ROCZNIK ORIENTALISTYCZNY, T. LVII, Z. 1, 2004, (s. 95–105)

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On Kitchens of Medieval Cairo, or Why Ordinarily the Saracens Did not Cook at Home and What Ensued From It

As most of the Western travellers who visited Cairo between XIII and XVI centuries observed, medieval Cairenes generally did not cook at home – they would rather use the services offered by the cooks in the city streets and bazaars[1]. The quantity of places where ready-made food was being sold night and day was shocking to foreign visitors: the number of street cooks in the city was sometimes said to reach twenty thousand[2], and sometimes ten[3] or twelve thousand[4]. The "twelve thousand", however, cannot be considered

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[1] Felix Fabri, *Voyage en Egypte de Felix Fabri 1483*, trans. J. Masson, IFAO, Le Caire 1975, II, p. 568; Bernhard von Breydenbach, *Peregrynacya arabska albo do grobu s. Katarzyny Panny y Męczenniczki, którą Aniołowie Święci w Arabiey na gorze Synai pogrzebli, Zacnych ludzi niektórych rodu Niemieckiego, w roku pańskim 1483 pielgrzymowanie, przekł. x. Andrzeia Wargockiego (Die Reise ins Heilige Land: Ein Reisebericht aus dem Jahre 1483)*; Kraków 1610, pp. 65–66; Emmanuel Piloti, *L'Égypte au commencement du quinzième siècle d'après le Traité d'Emmanuel Piloti de Crète (incipit 1420)*, Imp. Université Fouad I, Le Caire 1950, p. 108; Leonardo Frescobaldi, Giorgio Gucci, Simone Sigoli, *Visit to the Holy Places of Egypt, Sinai, Palestine and Syria in 1348, by Frescobaldi, Gucci & Sigoli*, trans. Theophilus Bellorini, Eugene Hoade; preface and notes Bellarimo Bagati, Franciscan Press, Jerusalem 1948, pp. 49, 167; Pero Tafur, *Travels and Adventures 1435–1439*, ed. and trans. Malcolm Letts, George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., London 1926, p. 100; Arnold von Harff, *The Pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff, Knight, from Cologne through Italy, Syria, Egypt, Arabia, Ethiopia, Nubia, Palestine, Turkey, France, and Spain, Which he Accomplished in the Years 1496 to 1499*, trans. Malcolm Letts, Works Issued by Hakluyt Society, 2nd. ser., no. 94, Hakluyt Society London 1946, pp. 109–110; Jean Thenaud, *Le voyage d'Outremer (Égypte, Mont Sinay, Palestine), suivi de la relation de l'ambassade de Domenico Trevisan auprès du Soudan d'Égypte 1512*, ed. Charles Schefer, Slatkine Reprints Genève 1971, pp. 47, 210; Mikołaj Krzysztof Radziwiłł, *Mikołaja Krzysztofa Radziwiłła peregrynacja do Ziemi Świętej (1582–1584)*, in: *Archiwum do Dziejów Literatury i Oświaty w Polsce*, XV, pt. 2, Polska Akademia Umiejętności, Kraków 1925, p. 91.
For general comments on street gastronomy in medieval Islam see Peter Heine, *Kulinarische Studien: Untersuchungen zur Kochkunst im arabisch-islamischen Mittelater: mit Rezepten*, O. Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 1988, pp. 30–31.

[2] Radziwiłł, *Perygrynacja*, p. 91.

