

THE ARABIAN NIGHTS AS A SOURCE FOR DAILY LIFE IN THE MAMLUK PERIOD

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The story collection the Arabian Nights is problematic as a source for social history. How much in these stories can we accept as accurate descriptions of social life? In Muḥsin Maḥdī's opinion, the stories should not be used as a source for the study of the 'manners and customs of Oriental societies'. According to him, the stories were of exotic places and times filled with characters who could experience more or less anything. (Maḥdī 1994: 180, n. 58.) But fairy tales always tell something about the society of their audience. To make the story interesting to the audience, a storyteller or an author had to tell about problems or conflicts that the audience could recognise even though the particular story was set in an imaginary land and had mermaids or fairies as major characters. The storyteller could not paint too odd a picture, but had to retain some degree of familiarity so that the audience was able to imagine the scenery. Therefore, mixed with the remarkable occurrences, all stories contain small everyday details or references to customs with which the contemporary audience was familiar.

This applies to the Nights' stories as well. The fantastic stories contain many details: the house of a physician is described, the friends of a barber are listed, a broker collects his fees, etc. In this article I intend to look into these details and try to find out if they are confirmed or discounted by what is otherwise known of the period. I also try to estimate the value of the Nights as a source for studying the daily life of the Mamluk-period commoners, i.e. people who did not belong to the scholarly elite or the ruling class. The commoners included various wage earners: unskilled workers, artisans, professionals such as physicians, and small scale merchants, even beggars can be considered to have worked for their living. The distinction between the commoners and the elite was wealth and scholarship.

THE STORIES CHOSEN AND THEIR DATING

The Nights' collection contains a multitude of stories from various origins and if we use the stories as a source for social detail, we have to determine which society these details apply to and here the dating of the stories becomes relevant. The oldest known collection, the so-called Galland manuscript, dates from the 14th or 15th century,¹ i.e. from the Mamluk period, but this does not exclude the possibility that some of the individual stories in the collection date from an earlier period. For example, the *Barber's tale* that is included in the Hunchback-cycle, contains a story about the barber and ten prisoners, who are brought to be executed in the presence of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mustanşir (d. 640/1242). According to Muḥsin Maḥdī, this story, although much transformed, has as its model an anecdote transmitted by the 10th-century historian al-Mas'ūdī about an incident in the court of Caliph al-Ma'mūn (d. 218/833).² Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila has pointed out the similarity between the story of the barber's second brother and an anecdote the 9th-century poet Muḥammad ibn Wahb told of himself.³ Furthermore, the *Steward's tale* in the Hunchback-cycle is an adaptation from a 10th-century historical report by al-Tanūkhī on an event that also occurred in the court of Caliph al-Ma'mūn.⁴

The question is how relevant is it to know the antecedents of an individual story in the Galland manuscript version of the Nights which was written down in the 14th or 15th century and intended to amuse a contemporary audience? The stories are said to have occurred in distant places or times, but a closer reading shows that the characters live in a society very familiar to the Mamluk period audience. The *Steward's tale*, the Nights' version of al-Tanūkhī's report, still has Abbasid Baghdad as its setting, but because the storyteller's audience in Cairo or in Damascus did not know Baghdad or Abbasid society, he downplayed what was unfamiliar to the audience and added details that were familiar, in this way changing the scene of the story so that it came to resemble the society around him. All topographic details of Abbasid Baghdad that are present in al-Tanūkhī's version are left out and, instead, the Nights' version includes names of materials, ranks, and objects belonging to the Mamluk period. (Maḥdī 1994: 173f.)

¹ In the Introduction, p. 29 of *Alf layla*, the editor, Maḥdī, states that the Galland ms. was written in the 14th century, whereas Irwin (1994: 60f) takes up some textual evidence indicating that the text cannot have been written before the 15th century.

² *Alf layla*, pp. 347-349. Maḥdī (1994: 166) considers the Nights' version so much different from the original that the old anecdote is only a 'distant indirect model'.

³ Hämeen-Anttila 1995: 189. The story of the barber's second brother is in *Alf layla*, pp. 354-357.

⁴ Maḥdī (1994: 164-180) compares al-Tanūkhī's version of the story in *al-Faraj ba'd al-shidda* to the Nights' version. The analysis is also published in Maḥdī 1997: 78-105.

Not only was the topography of Baghdad alien to the audience of the Galland version of the Nights, but the stories also show that their knowledge of Abbasid dynastic history was rather confused. The barber of the *Barber's tale* included in the Hunchback-cycle was according to his own words a contemporary of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mustanşir, but within the frame story the same barber meets a steward who seems to have lived five centuries earlier. According to the *Steward's tale*, the steward had, just before meeting the barber, talked with a young man whose father had lived in Baghdad during the reign of Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (d. 193/809).⁵ Obviously this discrepancy did not disturb the 14th- or 15th-century audience or the storyteller. The inaccurate identification of Caliph al-Mustanşir as the son – and not as the great-grandson – of Caliph al-Mustaḍī' (d. 575/1180) that also occurs in the *Barber's tale* is, in comparison, a rather small mistake but confirms the impression that the era of the Abbasid caliphs was far too distant in time to be common knowledge.

The stories contain references to even more exotic places than Abbasid Baghdad and one of these is the city called China and Kashgar (*madīnat al-Şīn wa-Qajqār*) presented in the frame story of the Hunchback-cycle. In spite of the assumed distant location, the city was not so strange that a Mamluk period audience would not have been able to form a mental picture of it. In fact, the city had several familiar characteristics they must have recognised, such as houses with flat roofs and air-shafts (*bādhanj*) for cooling, there were *ḥammāms* and *sūqs*, and the inhabitants are Muslims, Christians and Jews. The ruler lived in a castle that was situated higher than the rest of the city⁶ and employed Christian administrators. The city had also a *wālī* and a night-watchman, who acted as an executioner. All in all, the whole setting recalls Mamluk Cairo.

In my opinion, these examples show that the stories in the Galland manuscript contain descriptions and details that were familiar to the Mamluk audience and they can therefore be accepted as reflections of Mamluk society and the references to earlier times or other locations can be disregarded. Even if the above examples are all taken from the Hunchback-cycle, the same should apply to the other Galland manuscript stories as well, because in order to satisfy a Mamluk-period audience, the storyteller had to tell his stories in a way that was understandable to them.

However, the other Galland manuscript stories have not received such a thorough discussion of the dating as the Hunchback-cycle stories and therefore I have limited my own analysis to this cycle, which beyond doubt describes Mamluk

⁵ *Alf layla*, p. 347 (barber) and 305 (steward). About the confusion of dates see also Mahdi 1994: 170.

⁶ A person descended (*nazala*) from the castle to the town and went up (*ʔala'a*) to the castle as in Cairo, where the citadel lay on a hill above the city. Coussonnet (1989: 34) pointed out the use of these two verbs in a similar context in the story of 'Alī the Cairene, where the setting was supposedly Baghdad. In Coussonnet's opinion the choice of the verbs indicates that the storyteller actually described Cairo and not Baghdad.

society. Of stories outside the Galland manuscript, I have used *‘Alī the Cairene* which has been studied by Patrice Coussonnet and he has concluded on the basis of architectural and social detail that these describe the 15th-century Mamluk Cairo.⁷ In my analysis I have not used any Arabic version but have relied on Coussonnet’s French translation.

