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**Twelve Thousand Cooks and a *Muhtasib*.
Some Remarks on Food Business in Medieval Cairo**

The general aim of this article is to shed some light on the functioning of the industry that was to satisfy the medieval Cairenes' alimentative needs. As most of the Western travelers who visited Cairo between XIII and XVI centuries observed, the city dwellers generally did not cook at home—they would rather use services offered by cooks in the city streets and bazaars.¹ Indeed, since the majority of the city inhabitants did not have kitchens at their apartments², the easiest way for them—if not the

¹ Felix Fabri, *Voyage en Egypte de Felix Fabri 1483*, trans. J. Masson, Le Caire: IFAO 1975, pt. 2, p. 568; Bernhard von Breydenbach, *Peregrynacya arabska albo do grobu s. Katarzyny Panny y Męczenniczki, którą Aniołowie Święci w Arabiey na gorze Synai pogrzebli, Zacnych ludzi niektórych rodu Niemieckiego, w roku pańskim 1483 pielgrzymowanie, przekł. x. Andrzeia Wargockiego* (*Die Reise ins Heilige Land: Ein Reisebericht aus dem Jahre 1483*); Kraków 1610, pp. 65-66; Emmanuel Piloti, *L'Égypte au commencement du quinzisième siècle d'après le Traité d'Emmanuel Piloti de Crete* (incipit 1420), Le Caire: Imp. Université Fouad I 1950, p. 108; Leonardo Frescobaldi, Giorgio Gucci, Simone Sigoli, *Visit to the Holy Places of Egypt, Sinai, Palestine and Syria in 1348*, by Frescobaldi, Gucci & Sigoli, trans. Theophilus Bellorini, Eugène Hoade; preface and notes Bellarimo Bagati, Jerusalem: Franciscan Press 1948, pp. 49, 167; Pero Tafur, *Travels and Adventures 1435-1439*, ed. and trans. Malcolm Letts, London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd. 1926, p. 100; Arnold von Harff, *The Pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff, Knight, from Cologne through Italy, Syria, Egypt, Arabia, Ethiopia, Nubia, Palestine, Turkey, France, and Spain, Which he Accomplished in the Years 1496 to 1499*, trans. Malcolm Letts, Works Issued by Hakluyt Society, 2nd. ser., no. 94, London: Hakluyt Society 1946, pp. 109-110; Jean Thénard, *Le voyage d'Outremer (Égypte, Mont Sinay, Palestine)*, suivi de la relation de l'ambassade de Domenico Trevisan auprès du Soudan d'Égypte 1512, ed. Charles Schefer, Genève: Slatkine Reprints 1971, pp. 47, 210; Mikołaj Krzysztof Radziwiłł, *Mikołaja Krzysztofa Radziwiłła peregrynacja do Ziemi Świętej (1582-1584)*, in: *Archiwum do Dziejów Literatury i Oświaty w Polsce*, t. XV, cz. II, Kraków: Polska Akademia Umiejętności 1925, p. 91.

² The absence of kitchens in the Cairene houses and the culinary customs resulting from it will be discussed in the author's forthcoming article.

only one—to get a warm meal was to buy ready-made food. Because of the constant and common demand, the offer of public kitchens was fairly rich and assorted enough to satisfy various tastes and meet various financial capabilities of the customers. The quantity of places where ready-made food was being sold night and day was shocking to foreign visitors: the number of street cooks in the city was said to reach ten³, twelve⁴, and even twenty thousand.⁵

The meals offered by street cooks were probably lacking in subtlety and elegance if compared to the specialties served by the “caliph’s kitchen” or by the Arabic-Islamic haute cuisine whose recipes were written down in the cookbooks for the elites. The story behind their preparation seems, however, to be no less attractive, if only for the fact that the bazaar gastronomy was one of the most significant factors influencing and conditioning the city’s private, social and economic life.

Obligated to follow special market regulations, the city gastronomers were, in theory, subject to strict control by muhtasibs, the state inspectors. Various aspects of the *ḥisba* institution in Egypt, and in Cairo in particular, have already been a subject of research; a number of questions, however, still await answers. One of them is the problem of efficiency of authorities in implementing “the market law”, an issue that will be studied below with reference to the Cairene food industry. While discussing the question, the author will demonstrate that the fraud in the local food production domain was a rather widespread phenomenon.

Another point to be considered here is the way in which the state’s policing practices could, and did, affect social behavior. The services of the street cooks, comfortable as they were, clearly did not suit everyone who had to use them. Some of the city inhabitants refrained from buying ready-made meals straight from the cook and decided on a more complicated and expensive way to get a warm meal. They preferred to purchase fresh products: meat, vegetables, oil, spices, etc., and, having prepared their dish at home, to send it to the oven owner to cook or roast. A similar

³ Samuel Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas his Pilgrimes*, repr. by James MacLehose and Sons 1905, p. 653, mentioned in: Harff, *Pilgrimage*, p. 109, n. 2.

⁴ Fabri, *Voyage*, pt. 2, p. 568; Breydenbach, *Peregrynacya*, pp. 65-66. The same number was also mentioned by J. Tucher in: Rieter, *Das Reisebuch der Familie Rieter*, ed. by R. Röhrich and H. Meisner, “Stuttgart. Litt. Verein”, vol. 168, 1884, p. 117 (quoted in: Harff, *Pilgrimage*, p. 109, n. 2).

⁵ Radziwiłł, *Perygrynacja*, p. 91.

practice applied also to bread. The key question to be discussed in this context is if the presumed impotence of the market control had in any way contributed—by allowing the dishonest and neglectful food producers to have their way—to the fact that many of the city dwellers, instead of simply buying the bazaar take-away meals, practiced this custom.

The examination will be based, above all, on analyses of the religious law literature of the period, i.e. medieval Egyptian *ḥisba* manuals and a treatise by the XIV-century salafi scholar Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ. The components of the diet itself, a subject that has already been dealt with in a number of studies⁶, will be touched on rather briefly here, only insofar it refers to the food production.

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In Cairo, as in any other medieval Islamic city, there existed no municipal authorities or guilds that would supervise professional activities of merchants and craftsmen.⁷ The institution that undertook this controlling function in Islam was the office of the *muḥtasib*, a state official whose duty was to inspect various aspects of the city life.⁸ Though employed by the

⁶ See, e.g., Eliyahu Ashtor, *An Essay on the Diet of the Various Classes in the Medieval Levant*, in: Robert Forster and Orest Ranum, *Biology of Man in History*, Baltimore and London 1975, pp. 125-162; Joseph Dreher, *Un regard sur l'art culinaire des Mamelouks. Pâté d'agneau, ragout de volaille et eau de rose*, MIDEO ("Mélanges Institut Dominicain d'Études Orientales du Caire") 24 (2000), pp. 55-82; Manuela Marín, David Waines (eds.), *La alimentación en las culturas islámicas. Una colección de estudios editados por Manuela Marín y David Waines*, Madrid 1994; Maxime Rodinson, *Recherches sur les documents arabes relatifs à la cuisine*, "Revue des Études Islamiques" XVII (1949), pp. 95-165.

⁷ For the discussion on guilds in medieval Middle Eastern cities see, e.g., Gabriel Baer, *Guilds in the Middle Eastern History*, in: M. A. Cook (ed.), *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East*, London, New York, Toronto 1970, pp. 11-30; Claude Cahen, *Y a-t-il eu des corporations professionnelles dans le monde musulman classique?*, in: A. H. Hourani, S. M. Stern (eds.), *The Islamic City. A Colloquium*, Oxford: Bruno Cassirer 1970, pp. 51-63; S. M. Stern, *The Constitution of the Islamic City*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 25-50; Ira M. Lapidus, *Muslim Urban Society in Mamlūk Syria*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 195-205; S. D. Goitein, *Cairo: An Islamic City in the Light of the Geniza Documents*, in: Ira M. Lapidus (ed.), *Middle Eastern Cities*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: UCP 1969, pp. 80-96.