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

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

a real estimate here, if only for the fact that it was used with reference to medieval Cairo on various occasions in an apparently mythical way: according to Al-Maqrīzī's informants there were "twelve thousand" shops in Al-Qaṣaba[5], Ibn Baṭṭūṭa wrote about "twelve thousand" water carriers[6], Johann Schiltberger reported of "twelve thousand" streets in the city and "twelve thousand" houses standing on each of them[7]. Arnold von Harff multiplied this figure: Cairo's 24,000 lanes that are mentioned in his account had direct impact on the number of cooks: "a cook and two bread bakers are provided for each street, so that there are in the town 24,000 cooks and 48,000 bread bakers." He also gave some additional data: "Although there are many streets without cooks or bakers, there are countless alleys with a hundred or a hundred-fifty cooks."[8]

Leo Africanus's calculation seems to provide more reliable data: by his account there were about sixty kitchens serving boiled meat from tin vessels in Bayn al-Qaṣrayn area[9]. True enough, he speaks of the busiest artery and trading place in the city, yet sixty stands serving meat along a section no longer than half a kilometer is still a lot. But not impossible: Al-Maqrīzī remembered times when, after the afternoon prayer, the bird-meat fryers used to sell their goods while sitting in a row that had stretched all the way from Al-Kāmil's madrasa to the door of madrasa of An-Nāṣir[10]. The culinary center of medieval Cairo occupied much more territory than was covered by the Bayn al-Qaṣrayn square itself. Located along the main street of the Fatimid city, the two-kilometer artery of shops, workshops, mosques, caravanserais, etc., it ran all the way from Bāb al-Futūḥ in the North to Bāb Zuwayla in the South. The street cooks, with hundreds of their shops and stands serving fried, boiled and roasted dishes, were spread all over the area. A warm meal or snack could be bought night and day anywhere – be it in the neighborhood of Bāb Zuwayla, a place occupied by confectioners specializing in multicoloured sweets in the form of fruits, horses, lions and cats[11], or by Bāb al-Futūḥ, inside which the stands of butchers, grain dealers and green-grocers were located. Street kitchens and food stands could also be found, though with lesser density, all over the city.

Apart from food stands and street kitchens there existed in Cairo a unique network of "peddling restaurants". As Bernhard von Braydenbach, a prelate of Meinz, observed

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[5] Taqī ad-Dīn Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Mawā'iẓ wa-al-I'tibār bi-Ḏikr al-Ḫiṭaṭ, wa-al-Aṯār*, Cairo 1853–1854, II, p. 95.

[6] Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Riḥlat Ibn Baṭṭūṭa*, Maṭbū'āt Akādīmīya al-Mamlaka al-Maġribiyya I, Rabat 1997, p. 203.

[7] Johann Schliltberger, *The Bondage and Travels of Johann Schliltberger, a Native of Bavaria, in Europe, Asia and Africa, 1396–1427*, trans. J. Buchan Telfer, New York, Burt Franklin, repr. 1970, pp. 50–51.

[8] Harff, *Pilgrimage*, p. 109.

[9] Jean-Léon l'Africain, *Description de l'Afrique*, trans. A. Épaulard, Paris: Libraire d'Amérique et Orient, 1956, p. 504. According to Frescobaldi the cauldrons were made of copper (*Visit*, p. 49). Actually, the vessels were most probably made of tin-coated copper (the copper itself was apparently considered harmful, especially in combination with fatty and fried foods; cf. Manuela Marín, *Pots and Fire: the Cooking Processes in the Cookbooks of al-Andalus and the Maghreb*, in: David Waines, *Patterns of Everyday Life*, Aldershot, Ashgate 2002, pp. 289–302.

[10] Which had to take place before 1384–86 or before Aẓ-Ẓāhir Barqūq built his madrasa in the area; see Al-Maqrīzī, *Ḫiṭaṭ*, II, p. 29.

[11] Al-Maqrīzī, *Ḫiṭaṭ*, II, p. 100.

at the end of XV century, "quite a number of cooks (...) walk through the city streets with their kitchens, carrying and displaying fire or boiling water or roasting grills etc. on their heads."[12] From peddling cooks one could buy a variety of foods, including roasted meats, "boiled fowls, peas, and other boiled things"[13] as well as fried fish or a milk dish. Upon meeting a customer, the cook took the oven off his head and put it on a tripod[14]. While wandering about the streets of Cairo, the peddling cooks shouted the names of the dishes they were carrying. Some pedestrians approached them and bought the food when passing by, but a lot of customers waited for cooks at home, looking through the window; if they spotted a dish that suited them, they called the peddler and bought what he was offering[15].

