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## AS 100.438 – *The City Victorious: Medieval Cairo*

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In the late 14th century, the famous historian and philosopher of history (often called the ‘first sociologist’) ibn Khaldun (d. 1405) arrived to Cairo from his home in North Africa and stood stunned before its opulence and glory; amazed by its large population and urban density he dubbed it “the anthill of humanity”! The historian would settle there for the latter decades of life; there he would later teach a fascinating—if complex and often acerbic—Egyptian historian, one al-Maqrizi (d. 1442), who had the distinction of perhaps composing the first ever urban history of any city (according to an imminent architectural historian writing today). His *Khitat* is a passionate and densely researched topographical survey and history of medieval Cairo, told through the stories of its monuments. He begins the remarkable work thus

“Cairo is the place of my birth, the playground of my mates, the nexus of my society and clan, the home to my family and public, the bosom where I acquired my wings and the niche I seek and yearn to.”

Later in the 1480s, the Italian Rabbi Meshullam ben R. Menahem of Volterra visited the city and wrote

“I have seen Misr (Cairo)... and if I were to write and describe the glory and wealth of the city and the men therein, this book would not suffice, and I swear that if it were possible to place all the cities of Rome, Milan, Padua, and Florence together with four other cities, they would not, the whole lot of them, contain the wealth and population of half of Misr, and this is true.”

Earlier still—before the devastating effects of the Black Death, which arrived to the region in 1347 and killed off roughly a third of the population—Cairo had witnessed its period of efflorescence and rapid urban growth during the three reigns of the Mamluk sultan, an-Nasir Muhammad (d. 1341).

These and many other accounts of the city, fondly known as *Mother of the World* to its residents, afford us brief and tantalizing clues about life in a medieval metropolis—perhaps the largest city in the Western half of the known world (i.e. excluding China): estimates of its population before the plague (early 14th c.) suggest a figure as large as 500,000 souls (a significant number given that the largest European city, Paris, was likely less than 200,000, while London stood at half that figure).

So what was life like in such a thriving and opulent metropolis? How did its famously bustling markets work (al-Maqrizi estimates that somewhere around 12,000 shops stood on Cairo’s central Qasaba or main avenue alone!)? How did conditions of unprecedented density (with modest buildings commonly rising up to 6 floors) affect the urban experience of its denizens? One traveler noted that buildings in Cairo’s busy commercial center were so densely packed that the narrow streets between them hardly ever received sunlight—the dark causing throngs of bats to settle in the rooftops of markets. And what of the anonymity of such large throngs—ibn Khaldun’s “human anti-hill”? During the high and late Middle Ages (ca. 13th-15th c.), Cairo was ruled by a military aristocracy whose presence was intimately felt in the city: not only did horsemen and soldiers regular pass through its

streets and stage urban spectacles like their famed polo games. The city was also the backdrop to the pious patronage practices of elite Mamluks (lit. ‘owned’, referring to the military slave-soldiers although by the time they reached adulthood, they were all manumitted and served their masters as freedmen)—from the sultan to the senior military commanders—who endowed the many religious institutions that make Cairo today the prime repository of pre-Ottoman Islamic art and architecture.

## **A History of the *Mother of the World*: Scope and Organization**

This seminar examines the history of Cairo from its founding in the late 10th century (in 972), shortly after the Fatimid conquest of Egypt (969) until just after the Ottoman conquest of the region (in 1517); in other words, ca. 950-1550. During most of these six centuries, Cairo was the capital of trans-regional empires—first the Fatimids, then Ayyubids, and finally the Mamluks—and it is this period of its cultural efflorescence and political centrality that will study. (After the Ottoman conquest, Egypt would be reduced to a mere province in a larger empire and Cairo to the status of a provincial capital.) We also extend the analysis just past the Ottoman conquest—until 1550—in order to examine the first realistic and fairly accurate visual representation (or map?) of medieval Cairo, published by the Venetian, Matteo Pagano in 1549, although as we will see, certain clues suggest that the information within the map suggest a slightly earlier date of ‘ethnographic’ sketching (namely, the turn of the 16th century). Whenever possible we will examine primary documents related to the week’s theme; we will read those against the larger backdrop provided by secondary studies assigned that week.