⁸ Contrary to the general conviction, the *muḥtasib* was not the "market inspector" (as he is known in the west) only. His duties could be characterized as being of religious-judiciary-administrative nature. On *muḥtasib*'s functions see R. P. Buckley, *The Muḥtasib, "Arabica" XXXIX (Mars 1992)*, pp. 59-117; *idem*, *Book*, pp. 1-11; Al-Ghazālī on *ḥisba*, *ibid.*, pp. 139-190; Ibn Taymiyya, *Public Duties in*

state, he was guided by the religious law, and not by the ruler's orders. Based in the Qur'anic rule of "ordering good and forbidding evil" (al-amr bi-al-ma'rūf wa-an-nahy 'an al-munkar)⁹, the muḥtasib had in fact almost no limitations to his function of controlling the society.¹⁰ Muḥtasib could do this job personally or through the deputies he hired. In the case of Cairo, the former possibility was doubtlessly unimplementable, since the duties of the local muḥtasib could not be fulfilled by a single person. The beat of the Cairo muḥtasib was extremely vast (during the Fatimid era it covered the areas of Al-Fuṣṭāṭ, Al-Qāhira, and of the Ar-Rawḍa island; in the Mamluk period the muḥtasib had authority over all of the Lower Egypt apart from Alexandria¹¹), and so was the scope of his activity. The area of food industry alone obliged him to supervise hundreds of mills, bakeries, butcheries, shops, chimneys, street traffic, production and distribution of alcohol, water transport and treatment of animals, as well as behavior of peddlers and baker boys. To these must be added the city's public kitchens whose abundance was so shocking for many of the foreign visitors.¹²

Islam. The Institution of the ḥisba, transl. and ed. M. Holland, K. Ahmad, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation 1982, pp. 19-59; M. Izzi Dien, *The Theory and Practice of Market Law in Medieval Islam. A Study of Kitāb Niṣāb al-Ihtisāb of 'Umar b. Muḥammad al-Sunāmī (7th-8th/13th-14th Century)*, n.p.: E. J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust 1997. Al-Ġazālī's views on the ḥisba are very interestingly presented by Basim Musallam, *Struktura społeczeństwa muzułmańskiego*, in: F. Robinson (ed.), *Historia świata islamu (Islamic World)*, Warszawa: Muza S.A. 2001, transl. J. Kozłowska, pp. 173-186. About ḥisba in the Mamluk period see A. 'Abd ar-Raziq, *La ḥisba et le muḥtasib en Égypte au temps des Mamluks*, "Annales Islamologiques" 13 (1977), pp. 115-141.

⁹ Qur'an, 3:110; 9:71; 22:41.

¹⁰ In the case of medieval Cairo, there was also a person of a ruler himself who could, and did, intervene in the matters of public order. As far as the food domain is concerned, however, both the sultans, and the caliphs before them, were in fact interested in two products only. Except for the caliph Al-Ḥākim, whose famous bans on some foods were just one more manifestation of his unconventional behavior (for an interesting interpretation of the Fatimid caliph's decisions see D. De Smet, *Les interdictions alimentaires du calife fatimide al-Ḥākim: marques de folie ou annonce d'un regne messianique?*, in: U. Vermeulen and D. De Smet (eds.), *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras*, Leuven: Peeters 1995, pp. 53-69), the rulers interfered only when it was about the bread or wine (obviously enough, for extremely different reasons).

¹¹ All of Egypt was then submitted to three muḥtasibs: of the remaining two one controlled Alexandria and the other Al-Fuṣṭāṭ and the Upper Egypt; Al-Qalqaṣandī, *Subḥ al-a'ṣā fi ṣinā'at al-inṣā'*, 14 vols., Cairo 1918-1922, vol. IV, p. 37; Buckley, *Book*, p. 10.

¹² Weakly checking of scales and weights and caring that merchants did not mix good products with bad ones were not his only activity in the field of food industry.

Overburdened with duties, and generally with little knowledge of what he was searching for, the muḥtasib, known in the Western literature as “the market inspector”, did not walk through the markets everyday or visit every shop. To be able to do the job at all, he had to make use of the services of a whole network of assistants, ranging from ordinary spies and informers to professionals (‘arīf)¹³ who on his behalf controlled the processes of bread production and sausage-making, the degree of hygiene observed by street cooks, or work of the confectionaries, about which the market inspector himself did not have the slightest idea. That was why many of the muḥtasib’s assistants were chosen from the representatives of particular professions.¹⁴

The work they were supposed to do in order to implement the rule of “ordering the good” was immense. The food industry of medieval Cairo employed thousands of persons whose professions ranged from owners of large enterprises, rich spice merchants or grain dealers, to the army of petty street cooks and baker’s or butcher’s boys. Egyptian ḥisba handbooks¹⁵, or sets of instructions that were meant to help the muḥtasib in detecting various corrupt practices, usually discuss on this occasion about twenty most important professions linked to food production. They include: 1. grain dealers and millers (al-ḥubūbiyyūn and ad-daqqāqūn/aṭ-ṭaḥḥānūn); 2. bakers (al-ḥabbāzūn); 3. public oven owners (al-farrānūn); 4. zulābiyya (kind of deep-fried cakes with honey and almonds) producers (az-zulbāniyyūn); 5. butchers (al-qaṣṣābiyyūn/al-ḡazzārūn); 6. sellers of cooked livers (al-kabidūyyūn); 7. sellers of pickled vegetables (al-bawārdiyyūn), 8. sellers of boiled meat (aš-šarā’ihīyyūn)¹⁶; 9. sellers of

The muḥtasib was also authorized to supervise public mores which, in the case of food industry, meant (apart from the question of alcohol) caring that the miller's boy or street cook's assistant were young enough not be attracted by women's charms and that they behaved properly while delivering their products to the customers' homes, where they often met their womenfolk; cf. Aš-Šayzarī, *Nihāya*, p. 24 (Buckley, *Book*, p. 49). The question of the miller's or the cook's boys delivering products to private homes is frequently dealt with by Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ, *Al-Madḥal ilā tanmiyat al-a‘māl bi-taḥsīn an-niyya*, 4 vols., Cairo 1929, vol. IV, *passim*.

¹³ A. Allouche translates this name—somewhat misleadingly—as “master”, which may wrongly suggest that ‘arīf was in fact a guild’s head (*Al-Maqrīzī’s Ighāthah*, p. 33).

¹⁴ Buckley, *The Muḥtasib*, pp. 111-117; *idem*, *Book*, p. 23.

¹⁵ Ibn al-Uḥuwwa (d. 729/1329), *Kitāb*, *op.cit.*; ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Naṣr aš-Šayzarī (VI h./XII), *Nihāya*, *op.cit.*; Ibn Bassām al-Muḥtasib (before 844 h./1440), *Nihāya*, *op.cit.*

¹⁶ Maya Shatzmiller defines the šarā’ihī as “butcher, seller of sliced meat, pickled meat seller” or “meat merchant” (*Labour in the Medieval Islamic World*,

roast meat (aš-šawwā'iyūn); 10. sellers of sheep's heads (ar-rawwāsiyyūn); 11. sellers of fried fish (qallā'ū as-samak); 12. sellers of small salted fish (bā'at aš-šīr wa-al-būrī); 13. cooks (aṭ-ṭabbāḥūn); 14. harīsa (a thick meal of meat minced with wheat) producers (al-harrā'isiyyūn); 15. sausage producers (an-naqāniqiyyūn; these were sausages made of mince meat, spices and onions); 16. confectioners (al-ḥilwāniyyūn); 17. syrup producers (aš-šarrābiyyūn); 18. sellers of melted butter (as-sammānūn); 19. sellers of dairy products (al-labbānīn); 20. producers of sesame oil and olive oil (mu'ašīr aš-šīrg wa-az-zayt); 21. sellers of cooked lentils (maṭbūḥ al-'ads); 22. sellers of cooked broad beans (al-bāqilāniyyūn/al-fawwālūn).¹⁷

Obviously enough, the handbooks do not mention all the fields of culinary production or services that were offered to the Cairenes,¹⁸ nor do they discuss all the possible abuses practiced in the industry: those absent from the list were to be treated in an analogical way.¹⁹ Besides, as one of the authors makes us understand, there was a danger that "writing on all those countless methods of cheating" could "give clues to those who have

Leiden, New York, Köln: E.J. Brill 1994, pp. 109, 136). Ibn al-Uḥuwwa's (Kitāb, p. 175) and Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ's (Madḥal, IV, pp. 186-190) descriptions of this professional's activities clearly show him as a man who cooks and sells the meat and who, moreover, also cooks the products that the people bring him. Cf. "boiled meat" shops noticed by Roman authors in Ancient Egypt; Darby, *Food*, vol. I, p. 150.