Whatever the true number of Cairo street kitchens and cooks, it was no doubt very high. Whom did they feed and why people used their services? Some of the foreign visitors to Cairo who noticed the multitude and popularity of the street cooks' shops connected this phenomenon with the fact that the local people generally did not cook at home. In their accounts the authors reported, for example, that "no citizen, however rich, cooks at home"[16] or that "ordinarily the Saracens do not cook at home."[17] The others noticed that "heathen seldom cook in their houses"[18] or that only the rich did it[19]. Felix Fabri, however, did not limit himself to simply recording the fact. The German Dominican friar who visited Cairo in 1483 gave three reasons for which the majority of the city population did not cook at home.

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[12] Breydenbach, *Peregrynacya*, p. 66; they were also noted by Fabri, *Voyage*, II, p. 569; Harff, *Pilgrimage*, p. 109; Tafur, *Travels*, p. 100; Purchas, *Pilgrimage*, p. 653, quoting Baumgarten (mentioned in: Harff, *Pilgrimage*, p. 109, n. 2).

[13] Von Harff, *Pilgrimage*, p. 109.

[14] The instrument that the Cairo peddling cooks carried on their heads is itself worth considering. Most probably it was an ordinary, portable, two-chambered oven made of red pottery, known as *kānūn*, in whose upper chamber, over the glowing embers, a pot or small grills were placed. This kind of brazier was relatively widely used in Andalusian Murcia (where it is known as *anafe*) for cooking or warming the food at home. Considering its size, we cannot say that a man could not transport it on his head; the probability that city cooks in Andalusia sold their take-aways in this manner remains, however, rather low. To the best of the author's knowledge, the only relatively well preserved (but still very fragmentary) Egyptian piece resembling such a device was excavated by Polish archeologists in Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria. Of the remaining medieval items one was found in Qsar es-Seghir, Algeria, while others (25 items), dating back to XIII century, were discovered in Murcia, Spain. For the description of the Spanish device see Julio Navarro Palazón, Alfonso Robles, *Le mobilier céramique*, in: *Une maison musulmane à Murcie. L'Andalousie arabe au quotidien*, Musée de l'Institut du Monde Arabe, 30 avril – 27 octobre 1991, pp. 27–57; the photograph also in: Mariane Barrucand, Achim Bednorz, *Moorish Architecture in Andalusia*, Taschen, Köln-London 1992, p. 150; for the discussion on relation between the *tannūr* and *anafe* and the Arabic derivation of the latter term see G. Rosselló-Bordoy, *Arqueología e información textual: el utillaje en la cocina andalusí*, in: Marín, Waines, *Alimentación*, pp. 37–87. Cf. also Ch. Redman *Qsar es-Seghir. An Archeological View of Medical Life*, Orlando (Flor.): Academic Press Inc. 1986, pp. 113–114.

[15] Fabri, *Voyage*, p. 109.

[16] Frescobaldi, in: *Visit*, p. 49.

[17] Sigoli, in: *Visit*, p. 167.

[18] Von Harff, *Pilgrimage*, p. 109; von Breydenbach, *Peregrynacya*, p. 66; Piloti, *L'Égypte*, p. 108.

[19] Radziwiłł, *Peregrynacja*, p. 91.