CLASSES WITHIN THE ‘ĀMMA

In spite of the basic equality of the Muslims, the Islamic societies have always been socially stratified. The obvious marks of distinction were power – political or religious – and wealth. The ruling classes, the *‘ulamā*, and the rich merchants formed the elite, whereas the less wealthy traders, shopkeepers, craftsmen, and workers formed the main part of the broad class of commoners, *‘amma*. The *‘amma* also included the disreputable groups, i.e., the beggars, prostitutes, criminals, and other low-life types.

The respectable section of the *‘amma* was further divided into classes according to trade. The distinction between trades could be made on religious grounds: a person engaged in a trade that was in conflict with Islamic law – such as a wine seller or money-changer who was suspect of usury – was not respectable. Some trades seem to have been despised on aesthetic grounds: butchers, tanners, street sweepers, and waste collectors came in contact with filthy materials and were therefore considered menials. Cuppers, barbers, and weavers, although performing useful functions, were not esteemed. The most respected were the persons skilled in inoffensive crafts, such as masons, carpenters, tailors, shopkeepers, etc. whose work was not morally suspicious or unpleasant.⁸

These attitudes were current in the Mamluk period as is shown by Tāj al-dīn al-Subkī’s work *Mu‘īd al-ni‘am*. It gives moral advice to various groups in the society and the arrangement of its material indicates a social hierarchy, where the Sultan is on the top and the beggar on the bottom.⁹ Is this social stratification reflected in the Arabian Nights stories as well?

One of the persons in the Hunchback-cycle is the barber (*muzayyin*). The story gives details of the barber’s social connections – his friends and family – that make it possible to determine his social status. His intimate friends consisted of a bath keeper (*ḥammāmī*), a grain merchant (*fāmī*), a bean seller (*fawwālī*), a grocer

⁷ The dating of the story is discussed in Coussonnet 1989: 33-41. The translation is in *ibid.*: 11-29. In preparing the translation Coussonnet consulted the Breslau edition (1825-38), the Calcutta II edition (1839-42), and Bulaq I edition (1835).

⁸ The social categories are discussed by Brunschvig 1962: 41-60 and Lapidus 1967: 82f and 268f, n. 8 & 9.

⁹ Lapidus (1967: 82) mentions that the *ḥisba*-manual of Ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī dating from the Mamluk period also expresses the social status of the various professions.

(*baqqāl*), a camel driver (*jammāl*), a porter (*‘attāl*), a refuse cleaner (*zabbāl*), a bath attendant (*ballān*), a guard (*ḥāris*), and a groom (*sāʿis*).¹⁰ Of these the grain merchant, the bean seller and the grocer were perfectly respectable, whereas the bath keeper represented the modest and sometimes morally suspect trades, but most of the barber’s acquaintances belonged to the menial groups: camel drivers, porters and bath attendants had a low social position, whereas guards, grooms, and refuse cleaners were actually despised.

The family connections of the barber also place him towards the lower end of the social ladder: out of his six brothers, three were beggars, one a butcher and one a tailor – a respectable profession but this particular tailor was barely able to make a living. The trade of one brother is not disclosed. The barber’s father is also mentioned, but the story does not tell what his trade was; it only states that the father left a legacy of 700 dirhams which was divided among the six brothers.¹¹ The modesty of the legacy indicates that although not destitute, the father was far from being wealthy.

al-Subkī listed barbers after the physicians but before oculists, connecting the barber’s trade with medical services. He stated that the moral requirements that applied to the physician should also be recognised by the barber. (*Mu‘īd*, p. 190.) The barber’s connection with the medical profession is confirmed by the Nights’ story, where the barber did not only shave people, but also functioned as a blood-letting. He carried tools to perform small medical operations and was therefore able to revive the choking hunchback by removing a fishbone from his throat. (*Alf layla*, pp. 334, 379.) However, according to Ibn al-Ukhūwa’s *ḥisba*-manual, such a variety of services was not the duty of the barber. Ibn al-Ukhūwa mentions only shaving as the barber’s work and deals with phlebotomy and cupping as separate trades.¹²

In spite of the usefulness of the trade, the barbers were traditionally not highly esteemed. Brunschvig points out that the trades of barbers, cuppers, and phlebotomists were also considered menial in the pre-Islamic Middle East (Brunschvig 1962: 48). The low social esteem is expressed in the Nights’ story by the barber’s family connections and the social status of his friends. It is further stressed by the foolish talk and behaviour of the barber, but also his appearance – small ears and long nose – seemed to indicate stupidity, because the King of China just by seeing him recognised him for the fool he is (*Alf layla*, p. 378).

¹⁰ *Alf layla*, p. 341. Shatzmiller (1994: 107) has identified *fawwālī* as broad bean cook/seller and Lane (1927: 155) translates bean-seller. For *zabbāl* Shatzmiller (1994: 148) gives scavenger, street sweeper, superintendent of dung-fuel supply, and refuse cleaner. Lane (1927: 155) translates dustman.

¹¹ *Alf layla*, p. 364. As to the value of the amount, see below.

¹² *Ma‘ālim al-qurba*, pp. 156 (barber), 163 (cupping), 164 (phlebotomy): the phlebotomist was also expected to perform circumcisions.

One of the barber's brothers was a butcher (*jazzār*), a profession that was not highly respected because of the contact with blood and offal. al-Subkī listed the butcher among the menial trades together with the washer of the dead and the night-watchman, who was also an executioner (*Muʿīd*, pp. 201-204). In the story the butcher became wealthy, but lost his property and was forced to find a new trade. He ended up as a shoemaker (*iskāfī*), a trade that according to al-Subkī rated barely above begging (*Alf layla*, p. 362; *Muʿīd*, pp. 209-211). The social mobility in the butcher's case was downward. The status of the butcher was not necessarily much higher than that of the shoemaker, but he had been on the way up the social ladder, gaining property. In the end he might have been able to give up his despised trade and joined the ranks of the men of wealth, who were not engaged in any trade, but who according to al-Subkī, belonged to the most esteemed commoners together with merchants and respected artisans (*Muʿīd*, p. 180).

All in all the stories do not give an encouraging picture of social mobility in the Mamluk society. The poor tended to remain poor, the little property that they managed to collect was either confiscated by the authorities as in the butcher's case, or it was stolen as in the case of the blind beggar.¹³ Those who were born rich, gained even more wealth and influence, like ʿAlī, the son of a Cairene jeweller.

In the story ʿAlī squandered his inherited wealth and was reduced to poverty, but because of his education – he had studied all the branches of knowledge – and his pleasant behaviour, he managed to gain help from rich merchants, who obviously recognised him as one of their own class. ʿAlī succeeded in gaining a new fortune, not by trade or other effort, but by a miraculous event: a *jinnī* brought him an immense treasure. ʿAlī was again able to live in the way that he was accustomed and took up his place as a respected member of the merchant community. (Coussonnet 1989: 11-29.) Like the merchant notables in real life, ʿAlī also came in close contact with the ruling Sultan and the powerful *amīrs*. He finally became the Sultan's *wazīr*, a career development that was far from impossible in Mamluk society. We know of several merchants who became administrators and reached high positions within the bureaucracy.¹⁴

People of modest background could also make an administrative career. The chronicles and biographical dictionaries contain references to coppersmiths, furriers, and tailors who held the offices of *wazīr* or *nāzīr* (Lapidus 1967: 286, n. 27). These were known as persons who came '*min bayād al-nās*', a term indicating common origin.¹⁵ The picture that the Nights' stories give of social mobility, shows that this

¹³ The story of the barber's third brother, the blind beggar, *Alf layla*, pp. 358-360. Actually the property of the blind beggar was partly stolen and partly confiscated.

