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REVIEW ARTICLE

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THE PROMISE AND PITFALLS OF MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC SOCIAL HISTORY

CARL PETRY, *The Criminal Underworld in a Medieval Islamic Society: Narratives from Cairo and Damascus under the Mamluks* (Chicago: Middle East Documentation Center, 2012)

PAULINA LEWICKA, *Food and Foodways of Medieval Cairenes: Aspects of Life in an Islamic Metropolis of the Eastern Mediterranean* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2011)

KRISTINA RICHARDSON, *Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World: Blighted Bodies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012)

KRISTEN STILT, *Islamic Law in Action: Authority, Discretion, and Everyday Experiences in Mamluk Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)

When I was in graduate school, in the 1980s, one frequently heard complaints about the comparatively unsophisticated nature of the historiography of the medieval Middle East. There was considerable envy of historians in fields like early modern European history, who pushed broader disciplinary limits and whose works were read not just for content but also for historiographical and theoretical inspiration. There were some in our own corner of the profession blazing new methodological trails—Clifford Geertz, for example, who, though not a historian, had much to say to historians, and whose books were read eagerly by historians, and not just in Middle Eastern history; or Fedwa Malti-Douglas, as much at home in feminist literary theory as in medieval Arabic literature. But many graduate students in Middle Eastern history felt a bit underrepresented on the cutting edge of historical thought and practice.

These complaints were more than a little unfair. Medieval Middle Eastern history poses particular challenges, chief among them the daunting languages necessary for doing research in the field. On the more positive side, the field still offered—still offers—plenty of scope for close textual work on unpublished sources, propaedeutic work which has to be accomplished before the "big questions" can realistically be fully addressed. Moreover, the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s were in fact a moment of inflection for the discipline, when works such as S. D. Goitein's monumental study of the Cairo Geniza, Ira Lapidus' masterful analysis of medieval Muslim cities, and the pioneering studies of the ʿulamaʾ by Richard Bulliet, Roy Mottahedeh, and others virtually created a new field of medieval Islamic social history. The works under consideration in this

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review are all the beneficiaries of those earlier studies, and collectively build on the foundations which they laid. They also remind us of some of the persistent pitfalls faced by those working in the field, and point to some promising areas for future research.

Carl Petry has been one of the most innovative historians of medieval Islamic history over the last several decades. In 1981, he published a groundbreaking and still much-cited study of the 'ulama' during the last century or so of the Mamluk period. *The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages* used what was then a new tool—computers—to aggregate and analyze data drawn from the copious biographical dictionaries that have always been a major source for social historians.[1] In retrospect, one might call *The Civilian Elite* the first example of what may now be emerging as the discipline's cutting edge: digital studies. In a subsequent book, *Protectors or Praetorians? The Last Mamlūk Sultans and Egypt's Waning as a Great Power*, Petry turned his attention to a source that had hitherto received little attention from historians: endowment deeds (*waqfiyya*s) recording the charitable foundations established by the last major Mamluk sultans.[2] Those documents, drawn from one of the Middle East's few significant archives of pre-Ottoman documentary material, allowed him to paint a remarkably detailed portrait of the fiscal foundations of the Mamluk state in the decades before its defeat at the hands of the Ottomans.

In his most recent book, Petry has turned his attention away from elites and their socially and religiously approved activities to the "criminal underworld" of late medieval Cairo. In that respect, *The Criminal Underworld in a Medieval Islamic Society: Narratives from Cairo and Damascus under the Mamluks* represents a notable instance of the broader maturing of medieval Islamic social history. Medieval Islamic social historians, like their counterparts in European history of an earlier generation—and without ignoring the political and social elites who dominate the traditional sources, such as the biographical dictionaries—have begun systematically to study individuals and social groups who may have been in some ways more socially marginal but who were probably closer to the rhythms of quotidian life as most widely experienced on the streets of medieval Islamic cities. In this respect, Petry builds directly upon Lapidus' seminal 1967 book, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages*.[3]