The first of them was, as he put it, high quality of the street food. Since it was obvious for him that nobody would make purchases at the place where food is not cooked properly, and, at the same time, the street kitchens in Cairo were constantly busy, Fabri logically concluded that the food they served must be good. Such a quality was, according to him, impossible to achieve at home. The second reason of the discussed phenomenon was to lay in the deep contempt that the Egyptians felt towards women. The local men, Fabri wrote, "were absolutely not able to eat anything that woman cooked or prepared. That was why no woman dared to approach the fire on which the food was being cooked; that was also why one could never notice a woman preparing meat dumplings or a soup for the baby." And, as the author noticed, since cooking at home obviously excluded the possibility to prevent women from interfering in this activity, the food was not prepared at home at all. Finally, the third reason was – according to Fabri – the scarcity of forests in the Orient and, consequently, high price of wood, which was so costly that it was sold by weight. "If, then, food was to be cooked in every Cairene house, as we do in our country", he wrote, "all the forests of the Orient would not be enough to satisfy the needs of this one city."[20]

The first two of Fabri's statements remain open for discussion, for neither his opinion concerning the quality of the street food[21] nor his explanation relating to keeping women

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[20] Fabri, *Voyage*, II, p. 568.

[21] The question of quality of ready-made foods sold in the Cairo streets was discussed by the author in detail in: *Twelve Thousand Cooks and a* Muḥtasib. *Some Remarks on Food Business in Medieval Cairo*, "Studia Arabistyczne i Islamistyczne" 10, 2002, pp. 5–27.

[22] Fabri's opinion regarding this point can hardly be related to the true motives behind the discussed phenomenon. Nevertheless, his views are not as absurd as they may seem. True, in medieval Islam women were not entirely kept away from preparing food and did various works that involved them directly in the process of cooking, baking or selling the food. There were female millers, vinegar makers, bakers, sweets makers, and sellers of cooked beans. Moreover, in the sphere of domestic life in, for instance, medieval Baghdad, it was – according to David Waines – "exclusively the woman who prepared the meals for the whole household" (*Cereals, Bread and Society. An Essay on the Staff of life in Medieval Iraq*, JESHO, XXX, pt. 1, February 1987, pp. 255–285). As far as Cairo is concerned, Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ, the fiercest critic of the Cairene women behavior, saw nothing unusual in a woman preparing a bread dough – his only concern was, predictably enough, that she did not meet the strangers, including the baker boy who came to take the dough to the public oven (*Al-Madḫal ilā Tanmiyat al-A'māl bi-Taḥsīn an-Niyya*, Cairo 1929, IV, p. 172).
Maya Shatzmiller supposes, however, that women's involvement in the process of food production was somehow limited because of the prejudice that the menstruating women had a negative influence on the quality of food (*Labour in the Medieval Islamic World*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, New York, Köln 1994, p. 352). What is particularly interesting in this context is that Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ, famous for tracing the slightest manifestations of foreign influences, criticized women who went so far in practicing measures of purity as to refrain themselves from touching the wheat or any other food or even approaching the pantry while during menstruation. Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ considered such behavior a non-Islamic innovation of Judaist origins (*Madḫal*, II, p. 68). There was apparently no clear universal rule or one generally accepted practice as far as women's contact with prepared food was concerned. See also Huda Lutfi, *Manners and Customs of Fourteenth-Century Cairene Women: Female Anarchy versus Male Shar'i Order in Muslim Prescriptive Treatises*, in: Nikki R. Keddie, Beth Baron (eds.), *Women in Middle Eastern History. Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, YUP, New Haven and London 1999, pp. 99–122; cf. Scarcia Biancamaria Amoretti, *Un altro Medioevo. Il quotidiano nell'Islam dal VII al XIII secolo*, Editori Laterza, Roma 2001, p. 207.

away from kitchen and cooking[22], are unequivocally true. There were observers who would not share his way of reasoning – enough to mention Muṣṭafā ʿAlī, a Turkish historian who visited Cairo in 1599. The man, who generally despised many of the Egyptian peculiarities, not only considered the street food indigestible, but also presented his own interpretation of local ladies' disengagement from the kitchen affairs. According to him, the Cairene women – in contrast with Turkish women – did not care to cook food in their houses, just as they did not bother to do sewing or embroidering, simply because they were not good housewives[23]. Evidently, they preferred to "pass their days in idleness." He had no doubts about this.