¹⁴ Lapidus 1967: 128, n. 25: references to merchants employed as scribes, *nāzīrs*, *wālīs*, *wakīls*, and *wazīrs*.

¹⁵ *al-Nujūm*, XV, pp. 172 and 220. The term is explained in the editors' footnote (*al-Nujūm*, XV, p. 172, n. 1).

kind of a career development that took a commoner to a high social position was indeed rare. The Mamluk period stories discussed in this article do not encourage their audience to hope for a high position, but rather convince them that beggars will remain beggars.

This rather bleak view on social mobility is confirmed by the story of the barber's sixth brother, who was a beggar. He was lucky and became the friend of a rich man fond of feasting and drinking. But the life of luxury did not last: the friend died and the barber's brother fell back into poverty. On top of this, he was attacked by a Bedouin robber, who beat him and cut off his lips. (*Alf layla*, pp. 373-376.) The moral of the story seems to be that if a person not born rich indulges in luxury, he will be punished.

One exception is the fate of the barber himself. He ends up as the companion of the ruler and the king also pays him an allowance. This happy state of affairs does not cease but continues the rest of the barber's life. (*Alf layla*, p. 379.) The poor barber succeeded in reaching a high social status, but as the storyteller had already in the beginning of the story assured the audience, this did not take place in Mamluk Cairo, but in the realm of the King of China and Kashgar.

WORK AND EARNINGS

The stories give some economic details, such as broker's fees and payments given to a physician and a donkey driver. One of the stories even tells how much three beggars had been able to beg as alms. The stories also give some information on what people could afford to buy and what they seemed to value most. But do these details have any connection with reality or are they of a fairy-tale quality?

The currencies mentioned in the stories are dinars and dirhams. One of the stories defines the dinar to be an Ashrafī, a coin put in circulation by Sultan al-Ashraf Barsbāy in 828/1425. The other stories are not so precise and therefore it is rather difficult to estimate the actual value of the amounts mentioned. There were many types of coins in circulation and their purchasing capacities and exchange rates varied.¹⁶ In 806/1403 a dirham of account or a trade dirham (*dirham fulūs*) was introduced as an accounting unit that consisted of a fixed amount of copper coins (Allouche 1994: 7-9, 16-17).

In the period 1250-1370 the exchange rate was one gold dinar for 20 silver dirhams, whereas in 828/1425 the value of one gold dinar was 225 dirhams of account (Ashtor 1961: 21, n. 1). In the *Barber's tale* it is mentioned that the barber's father left 700 dirhams to his seven sons when he died (*Alf layla*, p. 363). Now, if the story was told to an audience of the early Mamluk period, the 700

¹⁶ Hennequin (1977: 212-215) suggests that there were official exchange rates for the various types of coins and this enabled people to use them simultaneously.

dirham legacy would have been worth 35 dinars, each brother getting 5 dinars, an amount that an unskilled worker earned in about three months. For a skilled artisan the inheritance would have corresponded to nearly two months' wages.¹⁷ A 15th-century audience would have considered the inheritance meagre indeed, because at the exchange rate of 1 for 225 (year 828/1425) the whole legacy would not have been worth more than about three dinars and each brother would have received less than half a dinar, an amount that an unskilled worker earned in a few days.¹⁸ If the inheritance consisted of actual silver coins and not of copper, the value of the legacy would have been a lot higher. According to al-Maqrīzī, one silver dirham equalled five dirhams of account in 808/1405 and a legacy of 700 silver dirhams would have been 3500 dirhams of account, i.e. about 23 dinars, the exchange rate being one dinar for 150 dirhams of account (Allouche 1994: 72). In this case, the share of each brother would have been a bit more than three dinars, equalling a month's wages of an unskilled worker.

Often the payments mentioned in the various stories do not correlate with each other. In the frame story of the Hunchback-cycle, the tailor gave the Jewish physician a quarter of a dinar as a fee and according to the story, the physician was overjoyed. His reaction indicates that the payment was generous and the value of the dinar high. In contrast, the value of the dinar seems to have been much lower in another story of the Hunchback-cycle, where the Christian broker told about a young man, who paid the same amount – a quarter of a dinar – to a donkey driver as a transport fee. This discrepancy is hardly explained by the higher salary level of the later Mamluk period, because even then a quarter of a dinar would have been a lot to pay for just one donkey-ride within the city. It corresponded, after all, to two days' wages of an unskilled worker. The more likely explanation is that by paying a quarter dinar, the very rich young man made an extravagant gesture and the figure was used by the storyteller to stress his spendthrift way of life.

The stories also mention other payments that are not even meant to be realistic. The barber in the *Barber's tale* claimed that his client's father had appreciated him so much that he had paid 103 dinars for shaving. Even the four dinars the young client offered the barber as a compensation if he left without doing his job were excessive and more an indication of the young man's great desire to get rid of the barber than an amount accurately corresponding to the services rendered. (*Alf layla*, pp. 144f.)

The *Christian broker's tale* contains information on the broker's work and earnings. The brokers (*dallāl, simsār*)¹⁹ were middlemen, who for a fee found

¹⁷ According to Ashtor (1970: 11 and 13) the average minimum salary in the 14th century was 1.5 dinars a month and the salary of a skilled worker 3 dinars a month.

¹⁸ Ashtor 1970: 11: In the 15th century the average minimum salary was 3.33 Ashrafī dinars.

¹⁹ According to Shatzmiller (1994: 262) there are three terms that are used to denote a broker: *simsār, dallāl, and munādī* and they indicate a division of labour among the brokers, each of

buyers for goods offered for sale. The importers brought their merchandise to towns, stored it in warehouses and instead of marketing the goods themselves, turned to brokers who contacted prospective buyers.

In the Nights' story a young trader owned a large quantity of sesame seeds that were stored in the Khān al-Jāwālī in Cairo. He went to the market in search of a broker and shows him a sample of the sesame. The broker assessed the quality of the seeds and quoted a price that satisfied the wholesaler. After that the broker went round to various prospective buyers – sellers of fodder ('*allāf*), sweet manufacturers, and traders who stored sesame – and was able to sell the stock at a higher price than the one he had quoted to the owner. He then went with carriers to the warehouse and the stored sesame was weighed and transported to the buyers. The amount of the brokerage was then agreed upon. (*Alf layla*, pp. 289f.)

According to Ibn al-Ukhūwa's *ḥisba*-manual, the broker's commission was paid by the seller. The buyer should not pay anything although 'there are those that agree with the buyer on an additional brokerage without informing the seller' (*Ma 'ālim al-qurba*, p. 136). The behaviour of the broker in the story was in conflict with the intention of the *ḥisba* text. The broker obviously did not agree with the buyer on an extra fee, but was able to gain it because the buyer and seller never met. The price he had quoted to the seller was 100 dirham per *irdabb*, the price the buyer offered was 110 dirhams per *irdabb*, giving the broker a gain of 10 dirhams. On top of that, the actual brokerage was also 10 dirhams per *irdabb*. (*Alf layla*, p. 290.)