To be sure, the phrase "criminal underworld" may be a bit misleading. Petry does devote some attention to mobs and loosely organized gangs of ruffians, but the scope of the book is actually much broader than that. Its subject is not simply socially marginal groups and individuals, but rather liminal, transgressive, or offensive behavior. Hence the book includes chapters on mob violence, theft, Bedouin brigandage, and homicide, but also on moral transgressions (such as fornication) and religious dissidence, including blasphemy, heresy, and apostasy. Moreover, many of the human subjects of this study were hardly socially marginal. Gangs of young Mamluk recruits, destined for leadership positions in the military hierarchy, formed a constant source of potential trouble in Cairo, especially when their pay fell into arrears. Some "crimes"—illegitimate confiscations, for example—were by definition perpetrated by those wielding the coercive apparatus of the state. And what do we make of Sultan Faraj ibn Barquq (r. 1399–1405 and 1405–12), who personally killed his former wife in an act of jealous rage? No doubt he was intemperate, even barbaric, but—a "criminal"?

The inclusion of the narrative about Sultan Faraj points to one of the most important aspects of the story Petry tells: its contribution to our understanding of Mamluk

politics, and more broadly to the complex intersection of public and private power in the medieval Islamic world. Many of the activities undertaken by the "criminals" Petry studies highlight tensions between the demands of the ruling regime and the methods and individuals they employed to satisfy those demands. This is especially clear in cases of the confiscation of property and wealth, a common subject in virtually any Mamluk-era chronicle. Confiscations and mulcting (for example, of disgraced former officials) were frequent enough that they were "not regarded as intrinsically criminal," but rather "had evolved into a standard process of revenue procurement" for the cash-starved Mamluk government (p. 83). The chroniclers' narratives suggest that the society recognized certain limits to the process, or rules to the game, and that when those rules were broken—when the target of confiscation lied about his wealth, or when the official overseeing the confiscation indulged in unusual brutality—a judgment of "criminality" ensued. Yet not infrequently, although an "extorter's procedures branded him a criminal," he might nonetheless be "prized by the monarch for his effectiveness" (p. 87). Hence many of the stories Petry tells point to critical moments when the social contract between the Mamluk rulers and their subjects broke down, or at least threatened to do so.

In reconstructing the history of "crime"—which term, following the actual subject of the book, we should understand to encompass a broad array of transgressive behavior—Petry encounters one of the major obstacles which have long frustrated historians of medieval Islam: the almost complete lack of archives, or indeed any significant collections of documentary evidence (other than the *waqfiyya*s). With the exception of one archive from Jerusalem, almost nothing from the Mamluk period has survived that would allow the kind of focused and comprehensive exploration of the life of a court of law, and of the individuals who passed through it, that emerged from Leslie Peirce's study of a 16th-century Ottoman court.[4] Instead, Petry relies on a broad and varied base of chronicles of the sort from which, together with the biographical dictionaries, the social history of the period has traditionally been written. These sources are voluminous, and social historians of, say, medieval Europe might well envy the detail one can extract from them. Petry is particularly fortunate that some of the authors of those chronicles themselves served as judges or scribes in courts of law, and so can provide firsthand accounts of the actions and individuals he studies.

That said, the chronicles have limitations as a historical source. They contain a lot of detail—this study is based on accounts of more than one thousand cases from Damascus and Cairo over the last century and a half of Mamluk rule. The accounts in the chronicles of those cases provide a rich trove of material that allows Petry to reconstruct any number of narratives about criminals and their crimes—and *narrative*, of course, is currently the subject of considerable attention within the historical profession. But they offer virtually nothing in the way of reliable *statistical* data. Consequently, the kind of analysis based on quantitative patterns in the biographical dictionaries that Petry pioneered to great effect in *The Civilian Elite* is impossible here—a problem which Petry himself frequently notes. There is simply no way of knowing how common the types of behavior he describes were—how frequently people were murdered, or subject to theft, or the victims of rape. Of course the choices that the chroniclers made about which cases to record, and in what way, reflect "their priorities on matters of order and security" (p. 8), and so tell us something about social values—at least those of the elites who speak through these sources. But even the significance of the chroniclers' editorial decisions is complicated

by the fact that, as the author repeatedly notes, their choices were driven *in part* by the simple "shock value" of the cases presented. Ibn al-Sayrafi, a judge and author of one of the more revealing and idiosyncratic chronicles of the later Mamluk period, functioned at times as a sort of medieval Jerry Springer. The real problem is that this makes difficult a full contextualization of the crimes and criminals discussed.