The last of the reasons quoted by Fabri, however, seems to correspond with the reality. Indeed, the high prices of wood resulting from its insufficiency in the country must have contributed to the fact that the majority of the population gave up the idea of cooking in their houses. There were, of course, substitute combustibles available: one could use sun-dried camel's, horse's or buffalo's excrements in the oven or – better – dried palm leaves and bark or chaff[24]; neither of them, however, could be comfortably used at home, particularly in the climate where the inconveniences that result from emission of smoke and heat are exceptionally high. This, together with the travelers' observations about the Cairenes who generally did not cook at home, could indicate that the medieval Cairene houses were not equipped with kitchens at all. Such a conclusion is in a way supported by Fabri who also noticed that the city inhabitants did not lit the fire at their homes[25].

None of the above accounts, however, may be used to definitely confirm such an opinion. Contemporary scholars differ at this point: the unfortunate statement of Gaston Wiet about the general absence of kitchens in Cairo houses was argued by S.D. Goitein who, having at hand the Geniza documents that "show that almost all of the described houses had a kitchen (and large ones had even more than one)," used them to prove it was rather on the contrary[26]. In fact both of the opinions somehow oversimplify the problem. While Wiet's book on Cairo is, by purpose, of more popular than scholarly character, and thus its contents contains, naturally enough, some generalizations, Goitein's arguments, on the other hand, introduce some confusion into the question: his assertion about a kitchen being "a common fixture" is accompanied by his explanation of the infrequency of fires by the fact that there was "very little heating and not much

[23] "Mornings and evenings", he noted, "they receive their allocated allowances from their men in the form of cash, and [with these] they eat the indigestible food that is cooked in the bazaars". Andreas Tietze, *Muṣṭafā ʿAlī's Description of Cairo of 1599*, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Wien 1975, pp. 41, 44.

[24] Also Piloti noted the absence of the forests and the use of palm wood and animals' excrements as combustibles (*L'Égypte*, p. 24); see also Trevisan, in: Thenaud, *Voyage* p. 209. Cf. Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ's discussion over the permissibility of using animals' excrements as combustible according to various legal schools of Islam (*Madḫal*, IV, p. 167).

[25] Fabri, *Voyage*, II, p. 568.

[26] Wiet, *Cairo*, p. 89; S.D. Goitein, *Urban Housing in the Fatimid and Ayyubid Times*, "Studia Islamica", 1978, XLVII, pp. 5–23.

cooking"[27] or, elsewhere, by a statement that "all a smart housewife had to do was to tell her husband in the morning what to bring home for dinner in the evening"[28]. Besides, one should keep in mind that simple application of the patterns of the Al-Fusṭāṭ type of house to the later Cairene type is not fully justified, for no indication has been revealed that would prove such a transition[29].

Nelly Hanna clarifies things to some degree: her research, though concerning the Ottoman period, introduces elements that, obvious differences notwithstanding, may also prove valid for the earlier epochs, particularly that the practices in question remained at work at least until XIX century. Thus, according to a number of 17th- and 18th-century documents, 84.4 per cent of the average houses (*maisons moyennes*) did not have a separate kitchen[30]. Of the remaining 15.6 per cent, 1.6 were provided with two such rooms. Two-(or more) kitchen houses, an exclusive prerogative of the rich, are also to be traced both in the Geniza documents (X–XII century) and, for the later period, in the Mamluk *waqfiyyas*[31]. Of these two kitchens the main one, situated on the ground floor[32], was provided with the *kānūn* – a mud-brick oven with iron grills, and with a ventilation system. The other constituted a kitchen niche adjacent to one of the apartment's rooms; the niche, however, had neither an oven, nor a chimney[33]. Al-Ǧabartī, an Egyptian chronicler of XIX century, confirms the existence of two kitchens in each of the rich people's houses and gives an additional explanation as to their character: according to him, one of the rooms, the lower one, was the men's kitchen, and it was here that everyday meals for all of the master's household and his guests were prepared, while the other was located in the *ḥarīm* or in the female (upper) part of the house[34].