The general public considered brokers deceitful and the legal scholars accused them of immoral practices. The trick to keep the buyer and seller ignorant of the prices was well known and considered illegal (Beg 1977: 90). It can be said that the Christian broker in the story acted in accordance with the expectations of the audience.

The total earnings of the broker amounted to 1000 dirhams, i.e. 18% of the value of the transaction. According to the Geniza sources, an average brokerage was 2% and the same percentage applied to the early Mamluk period.²⁰ The early 15th-century brokerages for wheat quoted by al-Maqrīzī are only slightly higher, i.e. 2.5% in 807/1404 and 3.3% in 818/1415. The brokerages tended to go up in times of shortage and, according to al-Maqrīzī, there was a severe shortage of wheat in 818/1415 which might explain the higher percentage (*al-Sulūk*, III, p. 1134 and IV, p. 333). These figures make the Christian broker's earnings exorbitant and even the

the three specializing in certain types of merchandise. In the Nights' stories only two of the terms – *dallāl* and *simsār* – are used. They are used interchangeably and no specialization is indicated. E.g., *Alf layla*, p. 293, the words *simsār* and *dallāl* are used to denote the same group of individuals. According to Goitein (1967: 160) there is no clear specialization: *munā-dī* and *simsār* were terms that could be used interchangeably and *dallāl* seems to have been a general term.

²⁰ Goitein 1967: 185. In *al-Nujūm*, XI, p. 45, Ibn Taghrībirdī gives as an average brokerage two dirhams for a transaction worth 100 dirhams.

actual brokerage that amounted to 10% of the price received by the seller must be considered high. It is likely that the high fee was used as an indicator of the broker's greed on one hand and of the sellers wealth on the other. The young man was so rich that he could afford to throw away his money on a broker. His disregard of money was further stressed when he finally donated to the broker the whole value of the sesame sale (*Alf layla*, p. 303).

What did the people spend their money on? Historical research has concluded that the main expense of the workers and artisans was food. It has been estimated that an unskilled worker used about two thirds of his salary to buy food. Their diet consisted mainly of bread, but they could also afford to buy vegetables and fish, whereas meat was usually too expensive. The skilled artisans also had to use the main part of their earnings for food, but they could afford to buy more and also include meat and possibly spices to their diet. In the 15th century, the salary level rose and even the unskilled workers were able to buy larger quantities of food and also meat, but they still spent the major part of their wages on food, whereas the skilled workers could use as much as half of their earnings for things other than food. (Ashtor 1970: 10-13.)

Although food and meals seem to form a topos in medieval Arabic literature, you can also see a social dimension in the preoccupation with food that is very much apparent in the Nights' stories. I think that the fact that food was so expensive explains why practically all of the stories discussed here contain details of ingested meals. Food seems also to have been an essential part of romantic encounters and the only ones who refused to eat were persons who had fallen in love but had not yet been able to meet the beloved and declare their love. This indicates that exquisite meals were viewed as sensual experiences and food was an important ingredient of happiness but expensive dishes were further an indication of wealth and prestige.

Bread was an important part of the diet and the most appreciated type was white wheat bread, whereas barley bread was only eaten by the very poor (Ashtor 1970: 2). In the story of the barber's sixth brother, the beggar met with a wealthy man who made fun of him by serving an imaginary dinner. The host described all the dishes he pretended to serve and the bread was praised for its whiteness which was a mark of quality. The poor beggar got more and more hungry and only wished that he had even one piece of barley bread that was real. Even though no delicacy, real barley bread would have satisfied his hunger better than the non-existent dishes his host served him and the beggar pretended to enjoy. (*Alf layla*, pp. 373f.) The status of the barley bread as a poor man's fare is also apparent in the story of the barber's first brother, the lame tailor. His customers ordered clothes to be made but did not pay for them and the lack of money finally forced the tailor to limit his daily diet to a small amount of barley bread (*Alf layla*, p. 351).

The tailor of the frame story was better off and could afford to offer the hunchback, his guest, a meal consisting of bread, fried fish, lemons, radish, and

honey. In accordance with his reckless and festive mood, the tailor also bought a wax candle. This was an extravagant purchase because candles were a very expensive commodity that only affluent people could afford and they were considered valuable enough to be given as presents to the Sultan.²¹ According to the Geniza documents beeswax could be as much as three times more expensive than good quality lamp oil (Goitein 1983: 133).

Most of the meals described in the stories are served to wealthy persons and they illustrate the commoners' view of the life-style of the rich. One young merchant used ten dinars for a meal for two and when an extra guest was invited, the cost of the dinner rose to 15 dinars. For an unskilled worker, the amount of money spent was fabulous, corresponding to 5 months' (15th century) or even to 10 months' wages (14th century). It cannot have surprised the audience, when the storyteller a bit later said that the same young man squandered the rest of his considerable fortune on food and drink. (*Alf layla*, pp. 320 and 322.)

As can be expected, the menus of the sumptuous meals that the stories described consisted mainly of various meat dishes, chicken being the clear favourite (*Alf layla*, pp. 291, 294, 298, 340, and 374). In reality, chicken was so expensive in the 14th century that an unskilled worker needed one month's earnings to buy twelve chickens (Ashtor 1970: 14). Another expensive foodstuff that only the rich could afford was sugar and therefore in the Nights' stories sugar is only served in the Caliph's court, whereas even the well-off tailor used honey as a sweetener (*Alf layla*, pp. 281 and 312).

The difference between the diet of the wealthy and the poor is illustrated in the Mamluk-period story describing the battle between King Mutton and King Honey.²² In the story, King Mutton is presented as the ruler of various expensive foodstuffs, i.e. meats and spices, whereas King Honey is the ruler of vegetables, milk products, fish, and fruits that formed the basis of the modest diet of the common people. King Honey's next in command is Sugar, the *wazīr*, which is rather surprising because sugar was expensive and one would not expect to encounter it in the diet of the poor, but this is explained when the *wazīr* complains to King Mutton's messenger, Fat Tail, that he is 'disgusted with frequenting the sick'. It appears that the poor use sugar as medicine and it is only served to those who suffer from fever, sore throat or indigestion. Only the wealthy could afford to buy large quantities of expensive condiments such as sugar and syrup, and the story illustrates this by making Fat Tail promise favours to Syrup and *wazīr* Sugar if they would switch their loyalty to King Mutton. These favours consisted of added use:

²¹ *al-Sulūk*, II, pp. 288 and 345f. According to the information given by al-Maqrīzī in *al-Khiṭaṭ*, II, p. 96, Sūq al-shammaʿīn had lost most of its clientele and many of the shops were closed in al-Maqrīzī's time because the people had become poorer and could not afford wax candles.

²² Finkel 1932 and 1933-34. The Arabic text has been published by Marín 1992.

Syrup is promised he would become the *amīr* of the chickens of the frying pan, prepared with butter and stuffed with seeds, instead of being used in drops on milk puddings on cold days. Similarly, the *wazīr* is promised the control of all foods, especially meat dishes and desserts. (Finkel 1933-34: 4-6; Marín 1992: 90-93.) The more varied uses on the tables of the rich entice the subjects of King Honey to desert him and join the ranks of King Mutton.

