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**Alcohol and its Consumption in Medieval Cairo.
The Story of a Habit**

Contrary to what the Islamic prohibition of intoxicants might imply, the alcoholic beverages in medieval Cairo were not universally scorned. The attitude towards drinking depended on the time in history and the social setting but, generally, neither the local population, nor the members of the foreign ruling elites, nor the multinational soldiery garrisoned within the city area, were avowed abstainers. Generally, different social groups drank different drinks. Particular preferences of the Mamluks notwithstanding, the city population enjoyed, above all, wine and beer, two basic kinds of alcohol drunk in the Mediterranean-Near Eastern world since remote antiquity. And, as in antiquity, but also as in Europe of the Middle Ages, the choice between them was a matter of social standing: grain beer, whose production was easier and cheaper, was generally the drink of the common people, while wine, more expensive due to its tricky fermentation and the demands of viticulture, was the beverage of the rich.¹

¹ On various aspects of alcohol consumption in medieval Islam see, for instance, P. Heine, *Weinstudien: Untersuchungen zu Anbau, Produktion und Konsum des Weins im arabisch-islamischen Mittelalter*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1982; J. Sadan, A.J. Wensinck, "Khamr," *EI*, IV; E. 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. 147-151; A.S. Melikian-Chirvani, "The Iranian *bazm* in Early Persian Sources," *Res Orientales IV: Banquets d'Orient*, 1992, pp. 95-120; Ch. Perry, "The Wine *Maqāma*," in: *Medieval Arab Cookery: Essays and Translations by Maxime Rodinson, A.J. Arberry and Charles Perry*, Blackawton: Prospect House 2001, pp. 267-272; J. Sadan, "Vin—fait de civilization", *Studies in Memory of Gaston Wiet*, in: M. Rosen-Ayalon (ed.), Jerusalem 1977, pp. 129-160; P. Smoor, "Wine, Love and Pride for the Fatimid Imams, The Enlightened of God", *ZDMG* 142 (1992), pp. 90-104; D. Waines, "Abū Zayd al-Balkhī on the Nature of Forbidden Drink: A Medieval Islamic Controversy", in: D. Waines, *Patterns of Everyday Life*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2002, pp. 329-344. Also some comments in R. Tapper, "Blood, Wine and Water: Social and Symbolic Aspects of Drinks and Drinking in the

Through the ages of Cairene history the alcoholic beverages, entangled in political and religious developments, depended more on prevailing doctrinal currents than on people's habitual or taste inclinations. Therefore, the story of these beverages' consumption is—not surprisingly—a turbulent one. Due to very fragmentary evidence, however, it is not possible to reconstruct all of its details. Unlike the literature produced, say, in Abbasid Baghdad, or in Iraq in general, the literary output originating in medieval Egypt lacks in descriptions of drinking bouts, tavern expeditions, or works written in praise of the inebriating beverage. In fact, the bulk of the information on the wine and beer consumption in Cairo comes from the chroniclers' accounts of various decisions taken by the authorities in reference to the presence of these drinks on the market. Such accounts have their obvious drawbacks—they are often deprived of a wider context, exaggerated, and far too incomplete to serve as evidence of popular attitude regarding the problem in question. Imperfect as they are, they nevertheless form a set of records that mark, more or less clearly, the course of history of the alcoholic drinks in Cairo. Supplemented, in the case of wine, by records of its use and its overuse, these accounts have to suffice to define some general tendencies and phenomena of this tiny section of the city culture's culinary-historical profile.

Koumiss and grain-based beverages

Of all the alcoholic beverages drunk in medieval Cairo, koumiss, whose popularity was most limited in time and social space, is also the least documented specialty. In fact, this fermented mare's milk with the alcohol content of between four and five percent² was introduced to Egypt by the Turkish mamluks and the taste for it never reached beyond the Mamluk milieu. Koumiss must have been relatively popular among the mamluks, although the written evidence confirms only two cases of sultans who

Islamic Middle East," in: S. Zubaida, R. Tapper, (eds.), *A Taste of Thyme. Culinary Cultures of the Middle East*, London, New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers 1994, pp. 215-231. M. Watt, "Islam and Wine-drinking," in: R. Traini (ed.), *Studi in onore di Francesco Gabrieli nel suo ottantesimo compleanno*, Roma 1984, vol. II, pp. 847-850.

² T. Şavkay, "The Cultural and Historical Context of Turkish Cuisine," in: E. Pekin, A. Sümer (eds.), *Timeless Tastes—Turkish Culinary Culture*, Istanbul: Vehbi Koc Vakfı, 1999, p. 76; J.A. Boyle, "Kumis", *EI*, V.

drank it in huge quantities. One was Aḏ-Zāhir Baybars who possibly died of abusing the drink.³ The other was Aḏ-Zāhir Barqūq, in whose times “it was one of the features of the kingdom” that the sultan and the amirs used to gather, twice a week—on Sundays and Wednesdays—on the Hippodrome below the Citadel, wearing their best uniforms, to drink koumiss together from their China bowls. The customary ceremony is said to have vanished together with Barqūq’s sultanate.⁴ The subsequent generations of Circassians apparently did not fancy the beverage.

Another fermented preparation that the Mamluk elites enjoyed those days was *šašš*,⁵ apparently a flour-based drink whose inebriating effects Ibn Iyās compared to the results of drinking koumiss. In one case, however, *šašš* clearly made its consumer “fall on the ground like a log” and lose consciousness, while the unconscious drinker’s companions were completely drunk.⁶ This, of course, *may* mean that *šašš* was in fact much stronger than koumiss. Since, however, it seems hardly possible that a flour-based beverage could be that strong, it is much more probable that it must have been slightly poisoned to cause such effects, either on purpose (which is more probable) or due to its perishable nature. From the ritual point of view, *šašš* was not important enough for the Mamluk elite to make them devote two sittings a week to its consumption, as it was in the case of koumiss. Instead, *šašš* seems to have been customarily served during “routine” Circassian Mamluk parties. Another fermented intoxicant drunk on such occasions was *būza*, a beverage whose otherwise uncertain nature can hardly be explained if examined independently of beer.

³ On causes of Baybars’s death see P. Thorau, *The Lion of Egypt. Sultan Baybars I and the Near East in the Thirteenth Century*, London & New York: Longman 1992, p. 268. It will probably never be known if the last beverage Baybars drunk was poisoned or not; since koumiss is perishable, however, it could simply have gone bad during the long journey across the Syrian desert.

⁴ Ibn Iyās, *Badā’i’ az-zuhūr fī waqā’i’ ad-duhūr*, ed. M. Mostafa, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag 1974, I/2, p. 393; cf. also Ibn Taḡrībī, *An-Nuḡūm az-zāhira fī mulūk Miṣr wa-l-Qāhira*, 16 vols., Cairo 1964-1972, XI, p. 256.

⁵ Ibn Iyās, *Badā’i’*, I/2, pp. 201-202, 393, 501. Ibn Iyās uses various spellings to designate the drink, and thus Š-Š as well as Š-Š-R-Š and *šušuš* are possible. Ibn Taḡrībī, *Nuḡūm*, VI, pp. 798, 799; XI, p. 153, XV; p. 144, spells it *šušuš*, too, and compares it to intoxicants such as *baštakī* or *tamar bughāwī*. See also J. Dreher, “Un regard sur l’art culinaire des Mamelouks. Paté d’agneau, ragout de volaille et eau de rose,” *MIDEO* 24 (2000), p. 80 where *šašš* is referred to as non-alcoholic drink; see also J. Sadan, “Mashrūbāt,” *EI*, VI.

⁶ Ibn Iyās, *Badā’i’*, I/2, p. 201.

The history of beer in Egypt and its capital is somewhat better documented than that of fermented mare's milk. Yet, due to the beverage's low social standing, the evidence relating to it is still very fragmentary. The basic term that the Arab-language sources use to designate beer in the Egyptian context is *mizr*. In the times of the Prophet the term *mizr*, apparently not clearly understood in his own milieu, was used in Yemen in reference to an intoxicant beverage made of barley, which was commonly drunk in this country. As some Yemenites once explained it to the Prophet, "our country is cold and gloomy, and we live from the cultivation of the soil; if not for *mizr*, we would not be able to do our work."⁷ When and how the name *mizr* first appeared in Egypt is difficult to establish. Although its earlier use cannot be ruled out, it is not impossible that it was popularized by the Yemenite troops who, following the 21/642 conquest of Egypt, settled in the newly founded town of Al-Fuṣṭāṭ.⁸

In fact, no hints regarding the post-conquest *mizr* production process in Egypt can be found in written sources of the time. Considering, however, the invariability of the elements that are essential for brewing, and the conservative attitude of Egyptians towards their traditional practices, one has good reasons to believe that the general features of medieval beer production did not differ much from what the ancient Egyptian records relating to this beverage say. This would mean that to make *mizr* in medieval Cairo one had to, as in antiquity, first sprout some quantity of wheat (to obtain active enzymes), then grind it and mix with cool water. The resulting pulp had to be mixed with another part of wheat that (sometimes sprouted, sometimes not) had been also ground, then mixed with hot water, and heated (in order to make starch susceptible to attack by enzymes). The resulting mass was then sieved and fermented so that yeast could change sugars to alcohol.⁹

⁷ Maḥmūd Ibn 'Umar az-Zamahṣarī, *Al-Fā'iq fī ḡarīb al-ḥadīṯ*, Lebanon: Dār al-Ma'rifa n.d, III, p. 363; see also numerous *hadīṯ*s referring to the Yemenite *mizr*.

⁸ For details on the Arab tribes that settled in Al-Fuṣṭāṭ see W. Kubiak, *Al Fuṣṭāṭ. It's Foundation and Early Urban Development*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego 1982, pp. 93-7.

⁹ On ancient Egyptian brewing see D. Samuel, "Brewing and Baking", in: P.T. Nicholson, I. Shaw (eds.), *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*, Cambridge: CUP 2000, pp. 538-541; W. Darby et al., *Food: The Gift of Osiris*, London: Academic Press 1977, II, pp. 529-550; on beer production and consumption in ancient Mesopotamia, M. Abdalla, *Kultura żywienia dawnych i współczesnych Asyryjczyków*, Warszawa: Dialog 2001, pp. 289-295; J. Bottéro, *The Oldest Cuisine in the World. Cooking in Mesopotamia*, Chicago & London: UCP 2004,

In ancient Egypt, it was barley or emmer wheat that were used in the process. In the Middle Ages emmer wheat, not available in Egypt anymore, was generally replaced with wheats that supplanted it, particularly hard wheat (*Triticum durum*; *qamlī*, *ḥinṭa*)—though occasional use of barley in local beer-making cannot be ruled out.¹⁰ Although some of the records name also *mizr* made of *ḍurra* (maize or sorghum), this could hardly be valid for Cairo—save some possible particular ethnic preferences.¹¹ Be it as it may, local beer was not a delicacy—Ibn Riḍwān, a 11th-century doctor from Al-Ġīza who commented on various alcoholic drinks produced in Egypt, included “*mizr* made of wheat” among the drinks that “are bad

pp. 89-93. On beer and its production in various cultures, H. McGee, *On Food and Cooking. The Science and Lore of the Kitchen*, New York: Scribner 2004, pp. 739-741.

¹⁰ According to what Eliyahu Ashtor maintains, “the inhabitants of a number of coastal cities in Egypt” drunk a particular kind of spiced barley beer: the beverage, called “*keshkāb*,” was “made of barley which had been sprouted, dried and milled, and then fermented with mint, rue, nigella, lemon leaves, and pepper” (Ashtor, “Diet”, p. 148). Ashtor, however, does not indicate how he arrived at this conclusion. At the same time, the two references he quotes do not support his assertion. Indeed, Nāṣer-e Khosraw saw in Tinnīs a drink of *kaškāb* being sold in the summer “since it is a tropical climate and people suffer so from the heat,” but in his account there is no indication regarding the ingredients or the production process (Nāṣer-e Khosraw, *Nāṣer-e Khosraw’s Book of Travels (Safarnāma)*, Albany: The Persian Heritage Foundation 1986, p. 39; Arabic text in: *Safarnāma*, Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Ġadīd 1983, p. 76); Dozy’s *Supplement*, whom Ashtor also quotes, defines *kaškāb* as “sorte de boisson faite de farine d’orge” (*Suppl.*, II, p. 472) which has little to do with the sophisticated spicy recipe given by Ashtor and equally little in common with beer in general. Cf. also below, p. 63 and n. 30, where a specialty called “kvass” is shortly discussed.