[27] Goitein, *Urban Housing*, p. 10; cf. Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Islamic Architecture In Cairo. An Introduction*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, New York 1989, pp. 39–41.

[28] *The Mentality of the Middle Class in Medieval Islam, in: Studies in Islamic History and Institutions*, ed. S.D. Goitein, Leiden: E.J. Brill 1966, pp. 251. Such an attitude towards food preparation seems to contrast with the ways of the medieval Mesopotamians, whose "kitchen and its proper management was of central importance to the smooth running of the family household's daily life" (Waines, *Caliph's Kitchen*, p. 18).

[29] Cf. Hazem I. Sayed, *The Development of the Cairene* Qā'a: *Some Considerations*, AI, XXIII (1987), pp. 31–53.

[30] 317 of 375: Nelly Hanna, *Habiter au Caire. La maison moyenne et ses habitants aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, IFAO, Le Caire 1991, p. 142.

[31] Janusz Bylinski, *Darb ibn al-Baba. A Quarter in Mamluk Cairo in the Light of Waqf Documents*, JARCE, vol. XXXI (1994), pp. 203–222; Jean-Claude Garcin, *Habitat médiéval et histoire urbaine à Fustat et au Caire*, in: Jean-Claude Garcin et al., *Palais et maisons du Caire, I – Époque mamelouke (XIII–XVI siècles)*, CNRS, Paris 1982, pp.197, 198.

[32] While discussing, in his table manners manual, the banquets held by apparently well-to-do persons, Yaḥyā Ibn 'Abd al-'Aẓīm al-Ǧazzār (d. 669/1270 or 679/1281) speaks about kitchens located outside of the host's house (*Fawā'id al-Mawā'id*, British Museum Ms. Or. 6388a, fol. 8a). We cannot tell, however, whether he meant the house's kitchen or the street kitchen that catered food for parties.

[33] Nelly Hanna, *La cuisine dans la maison du Caire*, in: *L'habitat traditionel dans les pays musulmans autour de la Méditerranée*, 3 vols., IFAO, Cairo 1991, II: *L'histoire et le milieu*, pp. 405–409.

[34] *'Aǧā'ib*, I, p. 288. This should be kept in mind while considering Lane's information (also XIX century) produced by him in the pages devoted to polygamy: "Most of men of wealth, or of moderate circumstances, and even many men of the lower orders, if they have two or more wives, have for each a separate house. The

In the case of richer or larger houses such an annex, often localized on the first floor, served as an additional kitchen space. It seems that in the more modest apartments it was exactly this kind of space, devoid of an oven and a ventilation system, that was used as the main and only kitchen room. Its destination becomes more evident when we consider the fact that some people prepared their meals (or bread dough) at home in order to cook or bake them in the public oven. To have a meal made this way one needed to have in his apartment a room or space where ingredients, spices, and necessary utensils could be stored and where servants or slaves could work on the dish. Such a space did not have to be a regular, large, well-ventilated kitchen – a simple recess would suffice[35].

From Hanna's estimation it does not come out if the single kitchens (which were localized in 52 of 375 apartments) were large kitchens with ovens and ventilation systems or just the niches. In fact such a niche, as a space often adjacent to one of the rooms, was ill described and particularly difficult to identify both in the sale documents and in the architectural material studied by Hanna[36]. It is thus very probable that at least some of the apartments that were included by Hanna into the category of those who "had no kitchen at all", were, nevertheless, equipped with this kind of "ersatz kitchen," a simple niche where all the activities connected with food preparation, excluding the cooking itself, were carried out. It seems that because of the high degree of smoke emission there was even no possibility to use in this kind of annex any kind of movable *kānūn*[37] or a brazier resembling contemporary North-African *mešwar*. If such a device was used at home at all – to keep a dish warm, for example – it could only be in the courtyard or on the roof[38].