The way of life of the rich was very different from the modest life of the commoners and a person who mainly lived on bread and vegetables probably found it difficult to believe that extravagant meals prepared from thousands of lambs and chickens were not from a fairy tale but had actually been served in royal celebrations.²³ The unbelievable wealth of the elite gave their life-style an otherworldly quality in the eyes of the commoners. This is shown in the Nights' stories, where the rich are described as living in pleasant surroundings with shadowy gardens and cooling fountains. They never lack food but enjoy sumptuous meals prepared and served by beautiful maidens. In the *Barber's tale*, the barber's second brother was approached by an old woman who offered him an opportunity to live in a beautiful house that had a garden with running water. There he could pass his time by eating fruit, drinking wine, and embracing a beautiful woman with a face like the full moon. Quite understandably, the poor man wondered, if all these pleasures were really true and of this world. (*Alf layla*, p. 354.)

Apart from food, which was the main expense of the commoners, they also had to find money to pay for housing and clothes. According to the Geniza documents, the rents of modest living quarters were low in the 12th century, costing only a few dirhams per month, whereas an opulent merchant's house cost 1 dinar a month (Goitein 1983: 94f). The same level was probably true for the Mamluk period as well. According to the story of the Jewish physician, the rent of a luxurious house in Damascus was two Ashrafī dinars a month. Even if we cannot be sure that the story reported actual rents of big houses, we infer that the storyteller's audience considered the figure large enough to be realistic. This indicates that modest accommodation cost much less although the stories do not give any figures. A further proof of low-cost housing was that in one of the stories, the beggars could afford to rent a room (*Alf layla*, p. 358). The story does not describe this as something exceptional or odd and therefore it must have been commonplace.

As for the cost of clothing, the stories do not give much information. The high prices of the expensive materials bought by the rich are mentioned, but the stories do not give any details of what the common people paid for their everyday clothes.

²³ *al-Sulūk*, II, p. 288: For the wedding of Sultan al-Malik al-Nāṣir's daughter (727/1327) five thousand lambs, a hundred cows, fifty horses, and countless chickens were slaughtered. Eleven thousand sugar loaves were used to prepare sweets and drinks. For the wedding of Sultan al-Malik al-Nāṣir's son (732/1332) more than 20,000 lambs, cows, horses, geese, and chickens were slaughtered and 18,000 *qinṭār* of sugar were used (*al-Sulūk*, II, p. 346).

That clothes were expensive is indicated by the tailor's story where an old woman accepts clothing as a payment for the services she did for a rich young man (*Alf layla*, p. 334). However, there were thousands of weaving workshops in the cities and they cannot all have specialised in luxury materials, but many of them must have produced simple textiles that also the commoners could afford.²⁴

WOMEN

Women were economically active in the Mamluk society and many of them worked either in manufacturing or commerce. The crafts the women usually practised were standard household skills, such as combing and spinning. (Lutfi 1985: 297.) Even though the work was done in a commercial scale, it was done at home and not in workshops, although sometimes a home could function as a workshop when several women came together to spin.²⁵ The women worked in other fields as well, and many of them earned their living serving other women as bath attendants (*ballāna*), hairdressers (*māshiṭa*), midwives (*dāya*), and wet nurses (*murḍi'a*). Women also functioned as washers of the dead (*ghāsila*) and as professional mourners (*nā'iḥa*). Some were active in commerce as traders (*tājira*) or peddlers (*bayyā'a*, *dallāla*), but they did not have shops in the markets but worked in homes, often dealing directly with other women. (ʿAbd al-Rāziq 1973: 44f, 48f, 62-64, and 81-87; Lutfi 1985: 288 and 290.) There were also women entertainers, such as professional singers (*raysa*, *mughanniya*, *qayna*), who had to pay a special tax, *ḍamān al-aghānī*. The same tax was also collected from prostitutes (*baghī*).²⁶

There were some female scholars, and some even received *ijāzas* to teach others (Berkey 1991: 146). Some scholars considered it important that women learned about religion and law so that they would not fail to fulfil their religious obligations out of ignorance (Lutfi 1991: 147). All scholars did not share this attitude and Ibn al-Ukhūwa actually forbade teaching women to read and write (*Ma'ālim al-qurba*, p. 171). In practice, only the elite households and the scholarly families were able to secure the education of their women, whereas the commoners were more likely to remain illiterate.

The women were active in many professions and when the 14th-century Egyptian poet Muḥammad ibn Mawlāhum al-Khayālī wrote a *maqāma*, where women of various crafts chatted with each other, he was able to include as many as

²⁴ According to Shatzmiller (1994: 240f) the number of weaving shops in Alexandria alone was 14,000 in the 14th century.

²⁵ Shatzmiller 1994: 358f. The reference to women gathering together to spin flax is from Muḥammad al-ʿUqbānī al-Tilimsānī's (d. 871/1467) book on *ḥisba*, *Kitāb tuḥfat al-nāzir*.

²⁶ *al-Khiṭaṭ*, I, p. 106: *ḍamān al-aghānī* was collected from the prostitutes. ʿAbd al-Rāziq 1973: 45-48, 66-69, 79. ʿAbd al-Rāziq calls the tax *ḍamān al-maghānī*.

fifty female professions.²⁷ It has been estimated that generally in the medieval Islamic world women had an important role in the economy and they were involved in all sectors, i.e. in production, service, and commerce (Shatzmiller 1988: 58). The Mamluk period was no exception and the women's economic importance is indicated in the consequences of the Sultan's decree during the plague of 841. The scholars believed that the plague was caused by immorality and it would subside if the women were forbidden to go out. al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī described the economic effects of the prohibition. Not only did the working women and their families lose their income, because the women could not go to work, but the shopkeepers also suffered because the women were not there to purchase goods.²⁸

How much of the economic activity of the women is reflected in the Arabian Nights' stories? There are several women present in the Hunchback-cycle and the story of 'Alī the Cairene, but the only working women among them are the servants and the old women ('ajūz) acting as paid messengers between men and women.²⁹ Apart from these women, there are the wives – the tailor's wife, the physician's wife, and the merchant's wife – who do not have paid work and, in accordance with the Islamic ideal, enjoyed the *nafaqa* provided by their husbands. Only when the husband proved to be unable to fulfil his duty as the provider for the family, did the wife take over the responsibility. This occurs in the story of 'Alī the Cairene, where 'Alī squandered his property and the family was reduced to poverty. 'Alī's wife took over the maintenance duty, but she did not start to work for a living. Instead she contacted a wealthy female friend and begged her to support the family. (Coussonnet 1989: 15.)

Although there were working women in Mamluk society and they were trained in various crafts, the stories do not portray them. There is some indication that in the medieval society, the status of a woman engaged in manual labour, such as spinning, was low and even her morality was suspect.³⁰ One 11th-century scholar expressed his opinion that female occupations were detrimental to the mind and the intellect.³¹ The negative attitude towards working women could explain their absence in the Nights' stories and the stress on the man's role as provider.

The attitudes towards women engaged in commerce seem to have been more positive and the legal scholars seem to have made an effort to circumvent the

²⁷ *al-Maqāma al-mukhtaṣara fī al-khamsīn mara*, MS British Library, Add 19411, fols. 89a-104a. The *maqāma* is briefly described by Shmuel Moreh 1992: 109 and on p. 119, n. 23. Moreh states that he and J. Sadan are preparing an edition of the text.