The seminar is divided into the three main (albeit unequal) parts:

- (1) a brief survey of the city’s historical development (weeks 2-3;), starting with its antecedent and twin garrison city founded by the conquering Arab-Muslims (Fustat/Old Cairo), and extending until just after the Ottoman conquest of Egypt (in 1517), i.e. ca. 640s-1540s;
- (2) a thematic exploration of life in Mamluk Cairo, esp. during the 14th-15th centuries (weeks 4-10);
- (3) a final section on medieval Cairo in history (weeks 11-14)—including (a) medieval (Muslim) attitudes towards Pharaonic monuments and culture; (b) travelers’ accounts of late-medieval Cairo (European Jews and Christians as well as Muslim travelers), and finally, (c) medieval Cairo as it appears in modern fiction (historical novels). This section will also include (d) our discussion of Matteo Pagano’s map/representation of Cairo—the print traditionally dated to ca. 1549, although we will suggest that its contents and first-hand observations are slightly earlier), the first fairly accurate visual representation of the city.

Part 2 is the longest section (seven of thirteen weeks) and is divided according to the senses and other modes of engaging with the city (thus, sound and smells, but also religious devotion; notions of justice, etc.). This is intended to steer us towards thinking about *what life was like* in medieval Cairo—rather than contend with dry, impersonal histories of, say, changes in the built area or developments in minaret style. In other words, throughout the semester we shall be centering Cairo—specifically, the denizens’s experiences of the city.

## Course Requirements & Grades

Students are expected to attend *all seminars*; prepare the readings and actively participate in class discussions. Three unexcused absences result in an automatic F for the course.

**Exams** There are no exams.

**Grades** will be assigned as follows:

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25% **Active participation:** this means you should be there for all meetings—but attendance alone is not enough: the grade is for your *active participation*. This is an upper-level seminar and we will learn through engaged discussion. This portion of the grade includes your introductory presentations of assigned chapters/articles and primary documents. Presentations of secondary studies should be brief (~5-10 mins each) in which you:

- (a) summarize the contents of the work (first, without any judgment!); identify the sources consulted by the author, and distill the *main argument* of the work in 1-2 sentences;
- (b) discuss the work in relation to other scholarship we have read/are reading and situate it within larger historiographic trends or debates; and
- (c) conclude with your critique, in the form of questions for a general discussion.

In the case of a primary source, your introduction should give some background on the author, the period and context in which he wrote (they are all men), and the text's genre. You should conclude by posing several questions for class discussion. Do not summarize primary sources, except sections related to your discussion questions.

25% **Two Essays:** Each essay will respond to prompt/question; you will have a choice of answering one of two questions. Your essay must discuss (i.e. cite and analyze) at least two primary documents/passages (your choice from the assigned readings).

Essay #1 should be ~4 pages (~1,200 words, assigned 10% of grade);

Essay #2 ~6 pages (~1,800 words, assigned 15% of grade)

Essays are due the Sunday before w5, w9 & w12, i.e. Sunday 9/29, 10/22, and 11/19, respectively (see Table). Essay Questions appear on the Blackboard the Friday before.

20% Compose a **Hypothetical Historical Document** You will receive a choice of 4 different scenarios—e.g. you are an early-14th-c. scholar who's just attended the festival of Nawruz and you're writing your journal entry for the day; you're a 12th-c. Jewish grass widow whose merchant husband has been lost at sea for three years and you're drafting a petition to the Nagid asking for support, etc.—and you pick one and write that hypothetical document.

30% A **Final Research Project:** This may take this portion of the grade covers various stages of preparing your research paper:

- Identify a topic and viable research question; to be submitted in week 9; I may direct you to relevant sources;
- Submit paper title, abstract, and preliminary bibliography by Tuesday 11/17—and schedule a meeting with me (during week 12) to develop this further.
- Final Product: substantial research paper (15-25 pages) is due by December 15th.

All student work must be submitted by email only (no hard copies); send the message with attached file (see below). Unexcused late submissions (e.g. without a doctor's note) are penalized: one grade 'notch' per day late (e.g. an essay drops from A- to B if handed in two days late). No exceptions.

**Format (for all written work):** Margins: 1" all around; double-space texts; font size 12 point. Submit written work as a MS Word or PDF file (either one—not both!) attached to an email (b/cc yourself: the email's time stamp is your receipt and confirmation of submission time). First word in the filename should be your last name; number all pages.

## *Reading and Writing*

*“Do not read superficially, lest you do me an injury, and derive no benefit for yourself. You must study thoroughly and read continually; for you will then find the solution of those important problems of religion, which are a source of anxiety to all intelligent men.”*

— Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* (Jewish philosopher, 13th-c. Egypt)

*“Context is one of the most important indications of the speaker's intended meaning. Overlooking context is likely to lead to misunderstanding [any text] and false argumentation.”*

— ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, 14th-c. Syrian Muslim polymath

Pay heed to these wise words when reading—and writing. You are responsible for completing all assigned reading—carefully, critically, and thoughtfully—before coming to class. Occasionally, I provide a few points or questions to guide you (e.g. what to look for in a text, or how it may differ from another), but you are responsible for asking your own active questions of the texts, rather than languishing in passive reading.