The kind of context needed for a fuller understanding of the criminal behavior that is the subject of this book can only be supplied as the field of medieval Islamic social history matures and more monographs fill in the gaps in our understanding. One almost wishes that an ambitious book like this could have been written *after* a series of other, more focused monographs on particular "crimes"—drunkenness, fraud, homicide, sexual misconduct, and so forth—in the Mamluk era. A monograph on inebriation, for example, might also describe and explain more fully the economy of alcohol production. Or one on sexual misconduct might situate the subject in a full analysis of *sharʿī* norms regarding sexuality, gender relations, and the cultural construction of affection. To give one particular example: Petry detects, concerning homicide cases in which women were the perpetrators, "a theme of women risking extreme consequences in order to act on their own initiative" (p. 237). That strikes this reviewer as a fascinating insight, and one that invites fuller explanation, of the sort that might analyze such homicides not simply as "crime" but as a product of psychologically complex gender relations, and of women's fraught relationship to public space.

Paulina Lewicka's *Food and Foodways of Medieval Cairenes: Aspects of Life in an Islamic Metropolis of the Eastern Mediterranean* is an equally ambitious book. Like Petry's, it reflects a genuine and admirable desire to move historical investigation of the medieval Islamic world beyond religious, institutional, and high political topics, to recover important aspects of quotidian life, although its approach is perhaps more traditional.

Recreating the history of food preparation and consumption in medieval Cairo is not an easy task. Lewicka, like most social historians of medieval Islam, faces no absolute shortage of sources. She has an extraordinary array at her disposal: cookery books, manuals for the *muḥtasib* (market inspector and enforcer of public morals), travelers' accounts, dietary and medical treatises, and works of fiction and *adab*, as well as more conventional sources such as the chronicles that played so important a role in Petry's research. She uses these varied sources to great and surprising effect, and in so doing really brings her story to life. So, for example, in discussing how Egyptian bread had the reputation of becoming stale and inedible after a single day, she notes a passage from the Persian mystical poet Jalal al-Din Rumi, who never visited Egypt himself, but who wrote: "My poetry is like the bread of Egypt / The day after, you cannot eat it / Eat it while it is fresh / Before dust has settled on it" (p. 159). The problem that she encounters is one that Goitein noted in his study of the Jewish community of Fustat as reflected in the Geniza records: namely, that food and its consumption did not form a common topic of polite conversation. Thus, while there are many sources that discuss food, few of them take the reader inside the subject in an intimate or contingent way. Medieval Muslim writers "seem to have been not interested in recording their personal impressions regarding their own or somebody else's meals." Consequently, she remarks, "there could be no Arabic Athenaeus, Rabelais, or Brillat-Savarin" (pp. 26–27). The resulting story is bound, therefore, to be somewhat formal.

More surprisingly, perhaps, the sources on which Lewicka draws span a startling chronological and geographical range. She cites the Old Testament as well as modern travelers' accounts—all for a book about medieval Cairo. She is aware that some historians will object, and defends her approach.

> Some of these studies may appear too distant in time or space from medieval Cairo to be acknowledged as relevant for studies of its inhabitants' ways. Such doubts are not necessary, though, if only because the rules according to which the sources are chosen for reconstructing of a historical community's daily life differ from those which are de rigueur for studying political or economic history. In this respect, the history of daily life is in fact much more demanding but also much more liberal than event history.

Lewicka, like Fernand Braudel and the practitioners of the *Annales* school of historical writing, is not so interested in "event history" (*histoire événementielle*), or mere narrative. She is after the *longue durée*. And so, she argues, "in the case of studies dealing with traditional societies, the use of later sources if contemporaneous ones are imperfect or nonexistent is not only a standard, but also an indispensable approach" (p. 25).

Works by historians of the *Annales* school were among the most methodologically innovative and important in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and it is heartening to see them invoked and modeled here. But many will object to this approach, at least as Lewicka applies it, and for a range of reasons. Some will question the casual description of medieval Cairo as a "traditional" society. Others may worry that the picture of Egypt that emerges is too static, too close to the old and intellectually lazy image of a "timeless" Egypt. That judgment would not be fair, however. Lewicka justifies her liberal approach to sources less on assumptions about an unchanging Egypt than on the conviction that the Islamic world forms an analytically coherent whole. Historians of medieval Islamic societies, she says, are "in a rather privileged position," since the Arab-Muslim conquests, while they did not create a vast, permanent state, did bring a large and diverse territory "together under one language, [and] one religion and legal system." Religious and linguistic uniformity produced, if not homogeneity, a degree of "standardization" of "many domains of political, social, intellectual and material culture" (p. 25). Many medieval historians will accept the argument—this reviewer is at least sympathetic—but others will not. In any case, it reflects an understanding of the *longue durée* dependent on cultural and religious factors and therefore quite different from the one that informed, say, Braudel's classic *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*.[5]