²⁸ *al-Sulūk*, IV, pp. 1032f and *al-Nujūm*, XV, pp. 93-95. See also Perho 1997.

²⁹ An old woman is given clothes as payment in *Alf layla*, p. 334. 'Abd al-Rāziq (1973: 59) lists matchmaker (*khāṭiba*) as a female profession.

³⁰ Shatzmiller (1994: 360) refers to two *ḥisba*-manuals (9th c. and 11-12th c.) that blame female workers for cheating and being immoral.

³¹ Shatzmiller 1994: 360f. The negative attitudes are expressed in 9th- and 11th-12th -century *ḥisba*-manuals and an 11th-century commercial manual.

segregation rules, in this way actually encouraging the commercial activities of women (Shatzmiller 1994: 361f). According to 14th-century Italian travellers, there were many female merchants in Cairo and they had commercial contacts throughout Egypt.³² The Nights' stories also seemed to share this attitude and where the female workers were absent, we encounter one female merchant. The *Christian broker's tale* introduces a woman, an *amīr's* daughter, who was engaged in sesame trade. Actually, nothing explicit is said about her commercial activities, but the fact that she owned several storehouses full of sesame seeds indicates that she was a trader (*Alf layla*, p. 303).

It has been said that the female characters in the Nights' stories are stereotypes and can be divided into two categories: the bad woman who has all possible vices but is active and the pious wife and mother who is virtuous but remains passive and has no influence on the story line.³³ If all the female figures in the stories really were such simple stereotypes, they could not be used as indicators of women's life in the contemporary society. As it is, the female characters in the Hunchback-cycle and the story of *ʿAlī the Cairene* do not all fit the simple type casting and therefore are more likely to reflect reality.

Among the women in the stories, there are the wives of the tailor, the Jewish physician, and *ʿAlī the Cairene*. As wives they should represent the virtuous but passive type, but all three women are rather active figures. The tailor's wife appears as a determined woman, who is not content with sitting meekly at home. When her husband has spent most of the day out with his friends, she demands that he takes her out to amuse herself, too. She says: 'You have fun and get about the town, whereas I am locked up in the house. If you will not take me out for the rest of the day, I will make it a cause for separation.' (*Alf layla*, p. 377.)

Later, when the hunchback chokes in the presence of the tailor and his wife, it is the wife who decides what to do, not the husband who merely wrings his hands (*Alf layla*, p. 282). Similarly, when the Jewish physician finds the body in his house, the only thing he can do is to run to his wife and let her find a solution (*Alf layla*, p. 283). At first glance, the pious and faithful wife of *ʿAlī the Cairene* seems to fit the stereotype better, but actually she proves to be quite resourceful when faced with economic disaster. After realising that *ʿAlī* is unable to provide for the family, she takes matters firmly in hand and is able to secure the survival of the family. *ʿAlī* leaves her to fend for herself and the children, and she manages to maintain the family, albeit in dire circumstances, until *ʿAlī* becomes wealthy again. (Coussonnet 1989: 15 and 21.)

In a male-dominated society the authority is supposed to lie with the man, whereas the woman is not reckoned as a decision-maker. This ideal does not always

³² *Visit to the Holy places of Egypt, Sinai, Palestine and Syria in 1384* by Frescobaldi, Gucci et Sigoli, tr. Bellorini, Jerusalem 1945, p. 46. Quoted by *ʿAbd al-Rāziq* 1973: 48.

³³ Kabbani 1986: 48-50. Her view has been criticized by Irwin 1994: 160 and 167.

correspond to reality and this seems to have been the case in Mamluk Cairo, according to Ibn al-Ḥājj. He complained that Cairene women did not show proper submission but acted defiantly. For example, they did not walk close to the walls giving way to men, but chose the middle of the road, forcing the pious men to seek the shelter of the walls.³⁴ Ibn al-Ḥājj's criticism of women and his description of their behaviour makes the Nights' characters of the three quick-witted and determined wives more plausible.

The stories portray several women that fit the negative stereotype; they are unscrupulous, lewd, and scheming. What is interesting in these women is that they belong to the elite: a *wazīr*'s daughter, a woman of the Sultan's court, and women belonging to a *wazīr*'s household.³⁵ They agree to clandestine meetings with young men and have sexual relationships with them. In addition, the *wazīr*'s daughter shows extreme cruelty by murdering her sister, whereas the woman of the court cuts off her lover's thumbs and toes.³⁶ There are only two vile women who do not belong to the elite, but even these two are not really commoners. The wife of a landlord in the story of the barber's first brother is wealthy – her husband is described as a rich man (*raḡul kathīr al-māl*) – whereas the wife of a Bedouin in the story of the barber's sixth brother clearly does not belong to an urban setting, but lives outside the city in the desert.

The people who formed the audience for these stories cannot have known much about the life of the rich and powerful and were willing to believe or at least be amused or shocked by the weird stories. Similarly, they may not have found the behaviour of a Bedouin woman – desiring a man whose lips had just been cut off – totally absurd, but merely exotic. In contrast to these amoral and strange women, the ordinary women in the stories did not show any outrageous characteristics. They were faithful to their husbands and willing to help them in distress, like the wife of the tailor and the wife of the physician did in the frame story of the Hunchback-cycle. They portray the familiar female characteristics, whereas the behaviour of the elite women belongs to the realm of fairy tale.

Islamic law permitted polygyny, but it is difficult to say how usual it was in the Mamluk period. Having more than one wife was expensive and therefore it was hardly a regular practice among the common people. The Nights' stories agree with this in that none of the commoner characters – physician, tailor, barber, butcher, etc. – is reported to have more than one wife. Further, there is a 14th-century *fatwa* accepting the validity of a condition in a marriage contract that forbade the husband from taking a second wife (Ibn Taymīya, *Majmū'at al-fatāwī*, IV, p. 65/question

³⁴ Ibn al-Ḥājj's views on women have been presented in Lutfi 1991: 99-121.

³⁵ The *wazīr*'s daughter appears in the story of the Jewish physician, the woman of the Sultan's court in the Steward's story and the women of the *wazīr*'s household in the story of the barber's second brother.

³⁶ *Alf layla*, pp. 325 (murder) and 314 (cutting of toes and thumbs).

116). The fact that such conditions were included in the marriage contracts shows that women did not necessarily approve of polygyny.³⁷ According to the 15th-century traveller, Arnold von Harff, taking a second wife was an undisputed cause of divorce if the man was unable to guarantee an acceptable living standard to both wives. However, von Harff noted that most men had only one wife – polygyny was obviously above their means. (Letts 1946: 112.)

Actually, one of the stories – *‘Alī the Cairene* – at least hints that the first wife might not approve of the husband taking a second wife. In the story *‘Alī* – now again an extremely wealthy merchant – is offered the daughter of the Sultan as a wife. *‘Alī* is bold enough to reject the Sultan’s offer and the young girl is married to *‘Alī*’s son instead. (Coussonnet 1989: 24f.) This refusal may reflect the attitude of the common people towards polygyny. After all, *‘Alī*’s pious wife had remained faithful throughout the period of poverty and had taken good care of their sons. In these circumstances *‘Alī* could not bring himself to take a second wife, an act that probably would have offended his first wife.