¹⁷The number of professions mentioned in particular manuals varies; as for the of the Egyptian authors, it is Ibn Bassām who deals with the highest number of them. The amount of professions mentioned in Spanish ḥisba manuals is much lower; cf., e.g., the manuals by 'Abd ar-Ru'ūf (where the discussed professions include twelve categories: shopkeepers, bakers, oven owners, fig sellers, milk dealers, butchers, cooks, fish sellers, fried fish sellers, cheese sellers, harisa sellers and oil and honey sellers) or by Ibn 'Abdūn (where all the questions concerning the food industry are limited to the chapter On weights and measures); see E. Lévi-Provençal *ed.*, *Documents Arabes inédits sur la vie sociale et économique en Occident musulman au Moyen Âge. Trois traités hispaniques de ḥisba (Texte arabe)*, Le Caire: IFAO 1955. The treaty written in India does not deal with control over the food trade and production at all (Kitāb nišāb al-iḥtisāb by As-Sunāmī in: Izzi Dien, *Theory and Practice*, op. cit.), Ibn al-Mubarrad ad-Dimašqī's treatment of particular professions mentioned in his Kitāb al-ḥisba (ed. by Ḥabīb Zayyāt, "Al-Mašriq" XXXV (1937), pp. 384-390) is limited to one- or two-word commentary for each of the professions.

¹⁸The most popular foods of those ignored here were fried fowl (pigeons, geese, and particularly chicken, produced in large quantities by the famous Cairo incubators), pancakes, fried cheese and fried eggs, sweet chicken meat, and rice desserts.

¹⁹Aš-Šayzarī, *Nihāya*, p. 118 (Buckley, *Book*, p. 135).

not possessed a knowledge of them yet,”²⁰ so it was better not to mention them. It is hard to say if such measures had any influence on preventing corrupt practices in the city. An attentive reading of the *ḥisba* books makes, however, one inclined to conclude that it was not uncommon among the Cairo food producers and shopkeepers to violate the Islamic law by making harm to their fellow Muslims. Two branches of food industry will be used here to demonstrate examples of purposely cheating naive customers in order to gain a higher profit and of carelessly ignoring the basic rules of hygiene: bread production and street gastronomy.

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In their treatment of individual branches of the food industry, most of the *ḥisba* handbooks usually give priority to the professions that deal with grain trade and bread production. In medieval Egypt, the bread was not only “the staff of life” only; in the country depending on moods of the inundating river it also had a strategic value. It was, therefore, an object of particular concern of the rulers, who had to secure its constant supply in both the market and the royal granaries and who had to deal with an immediate, and most often violent, public discontent if any irregularity adversely affected, or could affect, the population’s access to bread.²¹

And since it was the *muḥtasib* whom the state blamed, and sometimes punished, for any anomalies in bread distribution (as the rise of its prices or disappearance from the market), no wonder that it was the grain brokers, millers, and bakers who became an object of the *muḥtasib*’s particular “attention”. Besides, it was also this area that gave him the biggest opportunity to display his talents, to show off in front both of his royal employer and the society. This strategic importance of bread, together

²⁰ Aš-Šayzarī, *Nihāya*, p. 34 (Buckley, Book, p. 58).

²¹ On the bread in politics of the Mamluk sultanate see Boaz Shoshan, *Grain Riots and the ‘Moral Economy’*: Cairo, 1350-1517, “*Journal of Interdisciplinary History*” 10, (1980), pp. 459-478; idem, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo*, Cambridge: CUP 1993, pp. 58-66; Ira M. Lapidus, *The Grain Economy of Mamluk Egypt*, “*Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*” XII (1969), pp. 1-15; idem, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages*, Massachusetts: HUP 1967, pp. 51-55. On the grain trade and bread production in the Fatimid Egypt see Yaacov Lev, *State and Society in Fatimid Egypt*, Leiden: E.J. Brill 1991, pp. 162-178; also S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. IV, *Daily Life*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: UCP 1983, pp. 234-253.

with the fact that the merchandise offered various possibilities of manipulation, put the persons involved in bread production in hazardous position. The inevitability of control and high penalty was apparently much more probable in this branch of food industry than in any other business. In fact, the majority of records referring to the implementation of penalties on fraudulent food dealers mentioned in chronicles concern grain dealers, millers or bakers.

For example, in the Fatimid chronicle of *Al-Musabbiḥī*, seven instances of punishment inflicted upon dishonest entrepreneurs are mentioned. Of this number, only one (concerning a sweet-maker whom the muḥtasib beat and pilloried for cheating on weight in *Ḍū al-ḥiġġa* 415 h.) involved a person whose profession was not connected with the bread production. All the remaining cases (two in *Raġab* 414 h. and four in *Ḍū al-qa'da* 415 h.) concerned professions within the bread industry.²²

The muḥtasib's care for the bread started at the grain merchant's (*al-ḥubūbī*) who could occasionally cheat on the weight, mix fresh grain with the old one that remained unsold from the previous year, or mix good grain with the bad and sell the blend as good.²³ The list of wrongs and corrupt practices that could occur in the process of bread production grew as it came to other branches of the business. Apparently, the *ḥisba* functionaries could not boast much success here: although the muḥtasib (or in fact his assistants) was supposed to make sure that the millers carefully sift the dust from grain,²⁴ that they always clean it of clay, grass, straw and stones,

²² In *Raġab* 414 the muḥtasib beat and pilloried a number of bakers and flour dealers (*daqqāqūn*) in connection with the shortage of bread in the market. The same month a group of bakers was beaten and pilloried because of rising the prices. In *Ḍū al-qa'da* 415 h. the muḥtasib beat a group of bakers after he had found their scales giving short weight. Later the same month the muḥtasib summoned the brokers and carriers of wheat, beat some of them with the *dirra* (kind of a whip made of buffalo or camel leather, poured with the date stones (see *Aš-Šayzarī, Nihāya*, p. 108 [Buckley, Book, p. 124]; Buckley, *The Muḥtasib*, p. 108), and threatened them; then a group of twenty two flour dealers were severely beaten by this functionary and paraded on camels through the streets of *Al-Fuṣṭāṭ* which was a punishment for their rising the prices, "blackening" the bread and spoiling the flour by adding ground argil. Next day the muḥtasib beat another group of flour dealers and paraded them through the town. *Al-Musabbiḥī* (977-1029), *Aḥbār Miṣr*, ed. Ayman Fu'ād Sayyid, Le Caire: IFAO 1978, vol. I, pp. 14, 15, 72, 74, 76. see also Buckley, Book, p. 124, n. 1; idem, *The Muḥtasib*, pp. 108-109.

²³ The heaviest of his abuses, apparently considered of anti-state activity, was, however, hoarding the grain in order to sell it in the future at a higher profit.