Despite the fact that her sources range across a broad span of time, or perhaps because of it, Lewicka's account is actually quite sensitive to the shifting nature of eating habits in Egypt. Environmental conditions in Egypt played an important and limiting role in the evolution of the Egyptian diet. So, for example, the oppressive heat made the eating of raw meat dangerous and hence rare, and required that dairy products be highly salted in order to preserve them. The endemic shortage of firewood contributed to the common practice of eating food prepared by street vendors rather than at home, since cooking in large quantities was a more efficient use of scarce combustible materials. Despite inherent environmental restraints, she notes repeatedly that the food consumed by Cairenes, and the manner by which they consumed it, changed over time. The Muslim Arab invaders brought foods and a culture of eating of their own, as well as the

restrictions imposed by their new faith—for example, on the consumption of wine and of pork products. Islam, she argues, encouraged the eating of meat: "The lordliest of food of the people of this world and of Paradise is meat," she quotes the Prophet as saying (p. 173). Under Islamic rule, and as the new faith spread, the consumption of pork declined while that of mutton, which earlier in Egyptian history had been proscribed, soared. But the Muslim Arabs were only one of many influences on the Egyptian diet. The creation of an Arab-Islamic *oikumene* brought to Egypt new agricultural and culinary products, such as rice, as well as new assumptions, many of them grounded in Persian medical traditions, about the body and its nourishment. Similarly, the commercial revolution of the Fatimid period made spices from the East more widely available. "The history of Cairene culinary culture is, above all, a history of outsiders bringing in and planting in their new home town diverse culinary influences." Of course, the mingling of cultures is a common human phenomenon, especially in cases of conquest and the movement of peoples. "What was remarkable in the case of Cairo was that it was the newcomers who, arriving over centuries in an uninterrupted manner and from all possible directions, seem to have determined the spirit and form of the culinary culture of the host city" (pp. 79–80).

To say that *Food and Foodways of Medieval Cairenes* contains a wealth of information about medieval Egyptian eating habits would be an understatement. The chapter on "The Cairene Menu," for example, runs to more than two hundred pages. The prose is lively, and the stories Lewicka tells are never dull. Despite its length, the book is a pleasure to read. Still, the quantity of data the author has assembled raises the problem of how to organize and analyze it. She considers and rejects the possibility of approaching the material through the conceptual categories of a medieval cookbook—"sour dishes," "fried dishes," "relishes and condiments," "digestive beverages," and so forth. Instead she settles for the very simple approach of considering in sequence "the main food categories": cereals; meat; fowls and eggs; fish; dairy products; vegetables and legumes; fruits; nuts and seeds; and "flavorings" (pp. 134–35). This was perhaps an unfortunate choice, since it can make the book read at times like an enormous glossary of food terms. Medieval Islamic social history has made many strides, and *Food and Foodways* brings many new aspects of daily life in medieval Cairo to light. Still, one might want to consider its subject in a more methodologically challenging way. Might an anthropologically inflected historical analysis, for instance, be able to make sense of the categories in that medieval cookbook?

Kristina Richardson aims for significant methodological strides in *Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World: Blighted Bodies*. The book, she says, is "a critical microhistory of a chain of six male Sunni scholars linked by the social bonds of friendship and academic mentorship in Cairo, Damascus, and Mecca who produced writings about bodies marked by 'blights' (*ʿāhāt*, in Arabic)." The Arabic term *ʿāhāt* (sing. *ʿāha*) can indicate what we consider disabilities, such as blindness and paraplegia, but it can include many other things as well: diseases such as leprosy and ophthalmia and also various "extraordinary physical features like blue eyes, crossed eyes, flat noses, black skin, baldness, hunched backs, lisps and thin beards." What the works on *ʿāhāt* produced by the six medieval scholars she considers do, she thinks, is to "push the historian to reconsider the centrality of elected affinities in shaping trends in knowledge production, the prominence of physiognomic categories in everyday life and the capacity

for anomalous bodies to threaten notions of human decency, Muslim piety and aesthetic beauty" (pp. 4–6).