¹¹ For example Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, n.d., I, p. 182; J. Sadan, “Maṣhrūbāt”, *EI*, VI. Indeed, *ḍurra* was used to make some kinds of beer; this, however, seems to have been practiced south of Egypt, in Sudan and Ethiopia, where these cereals were more popular than wheat. Cf. Al-Ḥalabī, *Nuzhat al-udabā’*, Camb. ms. or. 1256(8), fol. 218b (as mentioned by J. Sadan in “Maṣhrūbāt”, *EI*, VI) where the Egyptian author describes *mizr* as the favorite drink of the Negroes living in Egypt. Also Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, I, p. 172, whose author suggests that beer made of *ḍurra* and called S-Q-R-Q-’/ S-K-R-K-t, was the alcohol of the Ethiopians; cf. Ibn Qutayba al-Kūfī, *Adab al-kātib*, whose author also maintains that S-K-R-K-t “is made of *ḍurra* and is the drink of the Ethiopians” (Miṣr: Al-Maktaba at-Tuġāriyya 1963, p. 139) and Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad Ibn Idrīs, *Kitāb nuzhat al-muṣṭaq fī iḥtirāq al-āfāq*, Beirut: ‘Ālam al-Kutub 1989, p. 37, where *mizr* of *ḍurra* is reported to have been drunk in Dongola; all that An-Nuwayrī says (*Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab*, Cairo: Dār al-Kutub n.d., IV, p. 88) is that *mizr* was made of grains (*ḥubūb*).

because of the swiftness of their transformation and the rottenness of their essence.”¹²

One of the earliest Egyptian post-conquest records referring to the beverage dates back to ca. 401/1010, when the Jews of the holy shrine of Dammūh, south-west of Al-Fuṣṭāt, were forbidden to brew it.¹³ Apart from this local ban, probably as short-living as all other prohibitions issued in the days of caliph Al-Ḥākim, the Fatimid state apparently did not bother Egyptian brewers. When, however, in 567/1171 Saladin replaced the Fatimids as the ruler of Egypt, one of his first decisions was to abolish the tax on *mizr* brewery and thus delegalize its production.¹⁴ Since, however, brewing does not demand much skill and can be easily done at home, the implementation of *mizr* prohibition was simply impossible in Egypt.¹⁵ The demand must have been high enough, and the possible profits tempting enough, to make Saladin’s nephew himself try his luck in the *mizr* business.¹⁶ All in all, Saladin’s order remained in force, if only officially, for almost quarter of a century. In 590/1194, Al-Malik al-‘Azīz ‘Uṭmān, son of Saladin and his successor in Egypt, was pressed by the economic crisis and lifted his father’s ban. As a result, “the *mizr*-breweries (*buyūt al-mizr*) became protected and heavy taxes were imposed on them; in order to

¹² M.W. Dols, *Medieval Islamic Medicine. Ibn Riḍwān’s Treatise “On the Prevention of Bodily Ills in Egypt”*, Berkeley: UCP 1984, p. 92 (p. 8/fol. 11a of the Arabic text).

¹³ S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, IV, *Daily Life*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: UCP 1983, p. 261; the steps taken against the Jewish *mizr*-brewers might have been related to the renewal of the *nabīd* prohibition issued by Al-Ḥākim in 401/1010; oddly enough, *mizr* itself does not seem to have been an object of al-Ḥākim’s of particular interest.

¹⁴ Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-mawā’iẓ wa-l-i’tibār bi-dīkr al-ḥiṭaṭ wa-al-āṭār*, Cairo: Būlāq 1853-1854, I, p. 105; cf. H. Rabie, *The Financial System of Egypt A.H. 564-741/A.D. 1169-1341*, London: OUP 1972, p. 119.

¹⁵ A few years after the prohibition was issued, ‘Imād ad-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī, the sultan’s biographer, spotted on his way back from Pyramids to Cairo, a circle of men dressed “in mantels like those of Iraqi or Syrian *faqīhs*.” He thought they must have been students and was surprised when they ran away; he was later told they were beer [i.e. *mizr*] drinkers; Al-Bundārī, *Sanā al-barq aš-šāmī*, pt. 1, ed. R. Sesen, Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Ġadīd 1971, p. 237; see also M.C. Lyons, D.E.P. Jackson, *Saladin. The Politics of the Holy War*, Cambridge: CUP 1988, p. 118.

¹⁶ Although Taqī ad-Dīn ‘Umar, Saladin’s nephew, denied the accusations of being a *mizr*-brewer, such an allegation in reference to a member of a ruling family, is meaningful. See Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad ad-Ḍahabī, *Siyar a’lām an-nubalā’*, Beirut: Mu’assasat ar-Risāla 1413 h., XXI, pp. 206-7; ‘Abd al-Wahhāb as-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt aš-šāfi’iyya al-kubrā*, Al-Ġīza 1992, VII, pp. 16-17.

increase sale in the protected breweries (*al-buyūt al-maḥmiyya* or *mawāḍi‘ al-ḥamy*), it was prohibited to produce home-made *mizr* (*al-mizr al-buyūti*),¹⁷ which, apparently, was commonly brewed until then.

It is rather difficult to ascertain definitely whether the obvious, though socially limited, popularity of *mizr* in the decades that followed was in any way related to Al-‘Azīz ‘Uṭmān’s encouraging policy, or was a simple continuation of local habits. The fact is that at the turn of XII century, a foreign visitor to Egypt observed that *mizr*, “or *nabīd* made of wheat,” was a common drink of the local populace (*‘awāmm*).¹⁸ The phenomenon was confirmed some decades later by another foreigner who noticed that white *mizr* was so popular among the common people that the price of wheat, or cereal of which *mizr* was made, increased for this reason.¹⁹

Whatever was the true *mizr* consumption level in XIII century, Az-Zāhir Baybars, the fifth Mamluk sultan, considered it definitely too high. Concerned to keep up the image of the virtuous Muslim warrior, and possibly inspired by Saladin’s move of almost a century earlier, in 663/1265 he decided to abolish *mizr*-taxes which some of preceding rulers levied. Thus beer production was delegalized again. While on expedition in Syria, he wrote his viceroy in Egypt ordering him “to demolish the *mizr*-breweries (*buyūt al-mizr*), wipe out the beverage’s traces, and break its vessels (...).”²⁰ Obviously, *mizr* was but an element of a wider-scale anti-vice campaign directed against intoxicants and prostitution. It probably never crossed Baybars’s mind that equally light but equally alcoholic koumiss, a beverage to which he was addicted, should be included in this category, too.

It is difficult to determine what the practical impact of Baybars’s campaign was. Although probably relatively effective in forcing both the

¹⁷ Al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ*, I, pp. 105, 106; II, p. 5; and idem, *Kitāb as-sulūk li-ma‘rifat duwal wa-al-mulūk*, ed. M.M. Ziada, Cairo 1956-, I, p. 119. On Al-Malik al-‘Azīz ‘Uṭmān’s attitude see also below, p. 76-77.

¹⁸ ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baḡdādī (an Iraqi physician who visited Egypt at the turn of XII century), *The Eastern Key. Kitāb al-Ifādah wa’l-I’tibār of ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baḡdādī*, London: George Allen and Unwin 1965, p. 196/7.

¹⁹ Ibn Sa‘īd al-Maḡribī (an Andalusian who lived in Cairo for some years of the 1240-ties and 1260-ties), *An-Nuḡūm az-zāhira fī ḥuly ḥadārat al-Qāhira (al-qism al-ḥāṣṣ bi-l-Qāhira min Kitāb al-muḡrib fī ḥuly al-maḡrib)*, ed. Ḥusayn an-Nāṣir, Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya 1972, p. 31; quoted in Al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ*, I, p. 368 and Aḥmad al-Maqqarī, *Nafḥ at-ṭīb min ḡuṣn al-Andalus ar-raṭīb*, Beirut: Dār Ṣādir 1968, II, p. 817.

²⁰ Al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ*, I, p. 105; idem, *Sulūk*, I, p. 525.

brewers and consumers out of sight, it could not, however, make *mizr* simply disappear from the menu of the urban or rural not-too-wealthy population. Nevertheless, in the annals for the years and centuries that followed, the chroniclers generally do not mention the name “*mizr*” any more, not even in the context of the prohibition orders that the Mamluk sultans reissued from time to time. This could either mean that *mizr* was not considered a “true” alcohol or that it was somehow automatically included in the category of “*ḥamr*” and, as such, remained subject to the same regulations as wine. At the same time, it seems very probable that *mizr* was either subsequently replaced by *būza*, a Turkish “drink made from millet grains,”²¹ or somehow transformed into it. As far as *būza* is concerned, the sources do not make it clear what it exactly was. The fact is that in the early XVI century *būza* appears in the records in the context similar to that in which *mizr* had been mentioned in the records referring to Az-Zāhir Baybars prohibition orders of XIII century. Thus in 910/1504-5 sultan Al-Ašraf Qānšūh al-Ġūrī, when the plague increased, ordered his officials to raid the Christian houses and shatter the jugs of wine there, and to burn the hashish and *būza* places, and not to allow any of these things to go on.²² Almost a decade later the same sultan, for the same reason, again ordered to prohibit wine (*nabīd*), hashish, and *būza*.²³ In 925/1519 an order to eliminate wine, hashish, *būza* and prostitutes was once again issued, this time by the Mamluk viceroy of the Ottoman sultan, when the Nile waters stopped to rise.²⁴

Būza, no doubt, was inebriating. The accounts depicting the ill-famed party held by Az-Zāhir Barqūq in 800/1398 make it clear that consumption of *būza* and *šašš*, intoxicants “prepared in the earthenware jars,” could have “regrettable” effects. In this particular case the effect was a grand scale one—the party resulted in the drunkenness of a part of the city populace.²⁵

²¹ T. Şavkay, “Cultural and Historical Context,” p. 80.

²² Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i*, IV, p. 76-7.

²³ And forbade the prostitutes to practice their profession. Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i*, IV, p. 303.

²⁴ Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i*, V, p. 304.

²⁵ See below, pp. 82-83; Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i*, I/2, p. 501; Ibn Taġrībirdī, *Nuġūm*, XII, p. 81. Al-Maqrīzī, in his version of events, does not specify the drinks; he simply says: “and so the intoxicants were prepared, in the earthenware jars [*dinān*].” (*Sulūk*, III/2, p. 902). The accounts of Barqūq’s party are among the earliest records to relate to *būza* in the Egyptian/Cairene context. Ibn Taġrībirdī, however, uses the term *būza* in reference to a still earlier date. In his annal for 742/1341-2 the term *būza* is reported to have been mentioned by amīr Qawṣūn

What casts doubts on the truly beer-like nature of this beverage is the fact that *būza* for Barqūq's party was made of flour,²⁶ an ingredient that, if used instead of malted grains, excludes the possibility of obtaining enzymes indispensable in the brewing process.²⁷ But even if *būza* of the Mamluk epoch could, in certain cases at least, be identified with beer, the modern variety cannot. In XIX-century Egypt beer seems to have been unknown at all.²⁸ "Boozeh" or "boozah," however, an intoxicating liquor made "with barley-bread, crumbled, mixed with water, strained, and left to ferment," was "commonly drunk by the boatmen of the Nile and by other persons of the lower orders."²⁹ In fact, both the flour-based beverage from Barqūq's party and the crumbles-based drink of the XIXth-century Nile boatmen, seem to have resembled medieval Egyptian *fuqqā'*, a drink more akin to kvass³⁰ rather than to true beer. Today, *booza*, a homemade alcoholic drink, "brewed in homes and small hovels tucked into narrow alleys found only by word-of-mouth," is made from moldy bread. "After two days of gurgling fermentation in a shallow tub of water and yeast, a dash of distilled alcohol is added for fortitude. A few more days in sealed plastic tubs and the foamy punch is ready to be served."³¹

who, leaning through the window, shouted to amir Baštāk that the latter could not become a sultan because he had been a *būza*-seller once; *Nuḡūm*, X, p. 20.

²⁶ Ibn Taḡrībīrdī, *Nuḡūm*, XII, p. 81; Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i'*, I/2, p. 501.

²⁷ Enzymes that convert starches into fermentable sugars.

²⁸ Such is the opinion of the authors of *Description de l'Égypte* who, while discussing the beverages of XIX-century Egypt, asserted that "La bière est totalement inconnue aujourd'hui en Égypte..." (1. *État moderne*, Paris: C.L. F. Panckoucke 1826, VII, p. 412). At the same time, however, the term "*mazzār*," or "*mizr*-brewer," appears in the sources as late as the XIX-century chronicle of Al-Ġabartī, *'Aḡā'ib al-āṭār fī at-tarāḡim wa-al-aḥbār*, Cairo: Dār al-Anwār al-Muḥammadiyya, n.d. II, p. 609.

²⁹ E. W. Lane, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, London 1836, last repr.: East-West Publications 1989, pp. 99, 336.

³⁰ A beer-related beverage traditionally popular in parts of Central Asia, Russia, Ukraine, and some parts of other Eastern European countries. Made by the natural fermentation of fruits, grain or, in its most popular version, stale rye bread, kvass is said to be either non-alcoholic or mildly alcoholic (depending on the source). The strongest of Russian-made variety cannot exceed 2.2%.

³¹ See Cam McGrath, "The Phantom Menace," *Egypt Today*, January 2006, vol. 27, issue 01 <http://www.egypttoday.com/default.aspx>.

Wine

Fragmentary as it is, the historical evidence referring to wine is nevertheless incomparably richer than that documenting the history of Egyptian beer or any other of the fermented beverages consumed in medieval Cairo. After all, beer, its popularity notwithstanding, was in a sense a “deficient” alcohol, a cheap wine substitute for the poor. Its role in the history of alcoholic beverages of medieval Cairo was rather episodic. In medieval Islam it was wine, the stronger, and far more effective drink, that was considered to be *the* alcohol and that became, as time went by, a more and more thorny issue. Wine, identified with Koranic *ḥamr*,³² a beverage literally forbidden by God, constituted—together with prostitution—an essential part of what the medieval Islam generally branded as vice.³³ And that is probably why the documentation referring to the question of sale and consumption of this beverage in medieval Cairo is not only confusing in itself, but is also further confused by secondary literature.³⁴

Eliyahu Ashtor is obviously right suggesting that the sobriety of the medieval Muslims must not be taken for granted.³⁵ But, at the same time, such misleading remarks as those made by a 16th-century French ambassador who maintained that “despite that wine was very costly,” the Cairene/Egyptian Muslims “drank unrestrainedly as much as they could,” should be treated with appropriate caution.³⁶ For it was not that the

³² To designate wine, also terms *qahwa* (e.g. Yaḥyā Ibn Sa’īd Ibn Yaḥyā al-Antākī, *Tārīḥ al-Antākī*, Tripoli (Lebanon): Gurūs Burs, 1990, p. 349; An-Nuwayrī, *Nihāya*, IV, p. 86) or *rāḥ* (e.g. An-Nuwayrī, *Nihāya*, IV, p. 86; Ibn Iyās, *Badā’i*, I/1, p. 579) were occasionally applied; *nabīd* was much more frequently used, particularly in the case of Al-Ḥākim’s prohibitive measures as related by Yaḥyā al-Antākī (see below, pp. 70-72) and Ibn Iyās’s records referring to the measures undertaken by the Circassian Mamluk sultans (see below, pp. 83, 84).