²⁴ *Ibn al-Uḥuwwa, Kitāb*, p. 152. *Ibn al-Ḥāġġ* considered sifting of flour as an "innovation", for the *sulaf* did not use a sieve (*Madḥal*, IV, p. 157); indeed, the

it seems that all those objects could be found in Cairo bread.²⁵ It was not uncommon, either, that millers mixed flour with ground chick-peas or broad beans or, to improve the flour's look, added turmeric into it. And, like many other entrepreneurs and shop attendants in other branches of the economy, they were clever cheating on weights and measures. One wonders if this situation influenced, or was in any way linked to, the phenomenon depicted by Ibn al-Ḥaǧǧ, who reported with anger that "most of the Muslims do not see any difference between buying [flour] from the Muslim and buying from the infidels and, moreover, some of them prefer to make transactions with 'the people of the Book' than with their Muslim brothers".²⁶

As for bakers and street oven owners, their acting to the detriment of the customer consisted mostly in ignoring the basic rules of hygiene that, in fact, were supposed to constitute an important element of their work.²⁷ The regulations provided that they should wear a special kind of garment and a veil while preparing the dough so that the sweat, saliva or hair do not drop into it.²⁸ They should also brush the furnace regularly and wash the vessels used for making and storing the dough. If they worked during the daytime they should have had by their side a man who would keep the flies away and remove the ones that got into the dough. It seems, however, that few cared about these matters and the control was not too effective, for

Tradition is explicit about the fact that the sieves were not used by Muḥammad's companions. Particular ḥadīṡs, however, are not clear about the details: some say the barley was blown to separate the grain from the chaff, and the dough was made of what was left (Sunan Ibn Māǧa, Kitāb al-aṭ'ima, ḥadīṡ 3326; Sunan at-Tirmiḏī, Kitāb az-zuḥd 'an Rasūl Allāh, ḥadīṡ 2287; Musnad Aḥmad, Bāqī Musnad al-Anṣār, ḥadīṡ 21748); the other suggest that the barley was first ground and only then blown to separate it from the husks (Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Buḥārī, Kitāb al-aṭ'ima, ḥadīṡ 4993). Nevertheless, Ibn al-Uḥuwwa (Kitāb, p. 152) stresses that the miller should not only sift the grain from dust and clean it from clay, but to have his flour sieve (manḥūl ad-daḡīq) in good condition as well; the remaining ḥisba manuals do not mention the flour sieve at all.

²⁵ Ibn al-Ḥaǧǧ, *Madḥal*, vol. IV, p. 173.

²⁶ *Madḥal*, vol. IV, p. 164.

²⁷ Ibn al-Uḥuwwa, *Kitāb*, pp. 154-155; Aš-Šayzarī, *Nihāya*, p. 22-24 (Buckley, *Book*, pp. 47-49); Ibn Bassām, *Nihāya*, pp. 21-24, 61-62; Ibn al-Ḥaǧǧ, *Madḥal*, vol. IV, pp. 167-172; 172-175.

²⁸ The merits of this kind of protection were known to "some Greek gourmards" of antiquity who made workmen wear gloves and tie cloths before their mouths to prevent contamination of the dough by the sweat or breath; see Armand Ruffer, *Food in Egypt*, (Mémoires présentés a l'Institut d'Égypte, t. I), Le Caire: IFAO 1919, p. 45.

insects and hair could also be found in the loaves of bread.²⁹ Another element that could worsen the bread quality was water: sometimes the bazaar bakers made the dough of water taken from salty wells and still added the usual portion of salt into the dough³⁰—as they in fact should according to the regular receipt.³¹ This double quantity of salt made the bread not only salty but bitter as well.³²

Moreover, employees of Cairo mills and bakeries seem to have been rather careless as far as hygiene was concerned. Some of them not only neglected washing hands before touching the dough, but also—as a trustworthy person observed—used to walk barefoot in the street or over the horses' excrements, or enter the toilet barefoot, and then go, without washing their feet, to thresh the wheat with them.³³ Some of the bakers burnt unclean combustible³⁴ in their ovens and others made them dirty while trying to clean them up.³⁵ Usually, no-one cared for the cleanness of the water prepared for the dough; moreover, it could sometimes be used for ablutions.

The muḥtasib was to inspect the bakeries and their employees every day,³⁶ but it is very much probable that the controls were not so frequent or regular. Judging upon the textual evidence available today we may assume that the Cairo bakeries were in fact inspected rather rarely and at random, that the level of hygiene of the bakers was, in many instances, far from

²⁹ Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ, *Madḥal*, vol. IV, p. 173.

³⁰ See Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ, *Madḥal*, vol. IV, p. 173. According to Ibn Riḍwān, the soil, and thus the well water within the Muqaṭṭam range and close to it, was boraxine and saline, Michael W. Dols, *Medieval Islamic Medicine. Ibn Riḍwān's Treatise "On the Prevention of Bodily Ills in Egypt"*, Berkeley: UCP 1984, pp. 82-83, 107; Nāṣer-e Khosraw noticed that the closer the well was to the river, the sweeter the well water was; it became more brackish the further one got from the Nile, Nāṣer-e Khosraw's *Book of Travels (Safarnāma)*, Albany: The Persian Heritage Foundation 1986, p. 46.

³¹ According to Aš-Šayzarī (*Nihāya*, p. 23 [Buckley, Book, p. 49]) too small quantity of salt added to the dough made the bread "heavy both in weight and on the stomach".

³² Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ, *Madḥal*, vol. IV, p. 172.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 157.

³⁴ Since the price of wood was extremely high, it was usually sun-dried camel's, horse's or buffalo's excrements, dried palm leaves and bark or chaff that were used in the oven; see Piloti, *L'Égypte*, p. 24; Trevisan, in: Thénau, *Voyage*, p. 209. Cf. Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ's discussion over the permissibility of using particular animals' excrements as combustible according to various legal schools of Islam (*Madḥal*, vol. IV, p. 167)

³⁵ The operation is described in detail by Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ, *Madḥal*, vol. IV, p. 167.

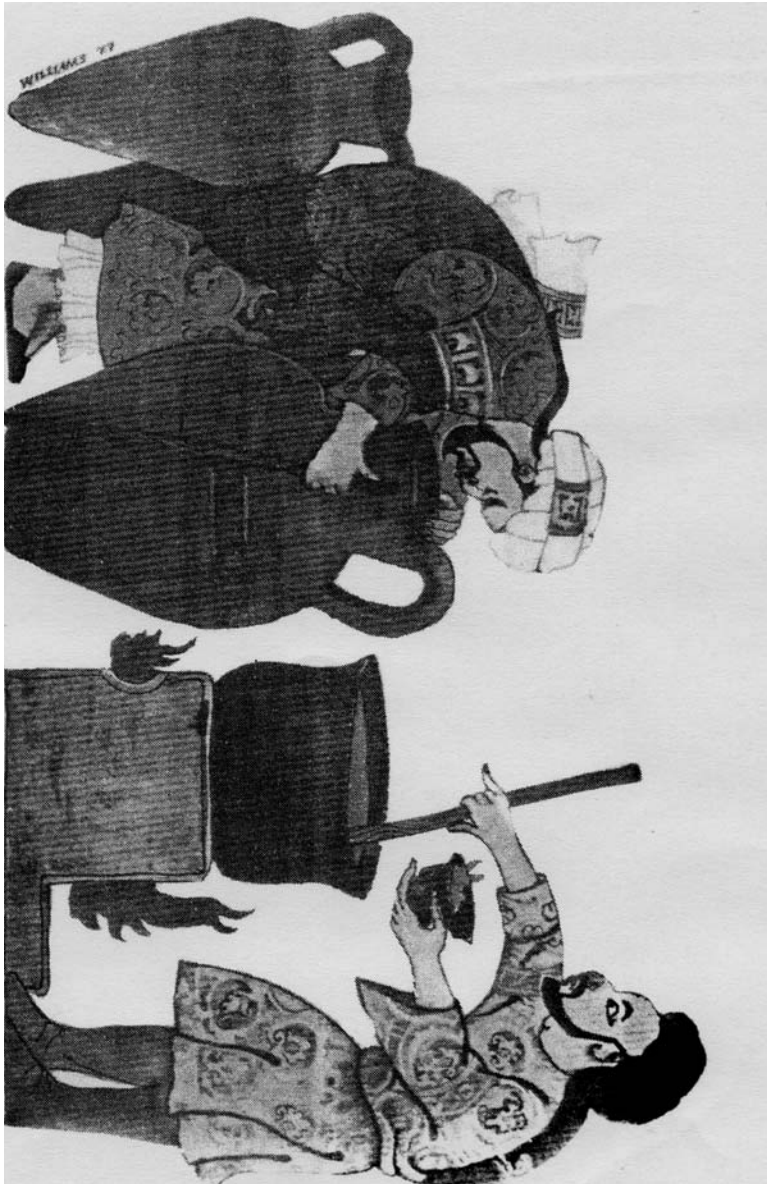
³⁶ Ibn Bassām, *Nihāya*, p. 21.