HOUSING

The dwellings of the common people varied from simple rooms to more spacious houses or apartments. The poorest did not even have rooms but lived on the streets seeking warmth in the stokeholds of bath houses like the trickster Gharīb did in Ibn Dāniyāl’s (d. 710/1310) shadow play *‘Ajīb wa-Gharīb*.³⁸ The pilgrim and traveller Felix Faber, who visited Cairo in 1483, describes how poor families lived in the squares of the city, working there in the daytime and sleeping under the open sky in the night. The women could even give birth in the place, being only protected by the veils and robes of other women. (Masson 1975: 567f.) The major residential areas of the poor were on the outskirts of the city, where the lower price of land permitted lower rents. A typical modest dwelling was a small room in a collective unit (*hawsh*) that consisted of rooms arranged wall to wall round a small courtyard that was shared by all the families living in the unit. These complexes are known to have included up to 24 rooms.³⁹

The craftsmen and shopkeepers lived in housing areas in close proximity to their workshops or shops in the commercial centres. Some of them lived in modest

³⁷ *‘Abd al-Rāziq* (1973: 165) claims that women did not resent co-wives, but instead lived in full concord. A rather rash generalization.

³⁸ Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 57. The relevant verses have been translated by Bosworth (1976: 121).

³⁹ Raymond 1985: 279, 290, 323-325. Raymond describes the residential patterns and types of houses in the Ottoman period, but the circumstances were undoubtedly similar in the Mamluk period.

houses of their own,⁴⁰ whereas others chose a cheaper alternative and rented an apartment in a multiunit building (*rabʿ*). The apartments were located above commercial units – shops, storerooms, workshops, etc. – that took up the ground floor. There was a separate entrance and a staircase leading to the apartments above. The main room of the apartment was either a *qāʿa* with two *īwāns*, a *riwāq* or *ṭibāq* with one *īwān*. In addition there were one or two smaller rooms above the main room or possibly only a mezzanine for sleeping, a vestibule, a pantry, a storeroom, and a latrine. From each apartment there was also access to a private section of the roof. In contrast to the more luxurious private houses, the apartments did not contain baths and the residents in the apartments frequented the public bath houses. (Ibrahim 1978: 24-28; 1984: 56f.)

The apartments formed a housing block that had a common entrance and staircase leading to a corridor with doors to each living unit. The multiunit building of Sultan Qāʾitbāy contained three separate apartment blocks, each with a private entrance. They were built above a warehouse and some shops. The two largest blocks consisted of 14 apartments each, and the total number of living units in the building was 37. Many of these types of buildings were built by the members of the ruling elite as investments. Both the commercial space and the living units were rented to provide income for the beneficiaries of *waqfs*. (Ibrahim 1978: 24 and 26.)

The Nights' stories refer to various kinds of living quarters. The most detailed descriptions are given of the grand houses or palaces where the rich live. The lofty marble-covered rooms with luxurious furnishings and cooling fountains receive a lot of attention, whereas much less is said about the more ordinary dwellings. These were obviously so familiar to the audience of the stories that no detailed description was called for. There are, however, some remarks made in passing that make it possible to relate the information to what is otherwise known of the dwellings of the common people in the Mamluk period.

None of the characters in the stories is so poor that he would be forced to live in the streets or in open courtyards. Everyone, even a blind beggar, seems to have a roof over his head, although the dwelling may be modest. The poorest dwelling was the room (*bayt*) shared by the three blind beggars in the story of the barber's third brother. It was an obviously poor room that had a plain earth floor (*turāb*) and no furnishings are mentioned, but the room was high enough for an intruder to hide from the blind men by dragging himself up by a rope attached to the ceiling. Somewhat better was the lodging taken by ʿAlī the Cairene and his family. It is described as a *qāʿa* giving onto a courtyard shared with the other lodgers (Coussonnet 1989: 14). A *qāʿa* was usually a fairly large living unit with two slightly raised *īwāns*. It was often part of a large house, but it could form an independent unit as well.

⁴⁰ According to Raymond (1985: 315f) such a modest house was much smaller than a mansion of any grand merchant. When a big luxurious house could take up an area of 400-900 m², a house of a craftsman or a small-scale merchant took up only 80-190 m².

(Garcin 1982: 176; Ibrahim 1978: 24.) If the *qā'a* referred to in the story was this type of dwelling, it was hardly as miserable as Coussonnet indicates in his commentary, but clearly much poorer than the palatial house the family had been used to (Coussonnet 1989: 36).

The homes of the Jewish physician and the Sultan's steward represent the apartment-type of housing, where the living units were on the first floor above shops or warehouses. There was a staircase leading up to the apartments and there was also access to a roof terrace.⁴¹ In the story the steward and the physician were neighbours, although one of them was Muslim and the other a Jew. The various religious communities lived each in their own quarters, but because they did not form closed and isolated ghettos, it was possible that in the border areas of the quarters members of two different communities could find themselves as neighbours. The houses of a Jew and a Muslim may not have been beside each other on the same street, but instead back to back with doors to different streets. Another possibility is that the segregation was not complete and that mixing of religious communities occurred in the housing areas. Later, in the Ottoman period, the segregation became more strict.⁴²

As has been mentioned above, many of the large apartment blocks were built by the elite, but according to the Geniza documents, the middle classes also invested in property and bought houses in order to receive rents. The rent level was fairly low and the net income was not necessarily very high after the maintenance costs were subtracted but it was a steady income and appreciated as such. (Goitein 1983: 84f.) The Nights' stories also indicate that houses were objects of investment for ordinary people. In the barber's story, the fourth brother, the one-eyed butcher, was a successful butcher and supplied meat to the elite households (*kibār*, *aṣḥāb al-māl*). He used the surplus income to buy houses (*dūr*) and estates (*'aqār*) and was able in this way to further increase his wealth. (*Alf layla*, p. 361.) A small-scale property owner sometimes lived in the same house as his tenants, as the landlord of the miller did in the story of the barber's first brother. The mill occupied the ground floor of the house, whereas the owner of the house, the miller's landlord, lived on the first floor with his family. (*Alf layla*, p. 350.)

⁴¹ The staircase is mentioned in connection with the home of the physician (*Alf layla*, p. 283), whereas the upper-storey location of the steward's apartment is only indicated by the use of the verb *nazala*, when the steward leaves the house (*Alf layla*, p. 285).

⁴² About the segregation see von Harff, *The Pilgrimage*, p. 113 and Lapidus 1967: 85f. As to the Ottoman period see Raymond 1985: 296.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS AUTHORITIES

The Nights' stories present several occasions where a commoner comes into contact with the authorities – Sultan, judge, police or *wālī* – and is usually made to suffer, sometimes even if he has not committed any crime. The worst case is the fourth brother, the butcher, who was wrongly accused of a crime and was brought to the chief of the police (*ṣāhib al-shurṭa*). The chief refused to listen to the accused and instead had him beaten and confiscated his property. Here it was mentioned that if he had not had the property, the authorities would have killed him. The poor butcher escaped but was soon beaten again. This time by the orders of a king, the reason being the fact that the butcher was one-eyed and the king could not abide one-eyed people. A third beating occurred when a *wālī* saw the marks of the former beatings and concluded that the butcher had to be an evil-doer and therefore deserved to be beaten again. (*Alf layla*, pp. 362f.)