³³ The category could also include beer, hashish, and, in certain periods, also musical instruments and singers (sometimes also homosexuality, probably meaning pederasty).

³⁴ Some of the secondary works tend to present either oversimplified, or somewhat exaggerated judgments regarding the question—such as those suggesting that in medieval Cairo the atmosphere was acquiescent enough to allow taverns be located in the area of Al-Azhar (Heine, *Weinstudien*, p. 54) or that it was chiefly the Mamluks’ drinking “which played a determining role in the extinction of their caste.” (Ashtor, “Diet,” p. 162).

³⁵ Ashtor, “Diet,” p. 148.

³⁶ J. Thenaud, *Le voyage d’Outremer (Égypte, Mont Sinay, Palestine), suivi de la relation de l’ambassade de Domenico Trevisan auprès du Soudan d’Égypte*

medieval Muslim population at large, from “the notables of Old Cairo” and caliphs, to Islamic scholars and judges, to soldiers and all other members of the Near Eastern society, were drunkards. Nor was drunkenness “a widespread vice” throughout the Middle Ages, and the fact that an individual judge or an Islamic scholar was reported to be a drunkard does not confirm the existence of a popular phenomenon.³⁷ True, in the history of Cairo there were moments when alcohol was a relatively commonly consumed beverage, or when one ruler or another rarely sobered up. But there also were rulers whose piousness was exemplary, and times when people readily assaulted and demolished wine dealers’ places. The problem is that it is almost impossible, either in the case of the medieval Near East, or in the case of Cairo of that period, to define things unequivocally. For whatever clues we have, they are valid for particular individuals or neighborhoods in particular periods in time and, as such, do not conform to any generalized conclusions.

* * *

The history of winemaking in Egypt dates back to Pharaonic times. The ancient Egyptians produced a lot of wine, though the quality of what they drank differed—which is not unusual—according to the social level: while the common people could afford, apart from beer, only some “poor” wine, the well-to-do and the elites enjoyed very fine wines, either locally-made or imported, particularly in the case of foreign residents who were not too fond of the local varieties. In ancient Egypt, as elsewhere, wines were named after the village, town, district, or geographic region where they were produced.³⁸ Since vintages were not the subject to be appreciated or discussed by the Muslim authors, it is rather difficult to define what exactly the city of Cairo drank throughout the medieval period. Obviously enough, there were quality wines and cheap wines. The quality, however, though doubtlessly dependent on the vintage, depended even more on the kind of fruit, additional ingredients and the technology used in the production process. These could differ significantly enough to make various products

1512, publié et annoté par Charles Schefer, Genève: Slatkine Reprints 1971, p. 47; cf. Ashtor, “Diet,” p. 150.

³⁷ As suggested by Ashtor, “Diet,” pp. 148-9.

³⁸ For ancient Egyptian vintages see Darby, *Food*, II, pp. 597-612.

having nothing to do with each other—apart from the fact that all of them deserved to be classified as wines.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the most popular wines must have been more or less the same as those mentioned by one Cairo physician as drunk in XI century. According to him, the best quality wine and, at the same time, the favorite drink of the Egyptians, was *aš-šamsī*, an expensive, long-lasting wine made of imported raisins and honey, fermented in the sun.³⁹ There was also *ḥamr*, or “Egyptian wine,” as Michael Dols aptly translated the name in the context, made of local grapes, clearly not as good as the imported ones, and also improved with honey. Apart from *aš-šamsī* and the Egyptian wine there was also *nabīḍ tamarī*, or “date wine,” and *maṭbūḥ*, or—according to Dols’s translation—“cooked wine.” *Maṭbūḥ*, however, although indeed cooked and fruity, was not alcoholic as a rule and, as such, was not really—or at least not always—a “cooked wine.” If we are to believe Šihāb ad-Dīn an-Nuwayrī, an Egyptian encyclopaedist and historian of XIII-XIV centuries, *maṭbūḥ*, also called *ṭilā*, could be any juice that was cooked until two thirds of it “were gone” and only one third left. A drink prepared this way was, obviously enough, alcohol-free and permitted. It seems, however, that fermented versions of it, probably a result of “underdoing” and longer storage, obtained accidentally or on purpose, were also consumed—if only occasionally.⁴⁰ Both “date wine” and “cooked wine” were nevertheless “bad because of the swiftness of their transformation and the rottenness of their essence” (which, by the way, applied to *mizr*-beer as well).⁴¹

³⁹ Which was “the favored drink of the Egyptians (...) because the honey in it preserves its strength and does not allow it to change quickly. The beverage is made when the weather is hot, so that the heat brings the drink to maturity.” (Dols, *Ibn Riḍwān’s Treatise*, p. 91; on wine as recommended by Ibn Riḍwān, and by Galenic medicine, see loc.cit., n. 12).

⁴⁰ An-Nuwayrī, *Nihāya*, IV, pp. 82, 87.

⁴¹ Dols, *Ibn Riḍwān’s Treatise*, pp. 91-92; the fragment also quoted by Al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ*, I, p. 44. It is probable that apart from grape/raisin and date wine mentioned by Ibn Riḍwān, the medieval Egyptians also drank wine made of other sweet fruits, such as fig, sycamore fig, pomegranate, palm, and the Egyptian plum, all of which were used for wine-production in antiquity and some of which were also used for the purpose in XIX-century Egypt (*Description*, VII, p. 412; also below, p. 96, n. 141; on ancient Egyptian fruit wines see Darby, *Food*, II, pp. 613-617; M.A. Murray, “Viticulture and wine production”, in: Nicholson, *Ancient Egyptian Materials*, pp. 592-3). Although wine can be made of many fruits, grape is particularly suited for the purpose: its fruits retain large amounts of tartaric acid which few microbes can metabolize and which favors the growth of yeasts. The

As for the genuine “Egyptian wine”, or *ḥamr*, the historical evidence referring to the technology of its production, although not as poor as in the case of Egyptian beer, is still rather scarce. Šihāb ad-Dīn an-Nuwayrī, the above-mentioned encyclopaedist who, in an appropriate chapter of his work, discusses a number of “names for wine from the moment it is pressed until it is drunk,”⁴² is in fact the only Egyptian Muslim author to provide some clues regarding the question. The other local source are the Geniza papers documenting the life of the Jewish community of Old Cairo. From the data collected from those two sources, it comes out that in medieval Egypt the grapes, harvested in August and September, were transported in baskets to the *ma‘šara*, or the grape-presser’s (who, in most cases, was a Jew) place where the *‘aṣīr*-juice was obtained as a result of treading the fruits in vats. Apart from pressing by treading, the juice could be also obtained by a non-invasive mode which consisted in that the grapes were simply left, in vats named *naḥl*, to allow the juice to flow from them; of this juice the choicest wine, *sulāf*, was made. In both cases the resulting juice or, more properly, the must, was then filled into fermentation jars and left in the sun to ferment, a process that must have lasted some (ca two-five) weeks. Since in ancient Egypt, after the fermentation was over, the wine vessels were sealed with opercula of straw and clay and, possibly, left to mature for some time, it is not improbable that the same technique was applied in the Middle Ages.⁴³ In fact, the late summer season must have meant a heavy traffic on the roads leading to grape-pressers’ places, for it was a popularly practiced custom that people, instead of buying wine, would rather buy grapes and have them pressed by a professional presser. One’s own wine, made of own must and possibly fermented and matured in one’s own backyard, allowed one to enjoy the drink with confidence that it was prepared properly and of good fruits.⁴⁴

grapes ripen with enough sugar that the yeasts’ alcohol production can suppress the growth of nearly all other microbes (McGee, *Food and Cooking*, p. 722).

⁴² An-Nuwayrī, *Nihāya*, IV, p. 86.

⁴³ An-Nuwayrī, *Nihāya*, IV, p. 86; S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. I, *Economic Foundations*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: UCP 1967, pp. 122-124. On ancient Egyptian wine production technology see Darby, *Food*, II, pp. 257-261 and Murray, “Viticulture,” pp. 585-591; on wine production in medieval Islam, Heine, *Weinstudien*, pp. 31-43; on wine-making technology in general, McGee, *Food and Cooking*, pp. 727-730.

⁴⁴ Goitein, *Economic Foundations*, p. 123.

Despite the fact that neither the soil, nor the climate of Egypt particularly suited vine growing, by the Fatimid and the Ayyubid times the Egyptian viticulture, probably a continuation of what remained from antiquity, was doing relatively well. Vineyards stretched along the Nile valley, both in the Upper Egypt as well as in the Delta area.⁴⁵ It is not impossible that due to first Al-Ḥākim's, then to Saladin's prohibition measures,⁴⁶ the Egyptian viticulture might have suffered certain losses of acreage, though not very serious yet. Since similar measures taken by the Mamluk sultans in the following centuries were much more frequent, albeit irregular, it must have been during their reign that the local winemaking industry, and thus the vine cultivation, suffered the true loss.⁴⁷ In any case, by the time the Mamluk rule was coming to an end, the yielding vineyards became exceptionally scarce in the country, so much so that, as the accounts of the foreigners who visited Egypt in XV-XVIII centuries suggest, all the available wine was exclusively an imported product, mostly from Crete and Cyprus, but also from Syracuse and Italy.⁴⁸ But the

⁴⁵ For details regarding the vineyards' locations see Heine, *Weinstudien*, p. 4; also Ashtor, "Diet," p. 148. For ancient Egyptian vintages, see Darby, *Food*, II, pp. 597-607. Vine cultivation in ancient Egypt is discussed in Murray, "Viticulture," pp. 582-5.

⁴⁶ See below, pp. 70-72; 75-76.

⁴⁷ Although Al-'Umarī maintains that in his time (i.e. the first half of XIV century) grapes in Egypt were abundant; see his *Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār. Dawlat al-mamālik al-ūlā*, Beirut 1986, p. 83. Al-Maqrīzī's record included in the annal for 736/1336 confirms that there were grapes in the Marṣafā area (Al-Qalyūbiyya region) and elsewhere (*Sulūk*, II/2, p. 400).

⁴⁸ See, e.g., E. Piloti, *L'Égypte au commencement du quinzième siècle d'après le Traité d'Emmanuel Piloti de Crète (incipit 1420)*, Le Caire: Imp. Université Fouad I 1950, p. 6; A. Adorno, *Itinéraire d'Anselme Adorno en Terre Sainte (1470-1471), texte édité, traduit et annoté par Jacques Heers et Georgette de Groer*, Paris: Éditions du centre National de la Recherche Scientifique 1978, p. 179; A. 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, London: Hakluyt Society 1946, p. 119 ("since none may keep wine openly upon penalty of death, (...), much wine is brought secretly into the town by the Mamelukes from Candia in little barrels covered with linen cloths"); M.K. Radziwiłł, *Mikołaja Krzysztofa Radziwiłła peregrynacja do Ziemi Świętej (1582-1584)*, in: *Archiwum Radziwiłł, Peregrynacja (1582-4)*, pp. 91-92; G. Fermanel, *Voyage en Egypte. Vincent Stochove, Gilles Fermanel, Robert Fauvel, 1631*, Le Caire: IFAO 1975, pp. 92-5; A. Gonzales, *Voyage en Egypte du Père Antonius Gonzales, 1665-1666*, Le Caire: IFAO 1977, I, p. 94/187; J. Coppin, *Voyages en Egypte de Jean Coppin, 1638-1639, 1643-1646*, Le Caire: IFAO 1971, pp. 123-4.

European wine was, as the European visitors said, quite expensive. According to some, this was the reason why (in mid-XVII century at least) “very few people drank it.”⁴⁹ According to others, however, the price did not really matter and the Cairene/Egyptian Muslims “drank unrestrainedly as much as they could” despite that wine was very costly.⁵⁰

Whatever the state of the art during and after the decadent decades of the Mamluk sultanate, until more or less the end of XIII century the Cairene and Fuṣṭāṭi wine market, dependent as it was on the variable circumstances, seems to have been supplied by the local vintners rather than by foreign deliveries.⁵¹ The last mainstay of domestically-produced wine was Šubra, an area located in the northern suburbs of Cairo, whose Christian population lived by winemaking. Having experienced, and survived, some anti-Christian violence of XIV century, it was finally turned into ruin in 803/1401, when one of sultan An-Nāṣir Faraġ’s officers destroyed all the wine-stock and production facilities of the area.⁵²

It is generally taken for granted that the Egyptian winemaking and wine-selling business, just as any business of this kind elsewhere within the Islamic domain, was throughout its history run exclusively by Christians and Jews. While it is beyond doubt that the Christian and Jewish traders indeed prevailed among the wine dealers, it is, however, not impossible that before the times when “the religiosity turned into bigotry,”⁵³ to use S.D. Goitein’s words, Muslims, too, had some share in grape pressing, winemaking, and wine trading as well.⁵⁴ The Fatimid and Ayyubid Egypt, mentally still closer to the style of the ancient Mediterranean-Near Eastern culture rather than to the fresh moral order of the relatively new religion, seemed to have been quite open as far as wine market was concerned. Or,

⁴⁹ Coppin, *Voyages*, p. 124.

⁵⁰ Thenaud, *Voyage*, p. 47.

⁵¹ Even the Fuṣṭāṭi Jews seem to have relied exclusively on domestic production. The Geniza documents mention imported (“Rūmī”) wine exclusively in the context of Alexandria (Goitein, *Daily Life*, p. 259).

⁵² Ibn Iyās, *Badā’i*, I/2, pp. 594-5. On the wine of Šubra see also Al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ*, I, p. 69; idem, *Sulūk*, II/3, p. 646; and p. 656, where wine is shown as a reason of inter-communal strife in one of the villages of the area. Also a record in *Sulūk*, II/2, pp. 400-401, revealing prominent Mamluk officers profiting from the local wine-business.

⁵³ Goitein, *Daily Life*, p. 253.