being in accordance with the official requirements, that customers were often cheated and that generally the bread was of poor quality.³⁷ What strongly supports the above thesis is the fact that most of the middle-class Cairenes avoided buying the street bread—they would rather buy the wheat, send it to the miller's, then have their dough kneaded at home out of their own flour and then send it to the bakery or street oven to be baked.³⁸

³⁷ Ibn Riḍwān, a son of a poor baker from Al-Ġīza (XI century), depreciated the Egyptian bread: “the bread made from wheat produced in Egypt is not edible if it sits for a day and a night. After that, it is no longer enjoyable and does not hold together in one piece. It is not chewable and becomes moldy in short time; the same applies to flour. This is different from the breads in another countries.” Ibn Riḍwān, however, did not associate the inedibility of bread with the millers' and bakers' negligence. According to him, similar situation concerned all the crops and fruits in Egypt and the products made from them, since they were “doomed to early spoilage on account of the swiftness of their transformation and alteration.” (Dols, *Islamic Medicine*, p. 90); Al-Maqrīzī's reports that the Cairo bread was inedible during the periods of privation, when it was becoming tasteless as soon as it got cold. The reason for this phenomenon was, in the author's view, a high degree of the bread's impurity (Allouche, *Al-Maqrīzī's Ighāthah*, p. 33). According to Arnold von Harff, however, who visited Cairo in late XV century, it was the great heat of the sun that within three hours made the bread as hard as stone and thus uneatable. That was also why there were so many bakeries, “for the bread had to be eaten hot from the oven” (Harff, *Pilgrimage*, p. 109).

Some, however, noticed the whiteness of Egyptian bread: according to Frescobaldi it was as white as milk (“because they have very fine and good wheat”), though very badly baked (Visit, p. 52), Sigoli observed that in Alexandria there was “the most beautiful bread and good and cheaper at any time than at home” (Visit, p. 161), while Symon Simeonis noticed the whiteness of it (*Itineraria Symonis Simeonis et Willelmi de Worcestre*, ed. J. Nasmith, Cambridge 1878, p. 34). Al-Muqaddasī (b. ca. 946) reported that in Al-Fuṣṭāṭ only fine, ḥuwwārī bread was baked (made with pure wheat-flour; *Aḥsan at-taqāsīm fī ma'rifat al-aqālīm*, ed. M. J. de Goeje, Leiden: E. Brill 1906, p. 199), but we have to remember that the author praised everything he saw in Al-Fuṣṭāṭ; thus the Fatimid chronicler al-Musabbīḥī who informs us about other kinds of bread eaten in Al-Fuṣṭāṭ seems to be a more reliable source: apart from al-ḥubz al-ḥuwwārī he mentions also al-ḥubz al-aswad (black bread), al-ḥubz al-ḥuškār (made of coarse-ground flour), and al-ḥubz as-samīd (semolina bread), the most expensive of them; see *Aḥbār*, pp. 48, 72, 74, 75; cf. also Ashtor, *Essay*, p. 128. Nevertheless, one should bear in mind that the above-mentioned whiteness of Alexandrian or Al-Fuṣṭāṭ bread did not result from the flour/dough quality but came from the fact that in Egypt almost exclusively the wheat bread was eaten.

³⁸ The only danger behind such an operation was that the customers' breads could be mistakenly changed or that they become imbued/saturated with odors of various meat or fish dishes cooked in the same oven; thus it was better if the bread's owner or his servant did not leave and watched his dough being baked. Cf. Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ, *Madḥal*, IV, p. 169; Ibn al-Uḥuwwa, *Kitāb*, p. 155; Aš-Šayzarī, *Nihāya*, p. 24 (Buckley, *Book*, p. 49); Ibn Bassām, *Nihāya*, pp. 61-62.



Muhtasib inspecting a street kitchen

Source: *Rihlat Ibn Baqtūta*, ed. by Abd al-Hādī at-Ta‘azī, Rabat 1997, vol. III, p. 131.

Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ, however, advised to bake bread not in any oven, but only on the premises where “the learned men’s bread” (furn ḥubz al-‘allāma) was being baked since, as a rule, clean combustible was used there—as opposed to the ovens baking home-made bread.³⁹

Another product whose presence in the market was also important—though not as much strategic—was meat and its products.⁴⁰ A range of professions engaged in this branch of food industry was very wide, from butchers and sausage-makers to street cooks specialized in preparing particular dishes. Again, the muḥtasib, whose work was to prevent them from abusing their fellow-Muslim customers and to punish those who did not observe the regulations, seems to have been almost powerless—one of the few records when a chronicler mentions a successful punishment inflicted upon a meat-meal producer is about a certain foreign (or Persian—‘aǧamī) cook who, in the beginning of XVI century, owned a street kitchen near Qanāṭir aṣ-Ṣibā’.⁴¹ One day the man decided—in order to add to the specialties he cooked (which was a meat pie called sambūsik⁴²)—to kill a black dog that he had fattened earlier on. The muḥtasib, who was immediately informed about it, flogged the swindler and chased him through the city with the dead dog tied with a rope to his neck. The foreign cook’s companions were treated accordingly.⁴³

The natural effect of the ḥisba office ineffectiveness was that some of the butchers did not slaughter the animals according to the religious law,⁴⁴ while the others were clever in planting the lean meat in place of the fat piece whose price the customer had just paid, still others kept forgetting to properly display the meat they offered for sale, which means that lamb was mixed with goat, and that the latter was not sprinkled with saffron nor the beast’s tail was left uncut for distinction. It could even happen that somebody tried to sell the carcass of the dead animal. May be that was why the Muslim customers sometimes chose to buy the meat in their Christian neighbor’s shop rather than at their brother-in-religion butchery.⁴⁵

³⁹ Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ, *Madḥal*, IV, p. 169. The term ‘allāma could also be used in reference to finely milled flour (e.g. ad-daḳīq al-‘allāma as used by in Ibn Taǧrī Birdī).

⁴⁰ On meat in the medieval Middle Eastern diet see Ashtor, *An Essay*, passim.

⁴¹ A bridge over the old canal (Al-Ḥalīǧ) in the south-eastern part of the city, on the latitude of the mosque of Ibn Ṭulūn.

⁴² A kind of croissant with sweet (nuts, honey, rose water) or salty (meat, salt, spices) filling; see Dreher, *Regard*, p. 76.

⁴³ Ibn Iyas (1448-ca. 1524), *Badā’i’ az-zuhūr fi waqā’i’ ad-duhūr*, vol. V, Cairo 1961, p. 122, quoted in: Dreher, *Regard*, p. 71.

⁴⁴ Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ, *Madḥal*, vol. IV, pp. 183, 186.

⁴⁵ Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ, *Madḥal*, vol. IV, p. 186.

The street cooks also could not stop trickery, especially so that it was particularly difficult to control them—if only for the fact that they were so numerous. The inspection of the roast lamb seller itself required exceptional devotion: to make sure that the latter did not cheat the customers, the muḥtasib had to weigh the meat before it was put in the oven (tannūr) and put the numbers down in his pad. Then, after the lamb was done and pulled out of the oven, it was weighted again—and if its weight was over 2/3 of the raw meat weight, it meant that it was rare and had to go back to the oven. Apart from all this the meat itself should be scrutinized carefully, since from time to time it happened that iron or plumb weights were hidden inside it.⁴⁶ The muḥtasib should make sure that the street cooks did not add pluck into the minced meat, that the goat meat was not cooked together with camel, lamb or beef, that the ovens were clean and inlaid with fresh, clean clay, and that the vessels were washed with hot water and covered against insects.

