The Market Society Of Greater Syrian Cities
in the Later Middle Ages (1250-1517)

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I. Introduction

During the period between 1250-1517, Syria came under the domination of the Mamluk rule. The Mamluks were slaves, who were purchased by the Ayyubids, the previous rulers of Syria, and trained in the arts of war to become their bodyguards. The beginning of the Mamluk rule was dominated by their wars against the Mongols and the Crusaders until the first years of the 14th century when the Mamluk empire entered a period of prosperity. Around the year 1388 A.D., different Mamluk factions were engaged in civil wars that weakened Syria and led to the victory of the Mongols and to the destruction of greater Syrian cities, such as Damascus and Aleppo, at the hands of Tamerlane in the year 1402. From 1422 Syria again witnessed a period of stability and recovery that lasted until the year 1468, when the empire entered again a period of political and economic decline until it was taken over by the Ottomans in 1517.

The classes of the population of Syria during this period can be divided into three groups. First, the ruling elite (al-khassah), which included the high ranking rulers and officials. Second, the notables, (al-a'yan), including
the most prominent leaders of groups, the leading members of smaller communities, wealthy merchants, etc. Third, the common people (al-‘ammah), a term used to denote the rest of the population; it included the working class and the poor.

It is of interest to note that although the Mamluk period was generally marked by disturbances and instability, it witnessed a period of active commercial and industrial activities. As a result of the end of the Crusades, the commercial relations between Syria and Europe were restored and that contributed to the expansion of cities and their markets. Furthermore, the Mamluks were also great builders who were interested in schools and learning, and left great architectural monuments in Egyptian and Syrian cities such as those of Cairo and Damascus. Public works were never neglected, and water supplies and the maintenance of roads and public buildings were always attended to by the government.

II. The Islamic city

It became fashionable to describe pre-Islamic Arabs as nomadic bedouins who did not commit themselves to one place but kept traveling from one settlement to another according to the availability, or lack of, water supplies.
This description, however, ignored the other Arabs, the settled folk. It is of interest to note that these settlements took place in commercial cities, which flourished around the markets, such as the city of Mecca, in the midst of which Islam had arisen. Other Arab cities flourished in the pre-Islamic period in Syria and Iraq, such as Petra, Bosra and Tadmur, as a result of being on the commercial routes between Arabia and those countries. The development or deterioration of these centers thus depended on the commercial life itself, which determined the fate of such cities.

With the advent of Islam, the Arabs encountered new civilizations and new types of urban life, represented by city dwelling, not all of which did they knew before. These cities were of two kinds. The first type were cities that were built before the Islamic conquests. The second type of cities were cities built by the Muslims themselves as camp-towns. For Islam, which was based on conquests, spread from camp-towns such as Kufah and Fustat which, in their turn, soon became large commercial cities.

Building cities also was a natural consequence of the Islamic conquests because it became easier for the Muslims to defend themselves in these towns against either an external or internal uprising, rather than to defend an open camp. Ibn Khaldun (d. 811/1406) discussed this point,
stating that royal authority calls for urban settlement because "when royal authority is obtained by tribes and groups, (the tribes and groups) are forced to take possession of cities [because] rivals and enemies can be expected to attack the realm, and one must defend oneself against them." Thus, the ruler "fortifies himself in the city and fights them (from there)" since "it is very difficult and troublesome to overpower a city. A city is worth a great number of soldiers, in that it offers protection from behind the walls and makes attack difficult, and no great numbers or much power are needed."¹

The existence of the city and the rivals who fortify themselves in it would contribute, according to Ibn Khaldun, to the weakness of the new state. "Therefore, if there are cities in the tribal territory of (a dynasty, the dynasty) will bring them under its control in order to be safe from any weakening (of its power, should the cities fall under control of its rivals). If there are no cities, the dynasty will have to build a new (city), firstly, in order to complete the civilization of its realm and to be able to lesson its efforts, and, secondly, in order to use (the city) as a threat against those parties and groups within the dynasty that might desire power and might wish to resist."²

It is of interest to note that each Islamic
government, or caliphate, took a different capital for itself. The Prophet Muhammad declared the city of al-Madinah as the seat of the first Islamic government, so did the first three caliphs, Abu Bakr (d. 13/634), 'Umar (d. 23/644) and 'Uthman (d. 35/655). But the fourth caliph, 'Ali (d. 40/660), moved his headquarters to the city of Kufah. The Umayyads (132-750), in their turn, proclaimed Damascus as their capital while the 'Abbasids (750-1258) built their new capital, Baghdad, as did the Fatimids (909-1171) when they built their new capital of Cairo.

The design of the Islamic city did not follow a specific order. However, the regular form was to build, in the center of the city, the palace, the mosque and the army camps. The rest of the population would settle in the city quarters according to their tribes, that is, each tribe would settle in a specific quarter (harah).

The medieval Muslim city, however, had three elements of unity, its walls, its great mosque (al-jami') and its markets suqs or aswag). "But otherwise, the town was a group of disconnected individual units of harat (quarters), which were based on religious, professional or ethnic grounds."3 Thus, a study of the city of Damascus in the eleventh century found that "the city appeared as a collection of independent quarters (harat), each having its own peculiar life, separate from that of its neighbor. Each of