## **Writing**

*Plagiarism will result in an automatic F for the course.* Keep all your notes and source material and be prepared to explain any writing you submit. In your response and exam essays, I am looking for indications that you have read and thoughtfully engaged the material—originally and critically. An essay is an argument; I need not agree with yours, but I expect it to address the issues raised in class and in the readings—and to be coherent and logically supported. I will discuss and provide more suggestions regarding essays later in the semester.

## **Primary Sources**

Primary sources provide an example of the texture of medieval texts and their worlds—the context of their production and audience; the social realities they recount and reflect. The short-response essays are intended to provide a first-hand experience of the task of historical inquiry: how can we use a text to illuminate the cultural history of a social group or period?

## *The City Victorious: Medieval Cairo — Outline*

Week/date		TOPICS
Week 1 Sep. 1st		<i>Introductions – Syllabus – A guided walk through medieval Cairo –</i>
Week 2 Sep. 8th	<b>HISTORICAL SURVEY</b>	<b>Beginnings (Fustat) &amp; Fatimid al-Qahira</b> [640s-1171] Early Islam & Arab-Muslim Conquests (7th c.); Garrison Towns: Fustat ( <i>aka</i> Old Cairo or Mist) The Fatimid Caliphate (969-1171): Fatimid conquest of Egypt; Founding Cairo (972): a new, walled, palatine city and capital of empire
Week 3 Sep. 15th		<b>Cairo Ascendant: Ayyubid and Mamluk Cairo</b> [1171-1517] Ayyubids (1171-1250): opening the city to subjects; Saladin's Walls, Aqueduct, Citadel Mamluk Competitive pious patronage; the expansion of the city; Topographical histories: al-Maqrizi's <i>Khitat</i> , the first urban history through monuments.
Week 4 Sep. 22nd	<b>ANATOMY OF A MEDIEVAL METROPOLIS</b>	<b>Tastes and Smells:</b> Food and Foodways; Water supply (water-carriers; water baths); Famines and Droughts; Poverty and Charity in the Jewish and Muslim communities. Wine/taverns and coffee/coffeehouses
<b>Essay 1</b>		<b>Questions posted: Friday 9/25 @ 5pm; Essay due Sun. 9/27 by 5pm</b>
Week 5 Sep. 29th		<b>Seeing, Showing, Celebrating:</b> Shadow plays; Coptic festivals (and their regulation); State ceremonies: The Nile; Pilgrimage processions; Public Punishment rituals
Week 6 Oct. 6th		<b>Touch:</b> Relics and funerary practices; the City of the Dead (medieval guidebooks for visitors); Buying and selling in urban Markets
Week 7 Oct. 13th		<b>Seeing II: Religious Institutions and Urban Monuments</b> The city of 200 Mosques; Synagogues and churches; Madrasas (Universities); Sufi <i>khanqahs</i> (convents); <i>sabil-kuttab</i> (drinking fountain/elementary school). Charitable endowments ( <i>waqf</i> )
Week 8 Oct. 20th		<b>Soundscapes:</b> State Edicts and Ceremonies; Urban Rituals of Coptic martyrs (late 14th c.)
<b>Essay 2</b>		<b>Questions posted: Friday 10/23 @ 5pm; Essay due Sun. 10/25 by 5pm</b>
Week 9 Oct. 27th		<b>Housing, Sleeping, Sex:</b> Domestic architecture; Elite mansions; Caravansaries and Inns ( <i>funduqs</i> ); Neighborhoods; Crime and Punishment; Prostitution
Week 10 Nov. 3rd		<b>Justice and other encounters with the state:</b> Political tribunals ( <i>maẓālim</i> ); <i>Qadi</i> -courts; The other certainty of life (Taxation)
Week 11 Nov. 10th		<b>Cairo in Outsiders' Accounts</b> Arab and Western (Christian and Jewish European) travelers' accounts of Cairo
<b>HIST. FICTION</b>	<b>Scenarios: noon on Fri. 11/13... Critical Fiction Document due Sun. 11/15 by 11pm</b>	
Week 12 Nov. 17th	<b>TIME/TRAVEL</b>	<b>Cairo in Time I</b> Medieval attitudes towards Pharaonic Egypt (Pyramids; marvels, spolia, recycling)
Week 13 Nov. 24th		<i>Thanksgiving vacation: no meeting</i>
Week 14 Dec. 1st		<b>Cairo in Time II</b> Medieval Cairo in modern Historical Fiction
<b>Final Project or Paper due 12/15 by 5pm</b>		