Apparently, the profession that excelled in all kinds of corrupt practices were producers of lamb-sausages, whose tricks were said, in some of the ḥisba handbooks, to be so numerous that it was impossible to know them all.⁴⁷ It was even suggested that their shops were close to the muḥtasib's booth so that the control over them could be better and more effective. The sausage makers, who were supposed to use only good, clean and lean meat, got in the inspector's books in many ways: for the sake of economy, they sprayed meat with water, or added to sausages plucks, cooked heads, tough beef or camel meat; spiced roast fish, onions and bean sprouts were also made use of. Another problem—and that concerned not the sausage makers only—was that they did not always care about having somebody who kept the flies off while the meat was being minced.

The merchants and producers of other branches of food industry could be equally inventive and equally careless about the hygiene. The milk dealers mixed milk with water, others sold bad cheese, the sellers of dates and raisins “improved” their goods by spraying them with fat or sugar water, sold outdated pickles, old oil or false spices. The fried fish sellers mixed the fresh fish with the old (unsold from previous day, which they should have thrown in the refuse heap outside the city) and fried them in

⁴⁶ Aṣ-Ṣayzarī, *Nihāya*, s. 30 (Buckley, Book, p. 54).

⁴⁷ Aṣ-Ṣayzarī, *Nihāya*, s. 38 (Buckley, Book, p. 62); Ibn al-Uḥuwwa, *Kitāb*, p. 158.

improper oil (which was to be controlled once every hour!).⁴⁸ Not to mention the confectionaries, whose ingredients and recipes were the most complicated of all - it was only the 'arif, a professional muḥtasib's assistant who could find out if they used the proper proportions, added natural honey or just the grape pulp instead of it, or mixed the proper ingredients with rice flour, ground lentils or husk of sesame seeds.⁴⁹

* * *

Bearing in mind that the medieval Cairo apartments generally had no kitchen, and that almost no Cairene cooked at home but used the services of the street food industry instead, one wonders how widespread were the instances of “economizing” the food production or of ignoring the rules of hygiene in the city. The historical annals are not too helpful in answering this question—as mentioned above, of the few existing chroniclers' records that concern the implementing of penalties on fraudulent food producers, almost all refer to punishments inflicted on grain brokers and millers or persons having direct influence on bread production. Such scantiness of information may have two reasons. First, it may suggest that no frauds were practiced or, second, that both the crimes and the punishments were so insignificant and socially harmless that there was no need to mention them in serious annals. The former possibility, advocated by M. A. Khan, who claims that the cases dealt with in the ḥisba handbooks were in fact merely “hypothetical probabilities and not a real-life phenomenon obtaining at that time”,⁵⁰ can hardly be considered an acceptable explanation. Actually, it can by no means be taken for granted that the fraud cases mentioned in the literature in question are “hypothetical probabilities”. On the contrary—the frequent occurrence of many of the described mal-practice instances is clearly confirmed by the authors of the ḥisba books themselves (as Aš-Šayzarī put it, “for most of them swindle in the ways we have described”⁵¹) as well as by other sources—in the case of medieval

⁴⁸ Aš-Šayzarī, *Nihāya*, p. 33 (Buckley, Book, p. 57); Ibn al-Uḥuwwa, *Kitāb*, pp. 178-179; Ibn Bassām, *Nihāya*, pp. 56-57.

⁴⁹ Aš-Šayzarī, *Nihāya*, pp. 40-41 (Buckley, Book, pp. 63-64); Ibn al-Uḥuwwa, *Kitāb*, pp. 181-184; Ibn Bassām, *Nihāya*, pp. 47-49.

⁵⁰ The M. A. Khan's attitude was apparently influenced by his fears that studying of the ḥisba literature “may induce one to conclude that the Muslim society, even in its hey-days was rampant with corruption and fraud”; see *Al-ḥisba and the Islamic Economy*, in: Ibn Taymiyya, *Public Duties*, pp. 139-140.

⁵¹ Aš-Šayzarī, *Nihāya*, p. 60 (Buckley, Book, p. 80).

Cairo, a treatise by Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ, a Maghribi scholar living in Cairo, is a mine of information for the study of the topic.⁵²

The second possibility is much more probable, though difficult to prove. The frauds of the food dealers could indeed be frequent, but of such insignificant character that they ended—if successfully detected by the inspector—with merely a loud argument, teaching the merchant a verbal lesson and, sometimes, confiscating the fake merchandise. Such events—contrary to cases that involved flogging and public pillory—were undeserving of the chroniclers' attention.⁵³ It was probably this lack of records that made R.P. Buckley conclude that the punitive measures as banishments from the market, imprisonments and seizure or the destruction of forbidden articles were of limited occurrence.⁵⁴

The third and the most probable hypothesis regarding the frequency of frauds in the Cairene bazaar food industry concerns the situation that could parallel the above, namely, that the authorities were, for some reasons, inefficient and slow to identify more serious swindlers. The network of informants could not—apart from single cases—be any effective means of investigation. Moreover, it is far from being certain that the 'arīf, an official on the one hand but also a fellow-professional, was indeed loyal to his state employer more than to his bazaar colleagues-in-craft.⁵⁵

Another important question in this context is that of the market inspector himself. The ḥisba treatises provide that the muḥtasib had to be an honest and modest man.⁵⁶ Having analyzed attitudes of this category of

⁵² Madḥal, vol. IV, pp. 92-194.

⁵³ To help the entrepreneurs observe the regulations, the muḥtasib had a set of punitive measures at his disposal. In the event of any suspicions about the merchant's honesty, the official was entitled to force him to promise a proper behavior in the future. If, however, the law was broken, he punished the guilty in a measure commensurate to the kind of transgression and degree of its social destructiveness. In such cases the muḥtasib might have merely teach the vendor a verbal lesson and confiscate the fake merchandise or order him giving it as alms. He could, however, also destroy the stand of the cheating merchant and chase him away from the market. In more serious instances the arguments were tougher, too: the muḥtasib had a dirra, kind of a whip made of buffalo or camel leather, poured with the date stones, and ṭarṭūr, a high felt conical cap decorated with pieces of colorful textiles, mussels, little bells and cat or fox tails. It was advisable that the two instruments hanged over the door of the muḥtasib's booth as a warning. To further humiliate a dishonest merchant public pillory could be pronounced: the convicted man was put backwards on a donkey or a camel and paraded this way—to the people's joy—along the streets of Cairo.

⁵⁴ The Muḥtasib, p. 111.

⁵⁵ Particularly that their position "naturally lent itself to bribery"; see Buckley, The Muḥtasib, p. 113.

⁵⁶ Buckley, The Muḥtasib, pp. 72-75; idem, Book, p. 30, n. 9

officials R. P. Buckley concludes, however, that “while a number of muḥtasibs do seem to have answered to these qualities, others were less than paragons of virtue.”⁵⁷ According to Al-Maqrīzī, in XV century Egypt the highest administrative and religious offices, including that of the muḥtasib, could be reached only by bribes and connections. In consequence, the positions were held by ignorant, corrupt, unjust and oppressive persons⁵⁸ whose attitudes fit the Damascene market inspector’s portrait drawn in 1001 Niḥgts’ “The Jewish Physician’s Tale”—enough to mention, for instance, Šaraf ad-Dīn Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. al-Ḥīrī (in office from 810/1407 to 812/1409), muḥtasib of both Al-Qāhira and Al-Fustāt, whom Al-Maqrīzī, describes as vile, foul, shameless, evil and offensive buffoon,⁵⁹ or Dawlāt Ḥuḡā, who served as Cairo muḥtasib in 841/1438, and whose death made people rejoice.⁶⁰ While stressing that there had existed some isolated examples of the Mamluk era muḥtasibs who had guarded their good name and honor, Aḥmad ‘Abd ar-Rāziq was able to name only two functionaries in this context: Al-‘Aynī and Al-Maqrīzī.⁶¹

The data on the tenure of the Cairo muḥtasibs adds to the indicators of the falling of the authority of the office: while under the Early Mamluks an average tenure lasted approximately four years, during the Circassian period it decreased on the average to only ten and a half months.⁶² In such circumstances the probability of penalty, further reduced by the functionaries’ little resistance to bribes and gifts, could not be too high. The growing ineffectiveness of muḥtasibs may mean that the representatives of the Cairene food industry were, in the decadent period of the Mamluk state, able to evade the inspectors’ control even easier than in the previous centuries.