⁵⁴ And, in fact, also in vine cultivation, for the vineyards were legally property of the government or of the amīrs; Goitein, *Economic Foundations*, p. 123.

to use another of Goitein's expressions, "a certain laxity prevailed"⁵⁵ in this respect. In this Egypt, the wine business and wine consumption, since antiquity as natural here as elsewhere in the Mediterranean-Near Eastern area, were still far from being commonly rejected.

In this Egypt there was "Wine-Sellers' Street" (Darb an-Nabbādīn) both in Al-Qāhira and in Al-Fuṣṭāṭ, and wine was openly sold, also by the Muslims who, like certain "Aḥmad the wine seller,"⁵⁶ could apparently run this kind business by that time. In this Egypt, in which periods of "wine rush" were still possible, people could not only buy out wine and consume it, but also bought out grapes and raisins in order to make wine using their own means. From the chroniclers' comments referring to the mass scale of such events,⁵⁷ it does not come out that Muslims, by then not so dominant or zealous yet, avoided participation in this kind of activities or that the popular grape- and raisin-processing was left exclusively to non-Muslim communities. In this Egypt, wine dealers were not necessarily identified with Christians or Jews, nor were Christians or Jews branded as wine-dealers. Although probably far from running taverns, an activity which is sometimes ascribed to them,⁵⁸ it seems that the Egyptian Muslims of the Early and early High Middle Ages, or may be of the pre-Mamluk era in general, did not always consider wine selling or, apparently, grape pressing or even fermenting the juice untouchable activities.

* * *

For this Mediterranean—rather than Islamic-minded Egypt, its local winemakers and their customers included, the reign of the caliph Al-Ḥākim, notorious not only for the inconsistency of his religiously-motivated measures, but also for his ruthlessness in implementing them, must have come as a shock. Al-Ḥākim was not the first to use ban on

⁵⁵ Goitein, *Economic Foundations*, p. 122.

⁵⁶ Goitein, *Daily Life*, pp. 253-259.

⁵⁷ As after Al-Ḥākim's death, or during the reign of Saladin's successor, see below, pp. 72, 76.

⁵⁸ Heine, *Weinstudien*, p. 54. The case of amīr Sūdūn min 'Abd ar-Raḥmān (d. 841/1438), a Mamluk governor of Damascus, whom Amalia Levanoni mentions as making a fortune on ownership of taverns ("Food and Cooking during the Mamluk Era: Social and Political Implications," *MSR* vol. 9, No.2, 2005, p. 220), seems to have been rather unique; for more comments see below, p. 91, n. 126.

alcohol as a device for promoting the Islamic values in Egypt;⁵⁹ he was, however, the first to do it with determination and vehemence. But because Al-Ḥākim, apart from all other things, arrived too early, his policy did not prove effective at all. His subjects, apparently far from appreciating the religious-moral aspect of the prohibition, concentrated their efforts on finding ways to evade the oppressive circumstances rather than to obey what the caliph tried to impose. The story of Al-Ḥākim trying to fight the Egyptians' drinking habit started in 392/1002, when wine (*nabīd*) was prohibited and the winemakers' shops were ravaged for the first time.⁶⁰ Unstable as he was, in 397/1007 the caliph Al-Ḥākim who had in the meantime started to cure himself with wine and music in accordance with his physician's recommendations, lifted the ban on what he had earlier prohibited. When, however, the physician died, having drowned in a pool into which he fell while inebriated, Al-Ḥākim, possibly enraged that he was beguiled by the late doctor's persuasions, not only reintroduced the ban on wine and ordered to destroy the existing stock, but also ordered raisins and honey to be either burnt or sunk in the Nile waters.⁶¹

By that time, however, the Egyptians already learned not to let the situation take them by surprise again and managed to anticipate the planned action. When the news of it somehow leaked and spread among the people, they proved fast enough to get to the wine shops before the ruler's men and buy up all the stock before it was destroyed.⁶² Moreover, despite the horror Al-Ḥākim's cruelty aroused in the country, not everybody cared to follow his wine prohibition, for a few years later (in 401/1010) the caliph had to renew the anti-wine regulations and to threaten those who would dare to violate them with even harder punishments than before.⁶³ It did not really work: when agents were sent following year to control the raisin- and honey-dealers, they had to report to the caliph that the forbidden intoxicant continued to be made of the products. So the raisins were burnt once again, honey poured into the Nile, and the ban on their sale, import and display

⁵⁹ In 170/786-7 the Abbasid governor of Egypt, 'Alī Ibn Sulaymān al-'Abbāsī, having "decided to order the good and forbid the evil," prohibited *malāhī* and wines and demolished all new churches in Egypt (Al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ*, I, p. 308).

⁶⁰ Yaḥyā al-Antākī, *Tārīḥ*, pp. 253-4, also p. 254, n. 3.

⁶¹ Yaḥyā al-Antākī, *Tārīḥ*, pp. 269-70, also p. 270, n. 5.

⁶² Loc. cit.

⁶³ This order was accompanied by a ban on the use of wine during Mass; the prohibition forced the Christians to use a substitute made of water in which raisins or vine wood were soaked; Yaḥyā al-Antākī, *Tārīḥ*, p. 289.

was issued. As soon, however, as the new grapes ripened, they started to sell well, for people secretly kept pressing them for wine.⁶⁴

By early XI century, there were not too many Egyptians who would care to perceive Al-Ḥākim as an example of Islamic piety or his anti-wine and anti-entertainment regulations a serious and binding law. In this respect, Egypt did not differ much from Iraq or Syria of the time. The disappearance of Al-Ḥākim (411/1021) marked the return to normality. Successful as they were in disregarding the state regulations and persisting with their dietary (here: drinking) tradition, people nevertheless could sigh with relief after Al-Ḥākim's death. Immediate resumption of open wine-drinking and indulgence in other earthly pleasures⁶⁵ helped the Egyptians to recover from the two-decade long stress.

Unlike Al-Ḥākim himself, his Fatimid successors did not consider the prohibition a burning issue. The only clear restriction was that the *qā'āt al-ḥammārīn*, or "wine-dealers' halls" of Miṣr and Al-Qāhira were customarily closed and sealed at the end of the month of Ğumādā al-āhira every year, i.e. on the eve of the holy month of Raġab, and by that time it was forbidden to sell wine in there.⁶⁶ The prohibition during the month of Ramaḍān was also treated relatively seriously by both the rulers and the ruled. The cases of getting inebriated during the fasting period must have been infrequent, so much so that when a merchant was found drunk in Ramaḍān in one of caravansaries of Al-Fuṣṭāṭ, the chronicler considered it worth recording.⁶⁷

Apart from that, the Egyptians were generally allowed to live their own way as far as wine drinking was concerned. In fact, it is difficult to gather what the everyday practice of the city population really looked like in this respect. At the dawn of the Fatimid epoch, the Palestinian visitor Al-Muqaddasī observed that the Egyptian shaykhs "do not refrain from wine drinking" and that "one can see them drunk."⁶⁸ Despite the otherwise

⁶⁴ Yaḥyā al-Antākī, *Tārīḥ*, p. 293.

⁶⁵ Yaḥyā al-Antākī, *Tārīḥ*, p. 374.

⁶⁶ Ibn al-Ma'mūn, *Aḥbār Miṣr (Nuṣūṣ min)*, ed. Ayman Fu'ād Sayyid, Cairo: IFAO 1983, p. 104; also quoted by Al-Maqrīzī in *Ḥiṭaṭ*, I, p. 49. Ashtor, "Diet," p. 150, interprets the term "*qā'āt al-ḥammārīn*" as "taverns."

⁶⁷ Al-Musabbihī, *Aḥbār Miṣr*, I, Cairo: IFAO 1978, p. 63; cf. Heine, *Weinstudien*, pp. 72-73, who confirms it was generally considered improper, even for Christians, to drink during Ramaḍān.

⁶⁸ Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan at-taqāsīm fī ma'rīfat al-aqālīm*, ed. M. J. de Goeje, Leiden: E. Brill 1906, p. 200. Al-Muqaddasī's accounts, often forging a hearsay or

dubious reliability of many of this author's records, there is no reason to distrust this observation. Authenticated by Yaḥyā al-Antākī's accounts,⁶⁹ it provides a significant clue as to the commonness of the drinking habit. Nevertheless, the details regarding the drinking behavior remain unknown.

However common and intensive drinking was in the course of daily life, on festive occasions the limits of freedom were particularly flexible. When in 415/1025 the Fatimid caliph was passing by the vicinity of Al-Maqs during one of the Coptic Nile festivals, he noticed a number of drunk women and drunk porters who carried them in baskets. Obviously, the drunken frolics of the company appalled and disgusted the caliph; nevertheless, he left them unbothered. A drunk man who on this occasion was punished with 30 whips got the punishment for attacking somebody with a knife, and not for being drunk.⁷⁰

But the Fatimids' policy towards the Coptic Nile festivals was meaningful in itself. Details of particular events aside, the customary practices of the five annual celebrations involved, apart from their religious and ritual dimension, public wine drinking and general revelry on the boats and on the river shores, events in which usually both Copts and Muslims participated.⁷¹ Although to discuss the issue in terms of "intercultural dialogue" may not prove relevant, it is nevertheless very tempting to use the words of a scholar who, while commenting on the policy of the early Arab-Muslim governors and rulers of Egypt, observed that they "seem to have adopted a pragmatic tolerance towards the indigenous popular culture" leaving, as long as the taxes were paid, their Coptic subjects to their own devices.⁷² In case of the Fatimids, this referred to their Egyptian

an occasionally observed phenomenon into a general custom, should be generally treated with caution.

⁶⁹ I.e. Yaḥyā al-Antākī's unique evidence showing the Egyptian's attitude in the context of the prohibition measures implemented by Al-Ḥākim, as discussed above.

⁷⁰ Al-Musabbihī, *Aḥbār Miṣr*, pp. 20-21; also quoted in Al-Maqrīzī's *Ḥiṭaṭ*, II, p. 145; Engl. translation in: H. Lutfī, "Coptic Festivals on the Nile: Aberrations of the Past?," in: T. Philipp (ed.), *The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society*, Cambridge: CUP 1998, p. 254.

⁷¹ Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, II/1, p. 29.

⁷² Lutfī, "Coptic Festivals," p. 257. In fact, the Fatimid caliphs went even further than the policy of non-interference. Having adjusted the local Nile rituals to those of their own—and vice versa—they included some of them into their sophisticated ceremonial, and used them, in a slightly recast form, to manifest and authenticate their authority over the country and its population.

Muslim subjects as well, if only for the fact that the Fatimids' priorities, both religious and political, did not include caring too much for the local population.

But wine, included by the medieval Islam in the category of vice, could not avoid dramatic changes that the fall of the Fatimids caused in everyday life of Cairo and Al-Fustāṭ. As Hassanein Rabie aptly phrased it while commenting on the state policy towards vice in medieval Egypt, "all through the history of vice taxes" a conflict is observable "between the desire to combat vice in accordance with religious conscience, and the reluctance of the rulers to renounce the abundant revenue it provided."⁷³ Indeed, the two attitudes can be traced throughout the history of post-Fatimid Egypt, although the historical evidence referring to them is very much uneven. Naturally enough, combating vice, in the form of abolishing taxes on sinful activities is much better documented than the practice of levying such taxes in order to augment the state budget. Combating vice was, after all, a deed meant to prove piousness of its perpetrator. Levying taxes on vice meant legalizing it, and the rulers could hardly be proud of such decision to have it recorded in the annals. Anyway, was it because of the chroniclers' self-censorship, or because of the fact that decisions of this kind were taken and implemented discreetly, the contemporaneous authors generally did not (unless things were too drastic to keep silent) mention such cases too often. Since, however, the taxes, before being abolished, had first to be imposed, the latter activity, ill-documented as it is, had to be at least as popular as the former one.

The "diligence" of particular dynasties was not of the same order here: although the two above-mentioned approaches can be traced both in the Ayyubid and the Mamluk epochs, it was, above all, under the Mamluks that wine and beer, apart from hashish, prostitutes and, in later centuries, also musical instruments and singers, became a frequently and deliberately used political device. In practical terms, this meant that despite the clarity of the legally binding religious guidelines, the rulers' policies depended on their personal attitudes towards the forbidden drink. These could range from encouraging permissiveness, to carelessness, to more or less persistent persecution. Depending on the circumstances, a ruler could either tolerate alcohol sale and its consumption, or raid the wine-sellers' places and destroy their merchandise. The former way was practiced either because he himself drank, because he did not care, or because he decided to impose

⁷³ Rabie, *Financial System*, p. 119.

taxes on sinful practices in order to cover the treasury's expenses. The persecuting approach reflected, on the other hand, the desire to implement the Islamic moral principles, an attitude that could result either from the ruler's true piousness, or just from his design to demonstrate it.

The absence of any consistent policy in this domain resulted in the emergence of legal and moral chaos that affected, in turn, the confused city population. People were sometimes prompted to drink, sometimes discouraged from doing so, and at other times left alone in this respect. Consequently, they oscillated between old habits and new laws, between virtual prohibition and veiled permission, between forced abstinence and a drinking habit. Some, unable to harmonize the habits with the changing circumstances, were truly torn. There must have been many cases resembling that of a certain Mamluk officer who, having visited the Holy Places in Mecca and Medina, swore to stop drinking but being addicted to alcohol, could by no means keep the promise.⁷⁴

It was only after centuries of such an uneven policy (or despite it), that the ideas of prohibition and abstinence, pressed into people's minds in irregular albeit violent waves, managed to supplant the traditional habits and to make the Cairenes form new standards. To make such a transformation possible, however, people had first to redefine their religion, reconcile themselves with the circumstances and, finally, to create some new patterns of behavior, form new standards, and get accustomed to new ways.