It turns out there was actually a staggering number of works produced by medieval Muslim scholars about *ʿāhāt*, many of them listing various figures from Islamic history who were afflicted with them.[6] This is no surprise, perhaps, given the centrality of the body to Islamic thought and praxis. To be singled out by one's *ʿāha* did not necessarily indicate moral opprobrium, as it might in some cultures. Frequently the *ʿāha* simply served as an epithet by which one was known—the litterateur al-Jahiz, for instance, whose name means "the bug-eyed." But nonetheless, as Richardson points out, "God does not view [those with *ʿāhāt*] as the same as their sighted, walking, healthy counterparts. 'The blind and the seeing,' God proclaims, 'are not alike'" (p. 22). Their "blights" prompted comparison to the Prophet's "perfect" body. And so, inevitably, a degree of fear and scapegoating fell upon those encumbered with *ʿāhāt*, part of a social construction of disability and difference.

What intrigues the author about the six works she considers is their effort to subvert that social construction. This is a fascinating project, and one that complements the larger project of social history: to broaden our understanding of social life at all levels, and in all its permutations and complexity. So, for example, the poet and hadith scholar Shihab al-Din Ahmad al-Hijazi (d. 875/1471) produced a number of poems and other writings problematizing *ʿāhāt*, even extolling and eroticizing them. Al-Hijazi, Richardson says, advanced "an alternative vision of devotion, dignity and desirability . . . departing from predominant writings of sexual culture that valorized ideal standards of beauty" (p. 56). Of course there was, as Richardson acknowledges, "a well-established Arab literary tradition of praising the undesirable and demeaning the beautiful—an exercise known as *taghayyur*." What distinguishes al-Hijazi, in her view, is his effort to "de-stigmatis[e] the gaze of unblighted people towards blighted ones and acknowledg[e] the sexuality and desirability of marked people." In the author's telling, al-Hijazi had a personal stake in the project, since he too suffered from *ʿāhāt*: a bad outbreak of boils combined with an impairment of memory, all the product of an accidental overdose of *balādhur* (the anarcadium nut), which medieval pharmacologists credited with a number of medicinal properties.

The project is an intriguing one, although in several chapters the reader's appetite is more whetted than sated. Chapter 3, for example, is devoted to a compilation of romantic or erotic verses by earlier writers compiled by Taqi al-Din al-Badri (d. 849/1449), a poet and pupil of al-Hijazi. The anthology of works originally produced by others was a common genre of medieval Islamic literature. Richardson perceives in al-Badri's collection an effort to re-valorize verses about *ʿāhāt* by removing them from their original contexts and surrounding them with other verses by different poets, all of them about "afflicted limbs and body parts." In this way, the poems anthologized by al-Badri are "re-archived," providing him with "the opportunity to fashion new canons, thereby establishing new sites of collective memory" (p. 82). His work thus "stands as a rather broad project with major social, political and literary significance." That may be true, although one should perhaps point out that the chapter anthologizing poems about "afflicted limbs and body parts" is only one of seventeen in al-Badri's collection, which also includes chapters on "clothes and jewelry," "archers and hunters," "sellers of fruits and flowers," and—in what at the least raises questions about Richardson's assertion

concerning the specific force of the section on *ʿāhāt*—"*laudable* physical attributes." In any case, one wants to hear more. Richardson *tells* us that al-Badri "resituated knowledge about blighted bodies" and "heightened the abilities, identities, cultural ascriptions and fetishes of individual body parts" (p. 83), but one wants to see *how* she concludes this through a closer analysis of the text. Rather than a close analysis of the poems about *ʿāhāt* anthologized by al-Badri, what we get is a five-and-a-half page list of the subjects of those poems: hunchbacks, stutterers, the cross-eyed, the crucified, those with plague boils on their legs, and so on. Given the book's subject, one is tempted to say that the analysis is a bit skeletal: it needs more flesh.