The butcher's constant bad luck was probably considered amusing by the audience, but even though the story obviously exaggerates the arbitrariness of the authorities, to some extent it reflects how people viewed their actions. The commoners often witnessed the abrupt endings of *amīrs'* careers and understood that a man could be respectable and wealthy one day and lose his position, wealth, and even his life the next. The reasons for these punishments were usually political, depending on the shifts in power relationships within the Mamluk elite and at least some of them must have appeared rather mysterious to the broader population.

The commoners themselves occasionally suffered from collective punishments which must have seemed arbitrary. al-Maqrīzī reports that in 828 about twenty people were randomly arrested and the Sultan ordered them to be cut in half, but finally only their noses and ears were cut off. The reason for the punishment was that some commoners had attacked a *muḥtasib*, but no attempt was made to find the actual culprits. (*al-Sulūk*, IV, p. 698.) Instead, the ruler resorted to an exemplary punishment that was meant to preserve the respect for authority and discourage people from challenging it.

It was considered necessary that the people were in awe (*hayba*) of their rulers because it made them obedient and prevented disorder. This was not considered oppression (*zulm*), but only a means of keeping people in their proper place.⁴³ These views reflected the opinions of the rulers and some scholars and the policy even had the desired effect of promoting quietism. However, the common people were not aware of the theoretical background of these ruling methods, but only experienced them in practice without being able to appreciate their logic. Considering the actions of the authorities, a commoner probably deemed the fate of the barber's fourth brother unlikely, but not impossible, to occur in reality.

⁴³ About *hayba* and *zulm* see Mottahedeh 1980: 176-179 and 190f.

Even though the authorities could cause problems for the common people, the existence of administration was also seen as a characteristic of orderly life. The city with its police force and *wālī* was a haven of security compared to the areas outside the city, where Bedouins and robbers roamed. The insecurity of the rural and desert areas is illustrated in the stories of the barber's fifth and sixth brother, who both had to escape from the city. The fifth brother was attacked by robbers who stole his clothes, whereas the sixth brother was held captive by Bedouins who, after giving up the hope of getting a ransom, cut his lips off. (*Alf layla*, pp. 372 and 375f.) The caravan 'Alī the Cairene had joined was also attacked by robbers, and 'Alī was lucky to reach Baghdad on foot with his last dinar intact in his pocket (Coussonnet 1989: 16).

The people may have considered the administrators, judges, and police corrupt and partial, but they still respected the Sultan and assumed him to be just.⁴⁴ They viewed him as a paternal figure who could be approached and who would redress the wrongs committed by the administrators. The chronicles report on the weekly sessions where the commoners could submit their petitions directly to the Sultan. The respect the commoners felt towards the Sultan is expressed in the Nights' stories as well. The idea that the Sultan may correct a wrong committed by one of his administrators is present in the story of the barber's fifth brother, where a *wālī* is said to have been afraid that his victim, the fifth brother, would take the issue of the *wālī*'s misrule to the Sultan and therefore forced the fifth brother to leave the city (*Alf layla*, p. 372).

Another story where the Sultan is attributed with positive characteristics is 'Alī the Cairene. In the story Ḥasan, 'Alī's son, was elected Sultan and the *amīrs* who made the choice explained that Ḥasan had all the necessary qualifications: he was not only intelligent and just but also beautiful to look at. He was perfect both in appearance and in character. (Coussonnet 1989: 25f.) The scholars had traditionally held the opinion that the ruler of the Muslims (*imām*) should possess special physical, intellectual and moral qualities, and these scholarly views seem to have received a wide acceptance because they have even been included in a Nights' story. In the Mamluk period, the scholars were not so demanding and accepted less virtuous persons as legitimate rulers. According to Ibn Taymīya, one of the most important characteristics of a ruler was his ability to provide security and prevent disorder. In his opinion even an unjust ruler was better than the absence of a ruler, (Lambton 1981: 145-149.) However, as illustrated by the story of 'Alī the Cairene, the commoners preferred an intelligent and just ruler, who would, like Ḥasan, promote good and forbid evil and treat the rich and poor equally.

⁴⁴ On the relationship between the Sultan and the commoners see Perho 1997.

CONCLUSIONS

The details given in the Hunchback-cycle and the story of *‘Alī the Cairene* largely correspond to the information given in other sources from chronicles to architectural reconstructions of Mamluk period houses. The stories contain references to daily life and these add colour to the reports and statements that can be obtained elsewhere. Ibn al-Ḥājj’s description of the Cairene women tallies well with some of the female characters in the stories and taken together these descriptions counterbalance the patriarchal stereotype of a submissive woman. On the other hand, the stories include only relatively well-off women. Working women, whose existence is testified to by other sources, are practically absent, the only exceptions being the female servants. There are no spinners or peddlers among the women in the stories, whereas the men represent a varied range of trades including barbers, tailors, brokers, and beggars. The stories seem to reflect the familiar ideal of the man as the provider, whereas the woman’s main role was seen as that of wife and mother. The reality did not correspond to this ideal and in this respect it is clear that the stories do not give a true picture of the contemporary society.

Another area where there is a clear discrepancy between the stories and historical evidence is some of the economic details given in the stories. The broker’s fees, the payments made to the donkey driver and the barber, are much too high to be realistic and these must be seen not so much as factual information but as descriptive details of the story itself, stressing the wealth, benevolence or the greed of the character connected with the transaction. The stories also contain indirect economic information that seems to be more correct but cannot really be understood without the help of other sources. The detailed attention to meals given in the stories becomes more pointed when the lists of dishes served are compared with the simple meals the commoners could actually afford.

The stories also give a picture of some of the prevalent values and they portray a society where everyone had his/her place and was advised to keep it. Climbing up the social ladder was not encouraged and the stories clearly show that those who tried suffered and lost what they had gained. The authorities – apart from the Sultan, to certain extent – are described negatively in the sense that their actions do not always seem to be just from the individual’s point of view, but nowhere is it indicated that the people should rebel against the arbitrary judgements of the administrators. Quite the contrary, even if a person falls victim to the injustice of the authorities, he has to accept it as his fate and endure it. It is here that the character of the Nights’ stories as ‘educational’ is most evident. The social immobility and political quietism reflects the thinking of legal scholars, who considered discipline and order as necessary requirements enabling the Muslims to fulfil their religious duties. Disobedience and rebellion led to anarchy, where no one had authority to supervise

the application of the Islamic law. The reports of the chroniclers with frequent outbursts of violent riots gives a picture very much different from the fairly peaceful urban life portrayed in the Nights' stories.

Finally, it can be concluded that the Arabian Nights stories are a useful source for finding details of the life of the common people, but they must be used with care. The dating of the stories not included in the Galland manuscript is important, because although the stories portray the pre-modern Islamic society, it is not necessarily the Mamluk society. Furthermore, the details given in the stories do not always correspond to reality for the Arabian Nights is, after all, a collection of fairy tales and intended to amuse and astound, not to serve as a report of actual circumstances. But when used together with other historical material, the stories do give flavour to the succinct prose of *hisba*-manuals or other legal treatises pertaining to the life of the common people. They also add scope to the sparse references to daily life in the texts of the contemporary chroniclers.

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