In Cairo, the harbinger of the new style appeared as early as in 1169, personified by Saladin who, in effect of a rather labyrinthine course of events, was in that year invested as vizier of the decadent Fatimid state. Before that happened, however, Saladin, as an average Kurdish-Syrian young gentleman, probably had not lived a life very much different from that of his fellow countrymen who were far from holding alcohol in contempt.⁷⁵ Either because of a true internal transformation, or as a

⁷⁴ In effect, amir Sayf ad-Dīn Kahardāš, the hero of the story, was attacked by hemiplegia and remained paralyzed until his death in 714/1314-15; Ibn Taġrībīrdī, *Nuġūm*, IX, p. 228.

⁷⁵ In Saladin's own times the teetotal attitudes were rare enough to make the chroniclers immortalize them in annals. Such was the case of the lord of Aleppo Al-Malik aš-Šāliḥ Ismā'īl Ibn al-Malik al-Ādil who, while dying of colic (*qūluṅġ*; or poisoning, according to another version) in 577/1182, refused to drink a draft of wine that the doctors prescribed to him as a cure. "And he died, having not drunk

consequence of a deliberate plan to found his authority on a new and well thought-out image of a virtuous Islamic ruler, or both, Saladin changed as soon as he took over the vizierate. As a pious Muslim, a champion of the Sunni Islam, and a chief warrior of the counter-Crusade war, he now repented of “wine-drinking and turned from frivolity” to “assume the dress of religion.”⁷⁶

The sources are not clear as to what exactly were Saladin’s decisions regarding the production and consumption of alcoholic beverages in Egypt, nor how effectively the prohibition was implemented. True, it was still possible during his sultanate that Muslims dared joining Christians on a Ramaḍān night to drink wine with them.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, judging by what happened when his son took power almost a quarter of a century later, the anti-vice policy of Saladin must have generally been quite bothering for the population of Cairo and Al-Fustāt. Whatever their details, the effect of Saladin’s decisions was far from what he originally intended. Instead of eliminating the old customs and making the Egyptians follow his virtuous example, he only made them miss the past. When after his death Al-Malik al-‘Azīz ‘Uṭmān, son of Saladin and his successor in Egypt (589/1193-595/1199), pressed by the economic crisis, lifted his father’s prohibitive regulations to reintroduce taxes on forbidden drinks, the wine- (and beer-) thirsty Cairenes welcomed the new-old order with excitement. And, similarly to what happened after Al-Ḥākim’s disappearance, they involved in grape- (and wheat-) processing and, in consequence, alcohol consumption, with redoubled energy. The effect of Al-‘Azīz ‘Uṭmān’s encouraging move was that, apart from the increased quest for beer, the “price of grapes grew, so much of it was being pressed for wine.”⁷⁸ Over two hundred years later Al-Maqrīzī seemed to have been shocked to learn, from

the wine.” See Ibn Taḡrībī *Nuḡūm*, VI, p. 89; Ibn Kaṭīr, *Al-Bidāya wa-an-nihāya fī at-tārīḥ*, Beirut 1987, XII, p. 309.

⁷⁶ Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, I/1, p. 43; see also Lyons, *Saladin*, p. 32.

⁷⁷ And that, moreover, nobody punished them—to the indignation of the chronicler. Such cases, however, could not be common (the above-mentioned situation occurred in 587/1191 in the area of Ḥārat ar-Rūm or the “Quarter of the Greeks”); Al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭat*, I, p. 24.

⁷⁸ Which took place in 590/1194, when Al-Malik al-‘Azīz ‘Uṭmān took the power; Al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭat*, I, p. 105; II, p. 5; idem, *Sulūk*, I/1, p. 119. When some half a century later an Andalusian author visited Egypt, he still could note that grapes were scarce and expensive, generally because people in the country were pressing (for wine) such huge quantities of them; Ibn Sa‘īd al-Maḡribī, *Nuḡūm*, p. 31; also quoted in Al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭat*, I, p. 368 and Al-Maqqarī, *Naḥḥ*, II, p. 817.

Al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil's account of the event, that "the vessels with wine (*ḥamr*) were carried openly in front of the people's eyes in the streets, with no sign of disapproval."⁷⁹ In Al-Maqrīzī's own times, or over a quarter of a millennium later, such a situation was already unthinkable.

The tax on alcohol apparently proved not sufficient to cover the needs of the state treasury and to save Al-'Azīz 'Uṭmān from economic crisis. After two years (i.e. in 592/1196) the tax on *ḥamr* (as well as on beer) was increased and the space was provided in the halls (*qā'āt*) and shops (*ḥawānīt*) for its display and sale. And, as the chronicler commented, "no one could contest that, either with words, or with deeds."⁸⁰ What shocked Al-Maqrīzī most deeply,⁸¹ however, was the fact that even such an indisputable and observed rule as "to refrain from winemaking in the month of Ramaḍān and not to be seen with wine jars or with drinking" was so easily disregarded by both the ruler and the population. But the rule, apparently observed in Al-Maqrīzī's own times, was not considered inviolable three hundred or so years earlier. In Ramaḍān 592/1196 not only the winemaking became so common that the price of grapes increased again but those involved in grape processing did not even try to hide their activities.

The same can be said about the sultan's officials who collected fees for the otherwise shady business. Guided by the sense of duty and unbothered by the sense of guilt, they did even not try to act discreetly. The sums they received must have been impressive, and the situation abnormal even by the standards of the permissive city population, because soon the rumors appeared about the sultan spending part of the wine revenues on golden and silver wine cups that were made for him. To complete the picture of the vileness of this Ramaḍān, the chronicler adds that many women joined men on the Canal when it was opened, and on the river bank in Al-Fuṣṭāṭ, and that "the Nile was stained with sins." But this was an exceptionally

⁷⁹ "And the Almighty God's punishment occurred immediately: the increase of the Nile stopped below the usual level and the price of crops grew"; Al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭat*, I, p. 105; idem, *Sulūk*, I/1, pp. 118-119.

⁸⁰ Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, I, p. 134; *Ḥiṭat*, I, p. 105.

⁸¹ But not only Al-Maqrīzī was shocked. It was also the case of the earlier author whom Al-Maqrīzī quotes or paraphrases and who apparently was an eyewitness of the event (possibly Al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil).

abominable year and no similar shamelessness had happened before, nor after it.⁸²

The rulers usually knew the records of their predecessors' deeds and learned their lessons from them. The account of Al-Malik al-'Azīz 'Utmān's reign must have made all subsequent sultans refrain from following his example, which was probably one of the reasons that such Ramaḍān never recurred. Yet, in Ramaḍān of the year 592/1196 such situations still could, and did, happen, despite Saladin's earlier attempts to promote chastity in the Cairene multi-religious Mediterranean society. At the end of XII century Saladin's chances to eliminate the ancient local habit not just temporarily, but permanently, were small—if only because that Egyptians were as uninterested in abstinence as most of Saladin's Ayyubid successors. His measures were soon abandoned and forgotten. It seems that in mid-XIII century, or over half a century after the virtuous ruler's death, the ban on wine was only issued occasionally in the vicinity of Al-Ḥalīġ, between Cairo and Al-Fuṣṭāt, because some time earlier a man was murdered there in a drunken brawl.⁸³ Apart from that, the drinking habit was still very much alive among the Egyptians and the jars of wine were kept undisturbed on display in the streets. As far as the Mediterranean was concerned, this was unthinkable probably only in the home country of Ibn Tūmart, the only place where, for the time being, the policy of implementing the innovation-free Islam proved to be relatively effective. In result, Maghrebian visitors to Egypt were shocked not only by the sight of hashish, dancers, drinking, and wine jars kept on display in mid-XIII century, but also by the generally easy-going approach of both the local people and their rulers towards the *ḍimmīs* half a century later, all of which was so much unlike what was going on in the Maghreb.⁸⁴

In Egypt, the post-Saladin generations of the Ayyubid rulers had a lot of other worries, much more urgent than the alcohol consumption of their subjects. The last of the dynasty, Aṣ-Ṣāliḥ Ayyūb, distrustful of his troops,

⁸² Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, I, p. 136, 137; also some fragmentary data in idem, *Ḥiṭat*, I, p. 105.

⁸³ Ibn Sa'īd al-Maġribī, *Nuġūm*, p. 31; quoted in Al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭat*, I, p. 368, and Al-Maqqarī, *Nafl*, II, p. 817.

⁸⁴ Ibn Sa'īd al-Maġribī, *Nuġūm*, pp. 30-31; quoted in Al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭat*, I, p. 368. When ca. 700/1301 the vizier of the "King of the Maghrib" arrived in Cairo, he expressed his indignation at the indulgence shown by the Mamluks to the Christians and Jews in Egypt; see D.P. Little, "Coptic Conversion to Islam under the Baḥrī Mamluks, 692-755/1293-1354," *BSOAS* 39 (1976), pp. 555, 567.

was preoccupied with buying and training hundreds of foreign slaves and forging them into his Baḥrī Mamluk guard. His son, Turānšāh, not only a drunkard and a party-goer, but also an unreasonable Baḥrī mamluks-hater, did not manage to enjoy his father's Egyptian throne for more than a few days. When drunk, he used to set big candles in a row by night, take a sword in his hand, cut the candles with the sword and say: "that's what I'll do with the Baḥrīs when I enter Cairo!"⁸⁵ Unluckily for him, his father's mamluks stroke first.

The major shift of power that took place in Cairo following the Baḥrīs' assassination of Turānšāh did not signal major change as far as the question of alcohol was concerned. When in 648/1250 Al-Mu'izz Aybak took over the power to start the long era of the Mamluks, nothing seemed to forecast the coming change. The fact that the first Mamluk sultan decided (or only approved his ex-Copt vizier's decision) to reintroduce taxes on wine, *mizr*, hashish, and houses of prostitution, signified that the sinful businesses were legal⁸⁶ and that the Cairenes, and Egyptians, although probably mindful of avoiding wine consumption during the Ramaḍān, were otherwise left alone to enjoy their drinking habits.

The problems started when the sultanate was taken over by Baybars al-Bunduqdārī, the mightiest of the Baḥrī rulers. Unlike any other ruler before or after him, Baybars took personal interest in everything and his energy displayed in running countless state and war affairs was inexhaustible. Busy as he was with the crusaders, international relations, inter-Mamluk strife, and the state administration, Baybars did not fail to take the issue of alcohol under his control. Because the wine and beer business were too ostentatious at the time, or because of his concern to upkeep the image of a virtuous Muslim warrior ruler, Baybars—his addiction to koumiss notwithstanding—proved to be an avowed enemy of alcohol.

Throughout his reign, Baybars repeatedly issued orders to abolish taxes on hashish, beer and wine, and to ravage breweries and wine-cellars, and pour out their stock, threatening wine makers with death. The regulations

⁸⁵ Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i*, I, p. 284.

⁸⁶ According to how Al-Maqrīzī relates the events, sultan Al-Mu'izz Aybak made a mistake by nominating certain Coptic convert to Islam for the post of the vizier. The nomination, apart from other "misdeeds," resulted in the fact that taxes such as the fees on wine, *mizr*, hashish, and houses of prostitution were reintroduced. Since Al-Maqrīzī clearly means to defame the vizier, it is difficult to gather, from this account, the true version of the developments; see Al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ*, I, p.105; II, p. 90.

were accompanied by orders to eliminate prostitution.⁸⁷ Unlike Al-Ḥākim who was considered an oddity rather than a respected ruler, or maybe even unlike Saladin who spent much of his time in Syria, Baybars did not give people too many chances to disregard the law. Like ‘Umar Ibn al-Ḥaṭṭāb, Baybars was determined and never gave up. Neither was he famous for his mercy. He was probably one of the first, if not the first, medieval Muslim Near Eastern ruler to punish his soldier with death for wine drinking.⁸⁸

And it was probably during Baybars’s reign that, possibly for the first time, in people’s thinking wine became linked to wrong, to what was forbidden by God’s ordinance and not just by a ruler’s caprice. It was probably then that alcohol drinking, persistently associated by Baybars with vice and sin, started to be perceived not as an innocent old habit, for some reasons persecuted by some rulers, but as a wrong thing to do: probably not yet a sin, but at least a misdemeanor.

Persistent as he was in haunting and defaming the wine and beer business, he must have caused considerable decrease of the popularity of alcoholic beverages, particularly of wine. It may have been from then on that alcohol disappeared from the corner shop and moved into less ostentatious places. Scenes such as those that happened during Saladin’s son’s reign were no longer possible. This time things were serious and people realized that. As one poet observed with simplicity and sorrow,

A goblet has no more use,

mouth has no more saliva.

The shaykh woke up in the morning

*and shed tears over what has vanished since the days of his youth.*⁸⁹

Which does not mean, however, that Baybars managed to eliminate wine or beer from the Egyptians’ menu once and for all. His own reign was too short to make such a revolution possible and of forty five Mamluk sultans who governed Egypt after him not many shared Baybars’s attitude or were equally determined to make the subjects live pious lives. Apart from few, their wine and entertainment policies were not so much a consequence of their sense of religious obligation but, rather, an effect of

⁸⁷ Such orders were issued, for instance, in 662/1264, 663/1265, 665/1266-7, 666/1268, 667/1269 and in 669/1271; see, e.g. Al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ*, I, pp. 105-6; Ibn Kaṭīr, *Bidāya*, XIII, pp. 254, 260; Ibn Taḡrībī *Nuḡūm*, VII, p. 154.

⁸⁸ Al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ*, I, p. 106. Baybars seems also to have been the first, since more less a quarter of a millennium, to suspend one of the Coptic Nile festivals; see Lutfī, “Coptic Festivals,” p. 266.

⁸⁹ By Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Ġazzār, as quoted by Al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ*, I, p. 106.

their personal approach towards phenomena included by medieval Islam in the category of vice. Some, obligated by Islamic ordinances, exercised restraint. Others, however, were party lovers whose drinking records, as documented in the annals, were impressive (and the fact that they were often sons, mamluks, or comrades of a ruler who himself was a paragon of temperance, did not matter much). Still others simply remained indifferent, while the attitude of some was moderate, verging on practical.