Of all the books under review, the most traditional, in a way, at least as far as topic is concerned, is Kristen Stilt's study of the Mamluk-era *muḥtasib*, *Islamic Law in Action: Authority, Discretion and Everyday Experiences in Mamluk Egypt*. The *muḥtasib* (his area of responsibility was known as the *ḥisba*) was an official responsible for regulating a variety of matters concerning the daily life of medieval Muslims. The term is frequently translated as "market inspector," probably because an earlier generation of historians assumed that the office had its roots in that of the late Roman *agoranomos*. That connection is no longer widely accepted;[7] rather, historians take the office to be grounded generally in the Qurʾanic injunction to "command what is good and forbid what is evil." Nonetheless, the *muḥtasib*'s particular area of administrative responsibility was the marketplace—not so much a particular place as any space in which public life and commercial transactions occurred. His activities thus put him at the heart of those "everyday experiences" that are of great interest to social historians.

The topic of Stilt's book is "traditional" in the sense that it focuses on an institution or official of the state, and thus one that belongs to the narrative of "high" political culture. Caliphs, sultans, amirs, *qāḍī*s, the leading members of the *fuqahāʾ*, the educated religious class: these are the people who populate the chronicles and biographical dictionaries from which the narrative of medieval Islamic history has conventionally been and indeed must be written. The rich literary legacy of the Mamluk period in particular has provided the foundation for numerous studies of these offices and the individuals who held them. The *muḥtasib* has received some attention in the past, most notably in Émile Tyan's classic *Histoire de l'organisation judiciare en pays de l'Islam*,[8] and also in a number of articles and chapters in various volumes, but until now had not been the subject of a focused monograph in English.[9] Kristen Stilt's book admirably fills that gap.

To recount the various matters that the *muḥtasib*s of Mamluk Cairo addressed is to survey the complex tapestry of social life in this largest of late medieval Middle Eastern cities. The scope of the *muḥtasib*'s responsibilities was a somewhat odd mix. He was to be guided by Islamic law, although he was not necessarily expected to be a jurist himself. At the same time, he was explicitly an officer of the state, and served at the pleasure of the sultan, and so inevitably addressed issues of public order that had little to do with the shariʿa. The resulting tension between the *muḥtasib*'s obligations to Islamic law and his commitment to the state—in other words, his grounding both in *fiqh* and *siyāsa*—is the principal lens through which the office must be analyzed. Mamluk *muḥtasib*s at times regulated the call to prayer, or supervised preaching in the city's mosques. Many of the wrongs that the *muḥtasib* sought to correct involved the crimes and transgressive behavior which Petry also studies in his volume—the use of hashish and other intoxicants, prostitution, gambling—although the *muḥtasib*'s jurisdiction was

usually limited to open, public manifestations of such activities, in keeping with Islamic law's general respect for the integrity and inviolability of the private sphere. Above all, Mamluk-era *muḥtasib*s worked to ensure the integrity of commercial transactions, regulating sales, preventing the sale of prohibited or improperly slaughtered meat, and guaranteeing the fair and proper use of scales and other instruments of measurement. Stilt devotes separate chapters to each of these topics and more. The detail she supplies—for example, explaining how weights and measures were actually determined—offers helpful insight into the mundane realities of daily life.

But Stilt's goal is not only that of the social historian. She herself is a professor of law, and her aim is to study "Islamic law in action." On a theoretical level, of course, Islamic law is extremely well-documented, but historians have long struggled with how to close the gap between prescriptive works of *fiqh* and the actual application of law in people's lives. Stilt remarks upon the absence of archives for the premodern Middle East, the same problem that affected Petry's study of criminals and crime. To some extent, she says, one can sidestep the problem by relying upon fatwas, legal opinions that typically reflect actual conflicts on legal questions, as David Powers did in *Law, Society, and Culture in the Maghrib, 1300–1500.*[10] Fatwas, however, do not always supply the "contextual details" necessary to the type of "socio-legal history" to which she aspires (p. 5). But the sources available to reconstruct the history of the Mamluk *muḥtasib*—several manuals composed specifically for *muḥtasib*s and outlining their responsibilities, read against reports in the chronicles of actual *muḥtasib*s and their activities—collectively amount, Stilt argues, to what we might call a "virtual archive" which brings the social historian of law closer to her goal.

How close? This is a rich and rewarding book, and both social and legal historians will find it extremely useful. It is also written in clear and elegant prose, which makes it easy and enjoyable to read. But the "virtual archive" that Stilt constructs still leaves us with certain gaps in our understanding. This is less a comment on the quality of her analysis than on the fundamental constraints that all historians of medieval Islam encounter.