Summing up, if we consider what we know from Aš-Šayzarī, Ibn Bassām, Ibn al-Uḥuwwa and Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ’s (all of them trustworthy authors who had no particular motivation to enrich their writings with

⁵⁷ idem, Book, p. 30, n. 9

⁵⁸ In: Allouche, Al-Maqrīzī’s Ighāthah, p. 52.

⁵⁹ Quoted by Ibn Taḡrī Birdī, Nuḡūm, in: Popper, William, History of Egypt 1382-1469 A.D. Translated from the Arabic Annals of Abū l-Maḥāsīn ibn Taḡhrī Birdī, pt. III, 1412-1422 A.D., Berkeley and Los Angeles: UCP 1957, p. 119.

⁶⁰ Al-Maqrīzī, Kitāb as-sulūk li-ma‘rifat duwal al-mulūk, vol. 4, pt. 3 (841 h.-844 h.), Cairo: Dār al-Kutub 1973, p.1063.

⁶¹ La ḥisba et le muḥtasib en Égypte au temps de Mamlūks, “Annales Islamologiques”, t. XIII (1977), pp. 115-178.

⁶² Allouche, Al-Maqrīzī’s Ighāthah, p. 4.

untrue information) about XII and early XIV centuries, and combine it with what al-Maqrīzī says about XV century, we may conclude that generally in Cairo of the Mamluk era the food dealers' malpractices, consisting in economizing production by reducing the quality of food sold to the city inhabitants, were not uncommon—with a tendency to worsen in the Circassian period. It seems that the first century of the Ottoman occupation did not bring much change: Muṣṭafā Ibn 'Alī of Gallipoli, a historian who visited Cairo in 1599, noticed "absolute chaos in business life" with several price systems in every shop.⁶³ What a contrast with the days of the Fatimids, when a meticulous foreign observer could note that "the merchants of Old Cairo were honest in their dealings" since "if one of them was caught cheating a customer, he was mounted on a camel with a bell in his hand and paraded about the city ringing the bell and crying out (...)" about what he had done.⁶⁴

* * *

True, we will never be able to find or to know the very origin of any custom or usage.⁶⁵ We may, nevertheless, try to define the motives behind certain social behavior in some particular moment of history. Having this objective in view, one must find it very much tempting to formulate a thesis that it was the impotence of the market control to check the food dealers' dishonesty that encouraged—if not forced—many of the Cairenes to refrain from buying the ready-made goods from both the bakery and the street kitchen, and to prepare their own meals or dough at home in order to take them to the public oven. Both in the case of bread and of warm meals, the patterns of customers' behavior are very much alike. Also the main reasons behind the two practices seem similar. In the present examination of the correctness of the above-formulated point, the Cairenes' behavior in the two cases, though outwardly similar and analogous, will, however, be dealt with separately.

⁶³ Tietze, Andreas, Muṣṭafā 'Alī's description of Cairo of 1599, Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 1975, p. 44.

⁶⁴ The Persian traveler's account proves, together with Al-Musabbiḥī's records mentioned earlier, the higher effectiveness of the Cairo muḥtasibs in the past; see Nāṣer-e Khosraw's Book, p. 55.

⁶⁵ Sumner, William G., *Naturalne sposoby postępowania w gromadzie. Studium socjologicznego znaczenia praktyk życia codziennego, manier, zwyczajów, obyczajów oraz kodeksów moralnych*, Warszawa: PWN 1995, p. 12.

As for the bread, Ibn al-Uḥuwwa (d. 729/1329), himself a Cairo muḥtasib's aide, seems to confirm the rightness of the above reasoning by making it clear that majority of the population resorted to the practice in question because they preferred to control and care for their bread production process personally.⁶⁶ Such must have also been, most probably, the general perception of people's own behavior. Obviously enough, people knew why and what for they were doing something. What, however, seemed to be obvious for the contemporaries, may only be a partial explanation of the phenomenon. The other part, which the city dwellers did not consider, resulted from the fact that the habit of preparing a bread dough at home and taking it to the public baker was not a Cairene medieval invention. Well-established not only in ancient Palestine⁶⁷ and Egypt,⁶⁸ but in Rome and Pompeii as well, this old Middle Eastern and Mediterranean tradition was followed, like in medieval Cairo, regardless of the fact that the bread was easily available in the nearby bakery or in the market.

Ancient Egyptian, Roman and Palestinian loaves had a lot in common. One of the features they shared was a serious degree of contamination, resulting from the fact that generally the grain was ground together with all the foreign matter and dirt in and on it.⁶⁹ Most of the inclusions were unintentional (though we may not exclude the possibility that the ancient bakers, too, did adulterate bread) which means that the stones, sand, dust, chaff, etc. were not put in the grain on purpose, but were never selected from it. The reason behind such presence in the ancient bread was in fact prosaic: the "fairly tedious and time consuming"⁷⁰ nature of the most of the cleaning process apparently made the employees of public bakeries unwilling to work with more energy on sieving the dust, winnowing the chaff, dehusking the grain and hand picking the stones. The effect was that the daily bread consumed by significant part of the population in classical antiquity was

⁶⁶ Ibn al-Uḥuwwa, Kitāb, p. 153.

⁶⁷ Where, however, the public oven is said to be used by the poorest (Henri Daniel-Rops, *Życie w Palestynie w czasach Chrystusa* (La vie quotidienne en Palestine au temps de Jésus), Warszawa: Cyklady 2001, p. 215; cf. also entry "Bread" in Smith's Bible Dictionary, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company 1975).

⁶⁸ Pierre Montet, *La vie quotidienne en Égypte au temps de Ramsès* (XIII^e-XII^e siècles avant J.-C.), Paris 1949, p. 89; Samuel, *Brewing*, op. cit. On bread in ancient Egypt see also Darby, *Food*, vol. II, pp. 501-528; Ruffer, *Food*, pp. 49-52.

⁶⁹ Naum Jasny, *The Daily Bread of the Ancient Greeks and Romans*, OSIRIS, 4 (1950), pp. 227-253.

⁷⁰ Samuel, *Brewing*, p. 562.

hardly edible. The bread from ancient commercial bakeries had one advantageous feature, though: it was cheaper than the home-made one, so that the poor classes of population could afford it. And, in fact, it was only those of modest means who were consuming it. Whoever could choose not to buy the street bread, did not do it. If one was interested in more edible staff, the grain had to be cleaned by his own household or family, the dough made in the home, and—if he did not possess an oven of his own—taken to be baked by the public baker.⁷¹

The medieval Cairene practice of kneading one's own dough and giving it to the public oven to bake, although directly associated with the impotence of the *muḥtasib* had, then, its beginnings far back in the ancient past. It did not constitute, however, a habit that lasted through the ages for its own sake or for the sake of tradition—the practice survived for so long,⁷² because its primary reason, the generally mean quality of loaves caused by grain pollution, never died out. With the grain cleaning process invariably remaining “fairly tedious and time consuming”, and the improvement of the bread's quality apparently considered unprofitable,⁷³ the negligence of bakers and their employees in this field became, in a sense, a tradition that the following generations of these professionals continued to “cherish”. Moreover, the practice of careless cleaning of grain,⁷⁴ transferred to medieval Cairo from antiquity, was with time supplemented by various purposeful adulterating practices. It is difficult to assert today if the medieval Cairo's street bread was as much polluted as the ancient Egyptian one.⁷⁵ Since, to the best of the author's knowledge, there are no studies that would let one compare the state of the medieval Cairenes' teeth with those of the Egyptian mummies (whose worn state of

⁷¹ Is it possible that the so-called bread platters or Egyptian clay trays described by Samuel (who was not able to identify the purpose they served) were used to carry the dough to the bakery on them; cf. Samuel, *Brewing*, pp. 567-568.