The first sultan to share at least a measure of Baybars's attitude towards alcohol was An-Nāṣir Muḥammad (693-4/1293-4; 698-708/1299-1309; 709-741/1310-1341), son of sultan Qalāwūn. Although far from imitating Baybars's fervor in implementing the anti-vice regulations, An-Nāṣir Muḥammad abhorred wine and drinking no less than Baybars. This was manifested not so much in his fierce or persistent fight to implement the prohibition measures,⁹⁰ however, but in the sultan's severe persecution of those of his mamluks and officers who drank. The fate of the rank-and-file mamluks, on whom the sultan vented his rage, was particularly hard—the accusation of drinking usually implied heavy beating with clubs, sometimes to death.⁹¹

Of An-Nāṣir Muḥammad's eight sons who ruled the state between 740/1340 and 762/1361, at least three did not share their teetotaler father's attitude.⁹² Nor did they intend to persecute the mamluks for drinking. Their party-loving style was continued by the brothers' nephew, Al-Manṣūr Muḥammad (762-4/1361-3). Like his uncles, he immersed himself

⁹⁰ The prohibition measures introduced by An-Nāṣir Muḥammad were rather few; they included abolishing the tax on wine on one occasion in 713/1313-14 (Ibn Kaṭīr, *Bidāya*, XIV, p. 70) and pouring out the winemakers' merchandise and burning hashish some years later, in 724/1324 (Ibn Kaṭīr, *Bidāya*, XIV, p. 113). Some years earlier (720/1320) the sultan, apparently in order to imitate steps undertaken by Ilkhanid ḥān Abū Sa'īd, ordered his governors in Syria to abolish taxes on wine, close ḥānāt, and call on the prostitutes to repent (Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, II/1, p. 211). An-Nāṣir Muḥammad's order to smash thousands of wine jars in the Šubra area in 736/1336 seems to have had nothing to do with fighting vice; the decision was meant to be a punishment for the amir (Baštāk) who appropriated and pressed the load of grapes whose value originally was to supply the sultan's treasury (Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, II/2, pp. 400-401).

⁹¹ Ibn Taḡrībīrdī, *Nuḡūm*, IX, pp. 73, 98. For the officers it was easier—they were punished in an imprecise manner and dismissed (Ibn Taḡrībīrdī, *Nuḡūm*, IX, pp. 114, 174).

⁹² Inūk, one of sultan An-Nāṣir Muḥammad's sons who never managed to attain the royal power, did not refrain from drinking; see Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, II, p. 492.

completely in drinking and listening to music and singing, which so distracted him from state issues that his two-year sultanate was reported to have been “nothing but a name.”⁹³

The fact that the Mamluks originated “from the steppes of Russia and Central Asia” was once used as an explanation of their alcohol addiction.⁹⁴ It so happens, however, that a sultan’s origin did not make a real difference. Of the five “Baḥrī” sultans who had more or less impressive drinking record, all were Egypt-born former rulers’ descendants. Which does not mean, of course, that other sultans of the “dynasty,” be it those of steppe origin, or those Egyptian-born, refrained from drinking. Their attitude was not, however, commented on by the chroniclers. Of the two confirmed Baḥrī teetotalers, An-Nāṣir Muḥammad, born in Egypt, was an avowed foe of drinking mamluks rather than an unyielding prohibition fighter. Baybars, the only one of the “dynasty” to be the true alcohol and vice enemy, originated directly from the Eurasian steppes.

Compared to the series of sultans who reigned as the so-called “Baḥrī” or “Turkish” dynasty, the subsequent series, known as “Burġī” or “Circassian” dynasty, had a significantly higher proportion of rulers who were not born in Egypt. The ratio of the evidenced drinking to non-drinking Egyptian-born “Baḥrīs” is not dramatically different from the proportion of the drinking Central Asian-born Circassians to the non-drinking ones. But the Circassians, abstainers or fun-loving, seem to have done things with a flourish and, in a way, with more fantasy than the Baḥrīs—or at least their stories portray them this way.

Aḏ-Ẓāhir Barqūq (784-91/1382-9; 792-801/1390-1399), the first of the “Circassian” series of sultans, not only neglected the state administration and disregarded foreign affairs but dedicated himself to inter-mamluk strife, an activity that involved plotting against some, and socializing with others. His socializing turned into fraternizing, which often led to drinking bouts.⁹⁵ One of his banquets, held in 800/1398 to celebrate his victory in polo game over one of the officers, went down in history as a particularly disreputable event. Apart from the enormous quantities of food that were presented in the tents pitched in the Cairo Hippodrome, equally enormous quantities of drinks, both soft and alcoholic, were served. The original idea

⁹³ When finally removed from power and imprisoned in the Citadel he was apparently allowed to continue his way of life and was able “not to sober up day and night.” Ibn Iyās, *Badā’i*, I, p. 592-593.

⁹⁴ Ashtor, “Diet,” p. 162.

⁹⁵ Ibn Taġrībī, *Nuġūm*, XI, p. 381.

of Barqūq was to spend the day—apparently as usual—with his amirs and mamluks, and give himself to drinking. Accordingly, at dawn he rode down from the Citadel in order to realize his design.

The versions of what happened next vary slightly; the most important in the present context is, however, that he decided to keep the Hippodrome open for the people and that, when the crowd became too dense, he left the place, letting the populace snatch away what remained of food and drink. Since, however, the drink included alcoholic beverages, the day was recorded as “a day of ignominy and horridness, a day in which intoxicants were permitted and a day in which people did not try to hide abominable and sinful behavior which was practiced in the unprecedented degree. From this day on,” as the chronicler maintains, “the forbidden things were abused in Egypt, and the sense of shame diminished.”⁹⁶

Considering his father’s attitude, one should hardly be surprised that An-Nāṣir Faraġ (801-8/1399-1405; 808-15/1405-12), Barqūq’s son and successor, did not prove to be a paragon of Islamic morale or of statesman-like behavior. Moreover, he probably even surpassed Barqūq in drinking episodes. His alcoholism did not stop him, however, from allowing—or ordering—the show of destroying all the wine-stock and production facilities (apart from the church demolition) in the Šubra area. By so doing, he not only ruined the last mainstay of the Egyptian wine-industry, but also put an end to the prosperity of its Christian population who lived off winemaking.⁹⁷ Al-Mu’ayyad Šayḥ (815-824/1412-21), a Circassian mamluk of Barqūq and successor of his son An-Nāṣir Faraġ, remained “wholeheartedly dedicated to drinking,” too.⁹⁸

But since neither the origin, nor the Cairene household of the future ruler mattered, sultan Al-Ašraf Barsbāy (825-42/1422-38), also an ethnic Circassian and a mamluk of fun-loving Barqūq, managed to remain an example of piety—at least as far as food and drink were concerned. He never touched wine, and he also fasted regularly and frequently.⁹⁹ During his reign, at least three operations against intoxicants were undertaken. One of them resulted in the fact that in 832/1428 “about 10 000 of wine jars

⁹⁶ Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, III/2, p. 902; Ibn Taġrībirdī, *Nuġūm*, XII, p. 81; Ibn Iyās, *Badā’i*, I/2, p. 501.

⁹⁷ The event took place in 803/1401; Ibn Iyās, *Badā’i*, I/2, p. 595; see also above, p. 68.

⁹⁸ Ibn Taġrībirdī, *Nuġūm*, XIV, pp. 1, 65.

⁹⁹ Ibn Taġrībirdī, *Nuġūm*, XV, p. 108.

were broken, so that a pond of wine flowed in the Rumayla Square.”¹⁰⁰ A similar number of wine jars were reportedly broken ten years later, in 841/1437.¹⁰¹

Barsbāy’s indirect successor, sultan Aẓ-Zāhir Ğaḩmaḩ (842-57/1438-53), also a Circassian and also a mamluk of Barqūq, was even more pious than Barsbāy and, moreover, he seemed to have masterminded and implemented a kind of moral revolution in the mid-XV century Cairo. Suffused with religious zeal, he not only refrained from all forbidden things and pleasures such as drinking, adultery, and pederasty, but he also hated those who did not mind these practices. The effect of Aẓ-Zāhir Ğaḩmaḩ’s disciplining activities was that many “improved and stopped drinking, out of their fear of him.”¹⁰² Some started to fast regularly, some went on a pilgrimage, others gave up their previous lives, still others built mosques. Obviously not all were able to convert to abstinence immediately but a chronicler could say that “there was no one left in his state who would drink intoxicating beverages except for very few, and if they did, they did it secretly and were so much scared that they trembled upon hearing a whistling man.”¹⁰³

As for the remaining sultans of the Mamluk state’s decadent years, it is rather difficult to define their attitude unequivocally. The opinions regarding Al-Ašraf Īnāl (857-866/1453-60) are divided: some historians maintain he was “absorbed by pleasures and inclined for wine drinking,”¹⁰⁴ while others say that he in fact refrained from intoxicants and forbidden things—his possible fondness for handsome youths notwithstanding.¹⁰⁵ Whether Al-Ašraf Qāyṭbāy (873-901/1468-95) drank or not, is not clear, either. The attitude of Qāyṭbāy’s son, An-Nāšir Muḩammad (901-904/1495-8), is also unclear. As for Al-Ašraf Qānšūḩ al-Ĝūrī (906-922/1500-1516), he was not too principled. He did issue at least two regulations banning wine, *būza*, hashish, and prostitutes, but both orders

¹⁰⁰ A square below the Citadel, recently renamed Maydān Salāḩ ad-Dīn; Ibn Iyās spells it Ramla; *Badā’i’*, II, p. 122.

¹⁰¹ On the same occasion, an action against prostitutes was also taken; see Ibn Iyās, *Badā’i’*, p. 184, and a poet’s interesting comment quoted therein.

¹⁰² Ibn Taġrībirdī, *Nuġūm*, XV, pp. 348-9.

¹⁰³ Ibn Taġrībirdī, *Nuġūm*, XV, p. 458.

¹⁰⁴ Ibn Iyās, *Badā’i’*, II, p. 313.

¹⁰⁵ Ibn Taġrībirdī, *Nuġūm*, XVI, p. 159.

seem to have been related more to the waves of plague that appeared in Egypt than to his sense of religious integrity.¹⁰⁶

Since the approach of the medieval Egyptian rulers to the issue of alcohol does not conform to any clear pattern, not many generalizations can be formed. The most obvious one is that for over half a millennium of Cairo's history, the paragons of temperance and avowed alcohol foes were rather innumerable among countless caliphs and sultans who resided in the city. Al-Ḥākim and Saladin represent those who ruled the country before the Mamluk era; as for the 250-year-long era of the Mamluks, there were three dedicated prohibition fighters among sultans out of the total of forty seven Mamluk rulers of both "dynasties."

The absence of a consistent policy regarding the question of alcohol has one particularly intriguing aspect. It is that after centuries of such an uneven policy (or despite it), the ideas of prohibition and abstinence managed after all to supplant traditional habits and to make the Cairenes form new standards. This long, slow and uneven process of transformation appears to have had its formative moment at some point in the Mamluks' epoch. Or, more precisely, between the reign of Aḡ-Zāhir Baybars and the end of the reign of An-Nāṣir Muḥammad, that is between 1270-ties and 1340-ties.

It was not, however, the post-Baybars Mamluk rulers whose personal role was instrumental in changing the subjects' attitudes towards the question of wine. In all likelihood, the timing was of essence here. The second half of XIII century was the time when the counter-crusade was at its high point. It was also the time when Muslims' anti-Christian emotions, relatively weak in the previous century, grew faster, and probably deeper, than ever. It follows that XIV century, and the end of XIII, were the times when "Islamic" more and more often meant "anti-Christian," for the simple reason that "Christian" was so often synonymous with "anti-Islamic." Stimulated by the enthusiasm that exploded after the recapture of Tripoli¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ The bans were issued in 910/1504-5 and 919/1513; Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i*, IV, pp. 76-7, 303.

¹⁰⁷ The unprecedented massacre of the city population that followed the recapture of Tripoli by Qalāwūn's army (1289) could be symptomatic of the Muslims' emotions of that time.

and then, finally, of Acre, this phenomenon, interwoven with the idea of promoting Islamic values and rejecting what was non-Islamic, gathered momentum.

In reference to the issue of wine this meant that measures taken against the wine business—those days an exclusively Christian domain (and, to some degree, also Jewish)¹⁰⁸—were meant to promote values that were as Islamic as they were anti-Christian. This also means that the question of wine became an inherent element of the general anti-Christian atmosphere and, consequently, of the Mamluk state's oppressive policy towards local Christians. But it was not the Mamluk rulers with whom this approach originated; rather, it was zealous preachers, fervent amirs, and the enthusiastic population at large. Given a chance to have their moment in history, they started to set the tone for the atmosphere of XIV-century Cairo, as well as for all of the Islamic Near East.¹⁰⁹

The beginning of XIV century coincided with the activity of Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) whose unfriendly attitude towards the “infidels” and dissenters did not allow him to pass over the issue of Christian wine. While in Syria, Ibn Taymiyya himself cruised local wine cellars on at least two occasions: once in Damascus, where he broke wine jars and reprimanded those whom he caught there, and then some years later in the Littoral and Tripoli, from where he managed to “eliminate wines and prostitutes” and where he “built a mosque in every Christian village.”¹¹⁰ Although he probably did not have a chance to act this way in Egypt, the spirit of his teachings, combined with his unquestionable influence, must have mattered in Cairo. XIV century was also the century of theologians

¹⁰⁸ The measures taken against the wine business affected the Jews, too. In the case of Jewish dealers, however, the harassment and repressive operations taken against them generally did not involve inter-communal hatred, nor were they a part of a large-scale inter-communal conflict.

¹⁰⁹ One of the results of their activity in Egypt was the fact that “as a result of the loss of their livelihood and the destruction of their churches, the Copts began to disappear into the Muslim population of Egypt.” Little, “Coptic Conversion,” p. 568.