Stilt's *modus operandi* is to begin her discussion of each particular area of the *muḥtasib*'s jurisdiction with an illustration, or sometimes several, drawn from the chronicles: "on such-and-such a date," she might say, "one *muḥtasib* did the following . . ." She then explicates the event by drawing on works of *fiqh* and especially the *ḥisba* manuals written as guidebooks for practicing *muḥtasib*s. The result is a compelling picture of how the *muḥtasib* might work, and how in fact he *did* work on one or more occasions, but little sense of how frequently or consistently the pattern was followed. Nor, apparently, do the chronicles' accounts of the *muḥtasib*'s activity contextualize his work in a way that would allow a complete description of "Islamic law in action." After discussing each area in which the *muḥtasib* might work, Stilt typically poses questions. So, for example, after describing one *muḥtasib*'s crusade again prostitution and the sale of alcohol, she asks: "Did the wine merchants return to their trade after the raid? Did prostitutes resume soliciting business in public? Did it change anyone's behavior?" (p. 101). Her answer, basically, is that the questions are important to raise, but impossible to answer with the limited evidence provided by the chronicles. This lends the analysis an unavoidably speculative quality.

What's missing, in other words, is a full narrative of how the office of the *muḥtasib* evolved over the two and a half centuries of Mamluk rule, a narrative that may simply

be impossible to reconstruct. "How the *muḥtasib* enforced" the rules and prohibitions which defined his responsibilities, Stilt acknowledges at one point, "is not clear in all cases" (p. 106). It is significant that many of the incidents and events that Stilt invokes to illustrate what a *muḥtasib* might do involve one particular individual, Sadr al-Din ibn al-ʿAjami, who held the post on several occasions in the early 9th/15th century. Ibn al-ʿAjami was an accomplished scholar of Islamic law, who also taught *fiqh* in several madrasas. But he was a somewhat exceptional *muḥtasib*—more inclined, that is, to take seriously the religious and ethical components of the *muḥtasib*'s responsibilities. Stilt describes what others have noted, that the nature of the individuals who held the office changed over time. "Over the course of the Mamluk period," she writes:

> the presence of the jurist-*muḥtasib* tapers off and then disappears. Simultaneously, well-connected individuals and amirs begin to dominate the position, with even the sultan serving toward the end of the period briefly. These trends suggest a change over time in the expectations by the sultan and perhaps society at large for the qualifications of the office (p. 63).

The religious roots and juristic character of the office, in other words, were eclipsed by the *muḥtasib*'s growing role as an enforcer of governmental preferences and as a collector of revenue for the state. For that task, scrupulous religious scholars like Ibn al-ʿAjami were less suited than strong men ready to bend the rules to raise money and preserve order, men like al-Zayni Barakat ibn Musa, the subject of Gamal al-Ghitani's well-known 1974 novel.[11] The changing characters of the individuals who served as *muḥtasib* provide an outline for the story of the office's evolution. But in the end the anecdotal evidence the chronicles supply leaves the story incomplete.

The field of medieval Islamic social history may still have some way to go. But all four of the books under review here bear witness to the fact that it has come a great distance in the last three or four decades.

NOTES

[1]Carl Petry, *The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[2]Carl Petry, *Protectors or Praetorians? The Last Mamlūk Sultans and Egypt's Waning as a Great Power* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1994).

[3]Ira Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967).

[4]Leslie Peirce, *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003).

[5]Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2nd ed., 1966, trans. Siân Reynolds (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

[6]And a fair amount of secondary literature as well. Richardson's survey of the historiography on disabilities in medieval Islam (pp. 7–9) is remarkably full, and a reminder that earlier historians really have accomplished a great deal.

[7]See Benjamin R. Foster, "Agoranomos and Muhtasib," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 13 (1970): 128–44.

[8]Émile Tyan, *Histoire de l'organisation judiciare en pays de l'Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960).

[9]There are at least two modern studies in Arabic, as well as Pedro Chalmeta's study of the office in Islamic Spain, *El "señor del zoco" en España* (Madrid: Instituto Hispano-Árabe de Cultura, 1973).

[10]David Powers, *Law, Society, and Culture in the Maghrib, 1300–1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[11]*Al-Zayni Barakat* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 1974); trans. Farouk Abdel Wahab (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1988).