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## The Economic History of the Medieval Middle East: Strengths, Weaknesses, and the Challenges Ahead

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One may say that our field has had a respectable crop of scholars engaged in research and numerous important publications to its credit.<sup>1</sup> Past investigations of the agricultural sector have included excellent coverage of taxation systems and tax rates, good coverage of cultivation methods and crops, not very thorough coverage of landholding patterns, and almost no studies of productivity rates. For the manufacturing sector we have very good coverage of manufacturing techniques and good coverage of labor organization and division of labor but little on the productivity rates of individual sectors such as textiles, on apprenticeship and wages for either skilled or unskilled labor, or on the relationship of wages to prices. We have important studies on both regional and long-distance trade and commerce, including on routes and trade-related institutions and on tools of trade such as credit and investment partnerships (*qirād/commenda*), and related studies regarding urbanization, exchange, and markets. The auxiliary fields of numismatics and archeology have yielded important studies on coinage and minting and on settlement patterns that are likely to improve our grasp of the economic history of the medieval Middle East. We also have at our disposal volumes of statistical data, collected from literary and documentary sources, on prices, wages, commodities, weights, measures, and coins. Several online projects scrutinizing data from primary sources, mainly papyri and *Geniza* documents, yield more figures, though mostly on the economic history of early Islamic societies. Among the lacunae are studies related to topics such as economic institutions, property rights, standards of living and inequality, GDP estimations, sector productivity, market integration, exogenous shocks, and economic growth.

We also lack both comprehensive coverage of any topic, economic sector, or region and an overview of the economy as a whole. We have not yet achieved a systematic approach to the disjointed historiography we inherited from earlier studies, which were produced following the discovery and publication of individual Arabic texts in archives and libraries. This, in turn, has led to a random selection of topics and has discouraged attentiveness to new subjects and methodologies, contributing to an unsystematic exploration of medieval economic history and to the neglect of new research methodologies. Adding to the fragmentary nature of the body of work is an uneven regional coverage. Our scholarly focus was, and remains, heavily skewed in favor of one region, Egypt. While the reasons for focusing on Egypt are clear—an unparalleled richness of archival and documentary sources—the imbalance in coverage prevents us from seeing medieval Islamic economic history as a whole or viewing Egypt's achievements in a regional relative perspective and precludes global comparisons such as those currently at the forefront of economic history.

Adopting new methodologies is one of the challenges lying ahead. The economic history of classical and medieval societies experienced a dramatic paradigm shift over the last thirty years, moving from close readings of literary historical texts and analyzing the

evidence they provide to an approach using economic theory, statistics, and even mathematical models and quantification. The new methodologies have been used with great benefit by modern economic historians<sup>2</sup> and are currently transforming the economic history of classical and medieval societies of ancient Babylon,<sup>3</sup> the Roman Empire,<sup>4</sup> the Byzantine Empire,<sup>5</sup> and early medieval Europe and England.<sup>6</sup> Medieval Islamic economic history is the only comparable field not yet applying the new approach. Our failure to exploit this is preventing us from expressing the achievements of the medieval Islamic economy in comparative terms and from participating in the recent debates over the economic performance of premodern societies.

Closer to home, it behooves medieval economic historians to engage in the current debate about Islam and economic performance—which draws on some questionable historical accounts—by examining the medieval performance of economic institutions, law, and commerce.<sup>7</sup> In general, the arguments against these institutions fault them first for their irrational economic functioning and then for blocking the changes necessary to improve performance. All historians of the medieval Islamic world, economic and otherwise, will find the argument about irrational Muslim institutions disturbing. If Muslims were innovators and transmitters of the exact sciences such as medicine, mathematics, philosophy, theology, geometry, and technological devices, then why would they make short-term irrational decisions on economic matters and develop inefficient long-term economic and legal institutions?

The medieval chronicles are replete with examples of rational economic decisions undertaken by central administrations and individuals as economic actors. Decisions on monetary policies by the Umayyads, Abbasids, and Samanids<sup>8</sup> encouraging mining and minting, increasing the supply of money in circulation, and monetizing tax collection, wages, and commerce greatly improved the efficiency of economic transactions and markets. Perusal of the empirical evidence, including medieval Islamic court records, especially those of estate division, as well as fatwas and notarial documents of practice, show how unverifiable and unjustifiable is the picture painted of Islamic law as an inefficient economic institution. The Islamic sources do not support such conclusions. Without the participation and input of medieval Islamic economic historians, explorations of these topics are and will remain rather unhelpful.

How soon will the economic history of the medieval Middle East join that of the Roman, Byzantine, and European societies and be meaningfully incorporated into the global comparative framework? The nature of the medieval Arabic sources has often been cited as an obstacle to this, on the grounds that they do not provide the kind of statistical records necessary for developing the criteria available for other economies. True, our sources do not include time series—that is, statistical data provided in chronological order—but medieval Arabic sources can and have yielded quantitative and empirical data, which could be productively and rewardingly interpreted using new theoretical frameworks and methodologies of quantification and economic modeling. Initiating team projects of data collection from medieval sources and making them easily accessible by posting datasets online will facilitate cooperation. Encouraging new PhD students to acquire the skills used by economic historians today to analyze and interpret data should complement these projects. Besides incorporating our field into global economic history, such initiatives will help to close the gap that has opened between our current understanding of the economic history of the medieval Middle East and that of comparable societies. It will

provide new insights into medieval economic accomplishments as well as the role of economic history in elucidating social and intellectual achievements.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Because it is beyond the scope of this roundtable discussion to engage in a comprehensive bibliographical coverage of the economic history of the medieval Islamic/Middle East, I limit my comments here to general observations and reflections. Further discussion of the issues and full bibliographical details may be found in my recent paper "Economic Performance and Economic Growth in the Early Islamic World," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 54 (2011): 132–84.

<sup>2</sup>For an example on standards of living and inequality, see Robert C. Allan, Tommy Bengtsson, and Martin Dribe, eds., *Living Standards in the Past: New Perspectives on Well-being in Asia and Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup>Michael Jursa, *Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium BC: Economic Geography, Economic Mentalities, Agriculture, The Use of Money and the Problem of Economic Growth* (with contributions by J. Hackl, B. Janković, K. Kleber, E. E. Payne, C. Waerzeggers, and M. Weszeli), *Alter Orient und Altes Testament* 377 (2010).

<sup>4</sup>Allan Bowman and Andrew Wilson, eds., *Quantifying the Roman Economy: Methods and Problems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup>J. Cl. Cheynet, E. Malamut, and C. Morrisson, "Prix et salaires. Byzance (Xe–XVe siècles)," in *Hommes et richesses dans l'empire byzantine*, ed. V. Kravari, J. Lefort, and C. Morrisson (Paris: Editions P. Lethielleux, 1991), 2:339–74.

<sup>6</sup>Nicholas Mayhew, "Modeling Medieval Monetization," in *A Commercializing Economy: England 1086 to c. 1300*, ed. Richard H. Britnell and Bruce M. S. Campbell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup>Avner Greif, "Cultural Beliefs and the Organization of Society: A Historical Theoretical Reflection on Collectivist and Individualist Societies," *Journal of Political Economy* 102 (1994): 912–50; Timur Kuran, *The Long Divergence: How Islamic Law Held Back the Middle East* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>8</sup>Juri Burjakov, "L'extraction minière en Asie centrale aux VIIIe–XIe siècles de notre ère," in *Islamisation de l'Asie central. Processus locaux d'acculturation du VIIe au XIe siècles*, ed. E. De la Vaissière (Louvain, France: Peeters, 2008), 257–74.