¹¹⁰ Ibn Kaṭīr, *Bidāya*, XIV, pp. 82, 698-9. Cf. the reports on *ḥān* Abū Saʿīd, the Mongol Ilkhanid ruler who, more or less at the same time, i.e. in 720/1320, was spilling wines, and killing those who stored wine despite the ban, eliminating houses of sin and *ḥānāt*, and destroying churches in his country, apparently to the amusement of the Muslim population (Ibn Kaṭīr, *Bidāya*, XIV, pp. 97, 99; Ibn Taḡrībīrdī *Nuḡūm*, IX, p. 309; Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, II/1, p. 211). Minor differences between their reports notwithstanding, all the chroniclers mention *ḥān* Abū Saʿīd and his operation with clear satisfaction and esteem.

like Ibn al-Ḥāğğ (d. 737/1336-7), a Maghrebian orthodox scholar living in Cairo. His teachings, while promoting the proper Islamic behavior, were also meant to discourage the Muslims from contacting the Christians who, apart from other sins, were guilty of drinking and wine-dealing.¹¹¹ It was also the time of theologians such as Al-Asnawī, a *ḥadīth* teacher and the head of the Egyptian Šāfi‘ītes, who held that Christians were responsible for spreading moral laxity, wine drinking, and for seduction of Muslim women. And who taught—in the spirit that many centuries later was to become the core of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s double *tawḥīd*—that “acceptance of unbelief is in itself unbelief.”¹¹²

But the theologians, influential as they were, were not alone in promoting the new currents in Islam. XIV century was also the century of officials such as amir Al-Malik al-Ğükandār, a Mamluk officer who vented his long-cherished hatred towards wine and Christians as soon as he was promoted to the post of viceroy by An-Nāşir Muḥammad’s successor. As viceroy, he first cracked down on what he hated most—namely, the Frankish-Armenian semi-legal “speakeasy” located at the back of the Bayn al-Qaşrayn square in Cairo, which made it his neighbor. The establishment was accused of wine-, pig meat-, and prostitution-business, as well as of depravity of every kind. It was surrounded on his order (in 744/1343) and, with the help of the local populace and the riffraff, it was leveled to the ground. This action was preceded by capturing the dwellers and attendants of the place and smashing wine jars that were found in the building.¹¹³ “It

¹¹¹ Ibn al-Ḥāğğ, *Al-Madḥal ilā tanmiyat al-a‘māl bi-taḥsīn an-niyya*, Cairo 1929, II, p. 51; IV, p. 94.

¹¹² M. Perlman, “Notes on Anti-Christian Propaganda in the Mamluk Empire,” *BSOAS*, X, 4, 1942, pp. 851; 860; 861. Not all Islamic scholars were as uncompromising, though. ‘Uṭmān an-Nawāğğī, a XV-century Cairene theologian and a *ḥadīth* teacher, could be open enough to compile two collections of wine poetry and anecdotes, his faith and career notwithstanding, and avoided moralistic teachings in his works; cf. Heine, *Weinstudien*, p. xvii.

¹¹³ The curious establishment, located in the back of the Bayn al-Qaşrayn square, in the post-Fatimid building of Ḥizānat al-Bunūd and turned into a semi-legal “speakeasy” reportedly famous for its wines, pig meat, prostitution, and depravity of every kind, was tolerated by An-Nāşir Muḥammad, apparently for the sake of international relations. For more on Ḥizānat al-Bunūd and on *amir* Āl Malik’s operation against see P.B. Lewicka, “Restaurants, Inns and Taverns that Never Were. Some Reflections on Public Consumption in Medieval Cairo,” *JESHO*, 48, 1, (2005), pp. 76-79.

was a great day, like the day of entering Acre or Tripoli, so horrible were sins committed there,”¹¹⁴ commented the chronicler contentedly.

A curious detail of the story is that more or less at the same time amir Āl Malik also ordered to remove a group of Frankish prisoners who lived in the Cairo Citadel and to smash the jars of wine that were reportedly found with them. Both groups of Franks were then moved to the neighborhood of the mausoleum of Sayyida Nafīsa, somewhere between the mosque of Ibn Ṭulūn and Al-Fuṣṭāṭ (one wonders, by the way, how the Franks earned their living after having been moved to the Sayyida Nafīsa area). Having cracked down on the Franks and Armenians, amir Āl Malik continued chasing and punishing wine sellers and their customers—he even promised an award to anybody who would bring a drunk man carrying a wine jug. Prompted, people readily lay in wait for drunkards in every street, but the hunt did not prove successful: only one drunken soldier was caught.¹¹⁵ This was not what the determined viceroy hoped for. In a few days a larger-scale operation was ordered. This time the toll was satisfying: the viceroy “seized many of wine drinkers and wine sellers in the Šubra al-Ḥiyam and Mīnyat as-Sīrġ area, and from the boats and houses.” Then he “lashed them, their bodies naked, uncovered their heads, spilled wine on them, and displayed them.”¹¹⁶

The atmosphere was encouraging, and very soon “a group of pious *faqīrs*” from a village north of Cairo, possibly prompted by news of the victory over the Frankish-Armenian ghetto, rebuked their Christian neighbors for selling wine. After one of the “rebuking” *faqīrs* had beaten a Christian and drawn blood, Christians gathered near the local mosque and beat the *faqīrs* after the Friday prayer. Muslims then repaid the Christians with the same, and moved to plunder their houses, after which the

¹¹⁴ Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, II/3, p. 641.

¹¹⁵ Unfortunate enough, he was brought to the viceroy, who beat him and deprived him of his pay. The man who brought the soldier received some award (the event took place in 744/1343-4); Ibn Taġrībirdī, *Nuġūm*, X, p. 88; Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, II/3, p. 646. From this time on, every now and then some helpful “citizens” brought the viceroy individuals seized with a jar of wine, or led him to places dealing in alcohol and hashish. For records of such events see Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, II/3, pp. 646-7, 667.

¹¹⁶ Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, II/3, p. 646.

plundering spread to Muslim houses. In effect, the entire village was destroyed.¹¹⁷

The records of the events clearly show that by mid-XIV century a certain transformation of attitudes had already been completed. After the death of Al-Ḥākim the Cairenes, or Egyptians in general, indulged in wine drinking and entertainment; after the death of Saladin, they not only bought up wine and grapes but, moreover, did not mind to drink with Christians in Ramaḍān. Now they enjoyed promoting the prohibition and watched the hunt for drunkards in the city.

Interestingly, the Cairene Muslim mob, or the main factor of the anti-Christian disturbances and their driving force, was not as unambiguous in its attitude towards alcohol as it might have appeared. The same late medieval Cairene mob who readily smashed wine jars and enjoyed demolishing Christian wine-selling premises, did not seem to care about what exactly was wrong about the Christian wine, nor about what was wrong about drinking in general. In 721/1321 long and destructive Muslim-Christian violence swept across the city. In the course of the events a number of churches was demolished, their valuables were robbed, and nuns were “captured.” Some of the wine jars found in the sanctuaries were smashed on the spot. Other jars, however, were taken as booty, possibly to be smashed in some public place and in a more “festive” way. But in the end the jars were not broken: some of those who a moment earlier participated in anti-Christian riots and demolition of churches, now did not mind getting drunk with the church wine they seized.¹¹⁸ Apparently, their negative sentiment towards Christian wine had little to do with its sacramental meaning.¹¹⁹ Moreover, this sentiment resulted more from their receptivity to provocation and incitement than from their deep belief in the superiority of Islamic abstinence. The city populace, while mobilized and excited, did not care too much about the Islamic ban on alcohol

¹¹⁷ Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, II/3, p. 656. The village, Minyat as-Sīrġ, was probably the center of the wine business off which the whole Christian population of Šubra lived.

¹¹⁸ Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, II/1, p. 217. It is probable that many medieval Egyptian churches, like some of those of early XX century, had their own winepresses; cf. S.H. Leeder, *Modern Sons of the Pharaohs. A Study of Manners and Customs of the Copts of Egypt*, London: Hodder and Stoughton 1918 (repr. 1973), p. 214.

¹¹⁹ One should not, however, underestimate the significance of the use of wine for sacramental purposes in Christian ceremonies as a reason for Muslims' negative sentiment. Cf. Al-Ḥākim's prohibition to use of wine in the Mass by the Christians; Yahyā al-Antākī, *Tārīḥ*, p. 289.

consumption. When allowed to drink, the common people could still enjoy getting drunk, en masse and openly.¹²⁰

All these events are perfect illustration of how wine was involved in the inter-communal tension of the time, and how it turned into a convenient pretext, ready to be used for religious and politico-religious purposes. Or, in other words, how wine fueled—or was used to fuel—mutual hatred and bitterness.¹²¹

Contrary to what has been suggested, the Mamluk policy towards the local Christian tradition was not a result of any premeditated designs of the Mamluks aiming at “suppressing the disruptive aspects of popular culture.”¹²² It was, above all, an echo of general and common radicalization of Islam. True, the Mamluk rulers were not the *spiritus movens* of the tendency.¹²³ But they followed it and yielded to it, often against their own interests and inclinations. In this sense the Mamluks, by either following the spirit of the time, or by using the mood of the times, contributed to reinforcing the inter-communal bitterness, of which the question of wine was, for some time, one of the constituting elements. But in XIV century they did not have to put much effort to seek popular support for it. The Crusades and the religious propaganda designed to incite Muslims against the *ḍimmīs* already did their work and in XIV century the anti-Christian

¹²⁰ Cf. the infamous open-air Barqūq’s party held three generations later; see above, pp. 82-83.

¹²¹ But the symptoms of inter-communal hatred, with wine as one of its hallmarks, reasons, and pretexts, were coming to the surface much earlier than in XIV century. In Syria, the tension must have been present long before 658/1260 when, following the Mongol occupation of Damascus, it was finally allowed to erupt. The local Christians, apparently in retaliation for the earlier oppressive behavior of the Muslims, and now under Mongol protection, marched along the city streets with a crucifix, insulting the Muslim population, sprinkling them, and the mosques, with wine, and shouting that Christianity was the only proper religion. As soon, however, as the Mongols withdrew from Damascus later the same year, Muslims took the revenge for the humiliation they had gone through. The Christians’ houses were ravaged, some churches demolished and burnt, and a number of Christians killed. A few days later Damascene Jews experienced similar troubles; Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, I/2, pp. 425, 432; Ibn Kaṭīr, *Bidāya*, XIII, p. 219.

¹²² Cf. Lutfī, “Coptic Festivals,” p. 272.

¹²³ The Mamluks, “except when they realized that to do so would constitute a threat to public order and stability,” generally “left *ḍimmīs* to their own devices” and were hesitant to take any action against the Copts unless they were prodded to do so; see Little, “Coptic Conversion,” pp. 557, 553.

sentiment among the Muslim population of Cairo, especially among the lower elements of society, was deep enough not to require encouragement.

Moreover, the tendency to promote Islam by suppressing what was non-Islamic within it, an idea for which the wine, both sinful and Christian, became a perfect target, was by no means an exclusively Egyptian phenomenon. In Syria, too, such things happened and Ibn Taymiyya ravaging the wine cellars on the Littoral and “building a mosque in every Christian village”¹²⁴ was not an isolated example of this kind of activities. It is enough to remember an announcement issued in Damascus promising an award to anybody who would find a drunk soldier, pull him down from his horse, take his clothes and bring him to the viceroy’s residence. Also here, like in Cairo, the popular response was positive. People, encouraged by the vision of receiving bread, gladly blocked winemakers’ and grape pressers’ premises.¹²⁵ One can also mention a “grass roots” initiative of 758/1356-7, when a group of people from the vicinity of the Damascene mosque, from *mašhad* of ‘Alī and other areas, followed by a group of *faqīrs* and Mağribīs, headed for places accused of dealing in wine and hashish. Upon reaching the places, they “smashed many wine vessels, spilled what was inside them, and destroyed a lot of hashish.”¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Cf. above, p. 86.

¹²⁵ Although it is not clear whether any soldier fell in a trap, the measurable result of the action was that the price of grapes decreased; Ibn Kaṭīr, *Bidāya*, XIV, p. 240 (annal for 753/1352).

¹²⁶ Ibn Kaṭīr, *Bidāya*, XIV, p. 257. In his *Sulūk*, Al-Maqrīzī mentions *amir* Sūdūn min ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān (d. 841/1438), a Mamluk governor of Damascus, who was to make a fortune on ownership of taverns (cf. Levanoni, “Food and Cooking,” p. 220). According to Al-Maqrīzī’s account, Sūdūn founded in Damascus *ḥammārāt*, or wine-selling establishments (but also venues for prostitutes and youngsters, most probably meaning homosexuals), and franchised them in return for a monthly charge. The record provokes a number of comments. One is that the other authors who discussed career of amīr Sūdūn (i.e. As-Saḥāwī and Ibn Tağrībīrdī) do not confirm the information that he participated in this kind of enterprising activity. Another question refers to Al-Maqrīzī’s remarks that Sūdūn’s way of making money was followed by other entrepreneurs, and that such a development was accepted without a public protest. This could suggest that in XV-century Damascus one could easily make fortune on wine trade because wine-dealers’ premises not only prospered but also enjoyed official and popular consent. True, such situation was not impossible; it was not, however, very likely, if one considers the non-permissive atmosphere of XIV-century Damascus, and similar atmosphere prevailing in XIV- and XV-century Cairo. See *Sulūk*, IV, pp. 1066-67. Many thanks to Joseph Drory for inspiring comments regarding the issue.