⁷² The custom of carrying one's own dough to the baker's was still followed in XIX-century Cairo. See 'Abd ar-Raḥmān al-Ġabartī, 'Aġā'ib al-āṭār fī at-tarāġim wa-al-aḥbār, 4 vols., Cairo: Dār al-Anwār al-Muḥammadiyya, n.d., vol. I, p. 37; vol. II, pp. 184, 394.

⁷³ For ratio between the weight and price of cleaned and uncleaned wheat see William Popper, *Egypt and Syria under the Circassian Sultans, 1382-1468 A.D.*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1957, pt. II, p. 102.

⁷⁴ Naum Jasny is of opinion that the practice of using the sieve in ancient Egypt is unlikely to have been common (*Daily Bread*, p. 243).

⁷⁵ Jasny, *Daily Bread*, p. 243; On inclusions in Egyptian bread see Samuel, *Brewing*, pp. 562-565; Darby, *Food*, vol. II, pp. 507-508.

teeth is commonly explained by the presence of sand in their bread),⁷⁶ we have to depend here on Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ who confirms the presence of various foreign inclusions in Cairene loaves.

The Cairenes were not the only medieval successors of antiquity in this field, though. As far as we know, the practice was also followed in the medieval Mesopotamia,⁷⁷ Muslim Spain⁷⁸ and the Maghreb.⁷⁹

As for the development of the analogical practice in the case of the bazaar fast-food, the question of it being influenced by the ineffectiveness of the state controlling agencies and the relatively unhampered dishonesty of the city gastronomers, is equally intriguing. Indeed, considering the great variety of street cooks' meals, the only reasonable explanation of refusing to buy the ready-made food seems to be—beside the diet prescribed by the physician or particular fondness of some unusual dish that could not be bought from the bazaar—one's distaste or reluctance towards the bazaar food.

The instances of similar customs practiced elsewhere in the medieval Islamic world do not indicate corresponding motives behind people's behavior, which lessens the possibility of their originating from any com-

⁷⁶ Which means that even the bread the ruling elite consumed was entirely cleaned.

⁷⁷ Cf. D. Waines, *Cereals, Bread and Society. An Essay on the Staff of Life in Medieval Iraq*, "Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient" vol. XXX, pt. I, February 1987, pp. 255-285 (the author's assumption is based on the ḥisba manual written in Egypt by Ibn al-Uḥuwwa).

⁷⁸ Rachel Arié, *Remarques sur l'alimentation des Musulmanes d'Espagne au cours du Bas Moyen Age, Etudes sur la civilisation de l'Espagne musulmane*, Leiden: E.J. Brill 1990, pp. 142-155; Derek J. Latham, who studied the bread production in medieval Málaga basing on As-Saqaṭī's ḥisba manual, doubts the poor quality of the Málaga bazaar bread. The main cause behind Latham's reasoning is that he can not see any data in As-Saqaṭī's work that would indicate the low food value of the local bread. However unconvincing his arguments at this point are, Latham quotes very interesting information concerning the bread trade in the early XX century Tangier and Fes: in both the cities self-respecting inhabitants had their dough kneaded in the home and baked in the communal oven. Market bread was "unsavoury, of poor quality, and produced under unhygienic conditions"; see D.J. Latham, *Some observations on the bread trade in Muslim Málaga (ca. 1200)*, "Journal of Semitic Studies," 29/1 (1984), pp. 111-122. For general comments on bread in the medieval Arab world see Peter Heine, *Kulinarische Studien: Untersuchungen zur Kochkunst im arabisch-islamischen Mittelalter: mit Rezepten*, Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1988, pp. 99-103.

⁷⁹ Cf. M. Talbi, *Quelques données sur la vie sociale en Occident musulman d'après un traité de ḥisba du XV^e siècle*, "Arabica", t. I, 1954, pp. 294-306.

mon, ancient tradition.⁸⁰ The workers of some Middle Eastern city are said to have had a habit, while going to work in the morning, of leaving their clay pots at the baker's, so that the dishes, slowly cooked in hot ash for many hours, were ready to be collected when their owners were going back home in the evening.⁸¹ The inhabitants of Muslim Spain used to leave their cooking pots (*qudūr*, *ṭawāğīn*) at the street oven owner's, too⁸². Neither of these cases, however, necessarily involves customers' reluctance towards the bazaar food: for the workers it was probably the most comfortable and cheapest way of having a dinner; as for Muslim Spain, it seems that the street gastronomy was neither the only, nor the most popular source of the warm meal there. Houses seem to have had regular kitchens, with plates, utensils and portable ovens (*kānūn*), as well as pantries full of oil, vinegar, and food preserved in pottery jars.⁸³ No one gathers this kind of goods in order to buy meals in the street—in case of big or sophisticated dishes it must have been simply easier, faster, better and sometimes more tasty to use the public oven (the author of one of the medieval Andalusian cookbooks advised to take the dish already cooked to the public furnace in order to “golden” its surface).

The case of medieval Cairo, most of whose inhabitants had no kitchen at home, was quite unlike the two examples quoted above. In Cairo, where all orders of the society—except, in general, the financial elite—had no choice but to use the street kitchens' services, the motives behind using the

⁸⁰ Particularly that in no other city of the Arabic-Islamic world the life was so much depended on the take-away food. As for the urban centers of pre-Mughal India, where the catering profession seems to have been flourishing since XIII century, the scarcity of studies dealing with the subject does not let us to draw any conclusions concerning the possible use of the communal oven for cooking home-prepared dishes. Cf. Iqtidar Husain Siddiqi, *Food Dishes and the Catering Profession in Pre-Mughal India, “Islamic Culture”*, 59 (1985), pp. 117-142.

⁸¹ Aly Mazahéri, *Życie codzienne muzułmanów w średniowieczu (La vie quotidienne des musulmans au Moyen Age X au XIII siècle)*, Warszawa: PIW 1972, p. 156.

⁸² Cf., e.g. Waines, *Culinary Culture*, passim; Marín, *Pots and Fire*, pp. 294-295, 299, and Spanish *ḥisba* manuals.

⁸³ Rachel Arié, *Espagne Musulmane au temps des Nasrides (1232-1492)*, Paris: É. de Baccard 1973, p. 376-377; for kitchen and storerooms in the Muslim domestic architecture of Murcia see plan of an excavated house of San Nicholas, J. N. Palazón, *La maison de San Nicolas*, in: *Une maison musulmane à Murcie*, pp. 22-25 and idem., *The Andalusī House in Siyasā: Attempt at a Typological Classification*, in: Waines, *Patterns*, pp. 43-61. On Andalusian cooking habits which involved the use of both the public (furn) and the home (*tannūr*) oven see Marín, *Pots and Fire*, op. cit.

public oven for cooking one's own food had to be entirely different. Such behavior, as practiced by the Cairenes, apparently had nothing to do with comfort or aesthetics. It was rather a means of self-protection practiced by those who were reluctant to buy at the "average" cook's premises, and, at the same time, were unable to afford what the honest cook prepared. They would probably not agree with Felix Fabri⁸⁴ who, considering the fact that the street kitchens in Cairo were constantly busy, concluded that the food they served must have been good and of high quality. His reasoning—although in a way logical—seems to miss the point. It could not have been easy for the average customer to judge if the tasty harīsa course contained some of the yesterday's meat or if the spicy sausages were at least partly stuffed with fried minced fish and onions instead of the prime quality lamb. Left powerless by the authorities' lax attitude, people invented their own alternative, much more complicated, but surely safer and healthier.

⁸⁴ Felix Fabri was a German Dominican friar who visited Cairo in 1483; see *Voyage*, pt. 2, p. 568.