No doubt, in XIV century the circumstances allowed for far less than in the earlier times. Yet the following century proved to be even tougher, for both the wine dealers and their consumers. One reason for this was, undoubtedly, the policies of the devout sultan Al-Ašraf Barsbāy and of the even more devout Az-Zāhir Ğaḩmaq. But what made the times ever harder was the common conviction that the occurrence of natural disasters was caused by sinful behavior. Ancient and timeless as it was, the belief was used to give the prohibition policy of the Mamluk state a new dimension. In XV century, the policy of demonstrating piousness by fighting wine business and vice in order to prevent the work of the elements was practiced more frequently than ever before, irregardless of the sultans' personal attitudes towards drinking and entertainment. But, in all fairness to the Mamluk rulers, such actions were in fact the only instrument one could use as an antidote against the waves of plague or the danger of Nile waters not rising high enough.¹²⁷ It is difficult to assert whether the state prohibition policy, aimed at preventing famines and plagues through demonstrating repentance, could have a deep influence upon the city population. With the majority of Cairo's Coptic population Islamized, and its Muslim population's radicalized religiosity, people did not need any added incentives to keep off from the unpopular and commonly despised habit of wine drinking. This aspect of the local ancient culinary culture, once common, was practically extinct by the end of the Mamluk epoch, as was the local wine industry, once thriving.

In defiance of the generally permissive attitude of the rulers and of their frequently licentious lifestyle, the tougher option was favored by the population at large, rejecting what was ancient and Mediterranean and making room for what was newer and Islamic. The abstinence was not only taken seriously but "turned into a rage"¹²⁸ against those who dared to violate the prohibition. The attitudes that caliph 'Umar tried to instill into the community at the very beginning of Islam were, partially at least,

¹²⁷ Cf, for instance, Al-Ašraf Barsbāy's order (issued after the new wave of plague had reached Egypt in 841/1437) to raid the houses of Jews and Christians all over Cairo and break all their wine amphorae; the operation resulted in the destruction of some 10 000 jars of wine; Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i'*, II, pp. 183, 184. Or similar measures taken by Al-Ašraf Qānšūh al-Ġūrī during the plague of 910/1504-5, when the sultan ordered his officials to raid the houses of the Christians, break the jugs of wine that were found there, and burn hashish and *būza* places; Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i'*, IV, pp. 76-7, and 303; also V, p. 304.

¹²⁸ Goitein, *Daily Life*, p. 253.

implemented in Cairo of the later Middle Ages. In XV century there was not much room left for leniency in the city. Nothing can probably illustrate the dramatic change in popular attitude better than the evolution of punishment inflicted on Ramaḍān drinkers in the opening and closing periods of the Cairene Middle Ages. A merchant caught drunk in one of the Al-Fuṣṭāṭ caravansaries in Ramaḍān 415/1024 was simply arrested and incarcerated in the local police station prison. When four centuries later, in Ramaḍān 818/1415, a presumably drunk man was seized, he was beaten according to the rules of punishment for crimes committed against religion (*ḍuriba al-ḥadd*), and then displayed around in Cairo. But this was only the official part of the sentence. When he reached the Main Street (Aṣ-Ṣalība), mob finished the work: he was assaulted, killed and his body was burnt.¹²⁹

The pressure of the government, of the religious circles and of the riffraff proved powerful enough to destroy the local viticulture and winemaking industry, and to make Egyptians significantly limit their wine consumption. Because, however, drinking habit dies particularly hard, the demand for alcoholic beverages could not be entirely eliminated. True, the shows of destroying thousands of wine jars in the public places of the city might have gladdened the populace. But the sight of ponds of wasted wine flowing in the square below the Citadel and soaking into the ground was not dear to everybody. There were still Cairenes who would watch the developments with grief and sorrow and who, unable to act, could only sit and whisper bitterly:

*They spilled wine all over the earth,
I cannot consent to this...
I wish I were the earth.*¹³⁰

¹²⁹ For the event of 415/1024 see Al-Musabbiḥī, *Aḥbār Miṣr*, p. 63. For the record referring to Ramaḍān of 818/1415, Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i*, II, p. 24. See also *ibid*, IV, p. 62, where in the annal for 909/1503-4 (sultanate of Qānṣūh al-Ġūrī) the author narrates the story of a woman and four men who were caught in a garden while eating *mulūḥa* (salted fish, the most probably mullet, one of the main items in the menu of the Cairene poor) in the daytime in Ramaḍān. The news of their arrest seem to have been interwoven with the rumors about them possibly being drunk. When the *wālī* caught them, the woman escaped, but the men were beaten with clubs and showed around in Cairo, and then put in prison, where they stayed for a long time.

¹³⁰ Anonymous verses quoted by Ibn Iyās as a comment to the events of 832/1429, when the implementation of sultan Barsbāy's orders resulted in smashing some 10 000 jars of wine "so that a pond of wine flooded the Rumayla Square"; *Badā'i*, II, p. 122.

It is difficult to estimate how numerous were those whose thoughts and feelings reflected a nostalgia for the ancient Mediterranean style. By the end of XV century an European traveler who observed that the Cairene “Mahomedans” generally “drank no wine” also noticed that there were “many who drank wine secretly with Mamelukes and Jews,” and with the local Christians as well.¹³¹ The adjective “many” as used by this author should, however, be treated with caution.

Epilogue

The Ottoman occupation loosened the reins of religious discipline and evoked the standards that by early XVI century were long forgotten in Cairo. Since, as one Turkish scholar put it, “Turks are not over-strict in their interpretation of alcohol prohibition,”¹³² in 923/1517 the Cairenes were shocked to see Turkish soldiers openly drinking wine in the streets.¹³³ But it was not only the question of soldiers—the Turks drank regardless of the rank. Moreover, those of the Circassian Mamluks who managed to avoid the Turkish-made massacre, drank with them. The standards were set by those in charge: completely drunk sultan Selim almost got drawn in the Nile waters when his boat was turned over by the wind.¹³⁴ Ḥayr Bak, his viceroy in Egypt and treacherous Mamluk ex-governor of Aleppo, kept up with the mighty ruler’s example and sometimes did not sober up for days. Apart from stories about forty mules loaded with Cretan wine he reportedly took for a one-week country excursion,¹³⁵ there are also records that show him spending his nights drinking and attempting to perform his official

¹³¹ Von Harff, *Pilgrimage*, pp. 102, 118-119; Arnold von Harff who, while in Cairo, made friends with two German mamluks, drank with them secretly first in the their own houses, then also at times in the Jewish or the Syrian Christian houses. Cf. also Felix Fabri’s story of Hungarian mamluks, some of whom visited the European pilgrims to eat and drink wine with them (Felix Fabri, *Voyage en Egypte de Felix Fabri 1483*, trans. J. Masson, Le Caire: IFAO 1975, II, p. 86b/434). Also in Syria the wine-seeking Muslims had to visit Jews and Christians to quench their thirst—in 764/1362-3, two drunk men, a Muslim and a Jew, were unlucky enough to fall from the roof of a house in the Jewish quarter in Damascus; Ibn Kaṭīr, *Bidāya*, XIV, p. 301.

¹³² Şavkay, “Cultural and Historical Context,” p. 82.

¹³³ Ibn Iyās, *Badā’i’*, V, p. 208.

¹³⁴ Ibn Iyās, *Badā’i’*, V, pp. 191-2.

¹³⁵ Ibn Iyās, *Badā’i’*, V, p. 326.

duties in the state of “insanity of drunkenness” in the mornings.¹³⁶ Yet, he had his moments of reflection, too—as when after a food-and-drink banquet on the Al-Ḥabaš Pond, an event that resulted in a serious quarrel between the drunk Ottoman and Circassian mamluks, and that made him swear “not to drink wine that year any more.”¹³⁷

The relatively high rate of alcohol consumption in the Ottoman milieu could have decreased somewhat by the beginning of XVII century, when “the pasha ordained that no Turk in Cairo could drink wine, which was because the sipahis and janissaries got drunk everyday day and started quarrels and disputes, so much so that many of them lost their lives [because of that].”¹³⁸ The ban, however, apparently did not set things in order once and for all, for some sixty years later Antonius Gonzales noticed “some Turks, particularly soldiers,” drinking wine in Cairo.¹³⁹

As for the local Muslims neither the Turks, nor their free interpretation of alcohol prohibition, were an example to follow, the Turkish occupation did not revive in Egypt the drinking habits of the past. As a popular habit, wine drinking was extinct. As a habit practiced by certain groups of the Ottoman Cairo population it was, however, still very much alive. The Turks were but one of these groups. Apart from them, there were also “Christian renegades”—as the Western travelers called the mamluks of European origin—who, newly converted, could not easily give up their practices of yesterday.¹⁴⁰ There were also some Western residents in Cairo, and

¹³⁶ Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i*, V, p. 255.

¹³⁷ Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i*, V, p. 287-8. Cf. also an account by Muṣṭafā 'Alī of Gallipoli, a Turkish historian who visited Cairo in 1599, and who could still observe with disgust that “it happens that the Egyptian jundis [i.e. mamluks] ride around with skullcaps or stroll through the bazaars bare-headed and drunk.” *Muṣṭafā 'Alī's Description of Cairo of 1599. Text, Transliteration, Translation, Notes by Andreas Tietze*, Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 1975, p. 55.

¹³⁸ J. Wild, *Voyages en Egypte de Johann Wild, 1606-1610*, Le Caire: IFAO 1973, p. 252/90.

¹³⁹ Gonzales, *Voyage*, p. 186/94.

¹⁴⁰ If Seigneur de Villamont's (in Cairo in 1589-1590) description is true, the Christian renegades “drunk wine in huge quantities since the morning till the evening” and, moreover, ate with Christians during the Muslim fasting period, and slept like pigs at the table after the meal was over, and generally lived a “brutal life.” The disgust that shows through de Villamont's account may mean that the ways of these “renegades” were unacceptable even if judged by the European standards of the time; but it also may reflect the author's contempt for those who gave up Christianity in favor of another religion; *Voyages en Egypte des années*

Western travelers passing through the city and staying there for a very limited period. Depending on the status and their own initiative, the Westerners either consumed their own wine, or used the hospitality of the “Christian renegades,” of Jews, or of autochthonous Christians.¹⁴¹

* * *

The question of wine and beer in medieval Cairo is not merely a story of how the local market was supplied with these beverages and what the demand for them was. Embroiled in political and religious developments, and entangled in the story of adjustment of the ancient indigenous culture to the fresh moral order of a newly arrived religion, the question of alcohol is also an inseparable part of a long and turbulent history of a conflict between two sets of values. The Mediterranean-minded Egypt was not eager to adapt itself to the newly imposed Islamic circumstances, nor was it eager to sacrifice its traditional habits for the sake of the rigorous doctrinal currents. It took centuries of tumultuous and violent events before the Cairenes accepted the fact that alcohol was a beverage forbidden by God’s ordinance and that drinking was an offense against the God’s law. It was only after centuries of Islamic dominance over Egypt that the ideas of prohibition and abstinence supplanted the traditional local attitude.

By the later Middle Ages, alcohol drinking ceased to exist as a popular habit, and the relatively permissive circumstances prevailing in Cairo under

1589, 1590 & 1591. Le Vénitien anonyme, Le Seigneur de Villamont, Le Hollandais Jan Sommer, Le Caire: IFAO 1971, p. 231.

¹⁴¹ It seems that the local Christians, possibly unable to afford imported grape wines, produced an assortment of fruit varieties: “Les Égyptiens fabriquent plusieurs espèces d’eau-de-vie: la meilleure et la plus estimée est celle qui se fait avec le raisin sec; celle que l’on tire des figues ordinaires, des figues du sycomore, des dates, ou des fruits du nopal, lui est bien inférieure. Les Qobtes abusent beaucoup de ces spiritueux: ils ont boivent des bouteilles entières; ce qui les dispose plus particulièrement aux hydrocèles.” *Description*, VII, pp. 411-12 .

See also an account by Volney (in Cairo in 1783) on “l’eau-de-vie” made of figs and dates. As for “l’eau-de-vie des raisins secs” it was, according to Volney, flavored with anise and very strong, because it was distilled three times. The Syrian Christians and the Copts of Egypt consumed significant quantities of it. The latter, moreover, drank whole pints of it during supper. Volney considered it an “exaggeration”; at the same time he noticed, however, that the examples of such an excessive drinking do not cause symptoms of “complete inebriation”; *Voyage en Egypte et en Syrie*, Paris: Mouton & Co 1959, p. 141.

the Turkish occupation did not revive the old ways. Not all the Egyptians gave up easily, though, and the statement made by Al-Ġabartī in the early XIX century that intoxicants were sold and bought secretly and “only by infidels”¹⁴² was not, it seems, wholly true. Those who drank could not be too numerous, definitely not enough to allow to categorize their practices as belonging to the habitual behavior of the local population. Yet, one could still observe that apart from “decent Muslims” who conformed to the rule of not drinking, there were also “great men, merchants and soldiers” who in secrecy broke the law,¹⁴³ habitually indulging “in drinking wine with select parties of their acquaintance.”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Al-Ġabartī, *Aġā'ib*, II, p. 512.

¹⁴³ *Description*, VII, pp. 411-12.

¹⁴⁴ Lane, *Manners*, p. 153; also p. 99. Cf. a mid-XVIII century traveler, according to whom persons who drank “were chiefly the soldiery and great men; but it would be reckon'd scandalous in people of business.” R. Pococke, *A Description of the East, and Some Other Countries*, London: Printed for the Author by W. Bowyer 1743-1745, vol. I. *Observations on Egypt*, p. 181. “The use of Laudanum,” Pococke adds, “so much in vogue formerly, is succeeded by drinking chiefly strong waters, which they take plentifully at their meals; tho' a great many will not drink, but they use heating things to chear them. (...) The Arabs indeed did not drink, or very rarely.” (Laudanum is an opium tincture, sometimes sweetened with sugar and also called *wine of opium*). Contrary to what Pococke maintains, *Description* confirms the use of laudanum in XIX-century Egypt: “Leurs boissons consistent en sorbets, et en une espèce de liqueur dans laquelle l'opium est employé comme principal ingrédient: les riches s'envirent avec ce dernier breuvage; les pauvres ne boivant, pour la pluepart, que de l'eau pure ou de mauvais sorbets” (VII, pp. 411-12).