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wife has, or can oblige her husband to give her, a particular description of lodging, which is either a separate house, or a suite of apartments (consisting of a room in which to sleep and pass the day, a kitchen, and a latrine) that are, or may be made, separate and shut out from any other apartments in the same house". (*Manners*, p. 185).

[35] Of course, those who could afford a "real" kitchen in their houses could also enjoy separate *ḥāṣils* (storerooms), *ṭišṯḫānas* (stores for vessels) or *maḫzans* (storage rooms); see Bylinski, op. cit., passim; also plans of residential buildings included by Jacques Revault in: *L'Architecture domestique du Caire a l'époque mamelouke (XIII–XVI siècles)*, in: Garcin, *Palais*, I, pp. 19–144.

[36] The fact that no kitchen was identified in the palatial buildings studied by Revault (*L'Architecture*) only confirms somewhat enigmatical position of this room in the medieval Cairo residential architecture. On the other hand, Revault's assertion about kitchens being located, together with pantries and toilets, in antechambers of the *rab'* (apartment building with lodgings for rent) units, should be treated with caution. In fact no study of the *rab'* structures confirms the existence of any kitchen space there – cf., e.g., Laila A. Ibrahim, *Middle-class Living Units in Mamluk Cairo: Architecture and Terminology*, "Art and Archeology Research Papers", 14 (1978), pp. 24–30; ibid, *Residential Architecture in Mamluk Cairo*, "Muqarnas" 2 (1984), pp. 47–59; Jean-Claude Garcin, *Du rab' à la masrîya. Reflexion sur les evolutions et les emprunts des formules d'habitat dans le monde musulman de Méditerranée à l'époque médiévale*, AI, vol. 31, 1997, pp. 61–80. According to Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Islamic Architecture in Cairo. An Introduction*, E. Brill, Leiden, New York 1989, p. 39, there "usually" was no kitchen in the *rab'*. Revault's own footnote suggests that he might have confused kitchen with a recess for water jars (*bayt azyar*).

[37] As suggested by Hanna in *Cuisine*, p. 406.

[38] This kind of brazier was relatively widely used in Andalusian Murcia (where it is known as *anafe*) for cooking or warming the food at home. For bibliography see supra n. 14, pp. 113–114. For description of the 11th

Goitein's remarks pointing that there was "not much cooking" in the houses of Al-Fusṭāṭ, (even though "the Jews did more cooking at home than others")[39] do not have to simply mean that its inhabitants "ate far fewer warm meals than we do", as the author maintains. Particularly that in Al-Fusṭāṭ, like in al-Qāhira, "warm food was often brought home from the bazaar."[40] Nevertheless, these remarks are significant: they allow us to presume, with much probability, that the "kitchen" that was so frequently mentioned in the Geniza papers and that Goitein claims to be present in almost every house in Al-Fusṭāṭ, could be a room resembling, if not identical with, the above-discussed niche or recess used exclusively for storing and preparation of food that was to be carried to the street oven. Such a recess was also very comfortable, if not indispensable, to unpack the shopping and "reload" the dishes from the boxes or pots in which they were carried home into the bowls in which they were served.

Based on the above reflections two main remarks can be made at this point. First is the conclusion that it was, above all, the members of the broadly understood middle-class who, having no kitchens in their apartments, used the services of the street cooks. Motivated by necessity and having no choice, they constituted the main part of the cooks' shops clientele[41]. Second, that the financial elite of Cairo did not have any particular reason (in theory at least) to use the services of the bazaar system of collective nourishment at all – most of the great merchants, high officers or officials belonging to this group owned a house with one or more kitchens and employed significant number of servants and slaves who cared for the buttery and meals. Sometimes, however, if the number of guests they invited exceeded their logistic capabilities, those richest of the city inhabitants could use the catering services or hire a "company" that prepared food for the banquets, parties and festive occasions (*ṭabbāḫūn al-walā'im*)[42].

If we were to judge by the archeological evidence, it would be impossible to definitely state if the rich owners of the palaces and villas availed themselves of the take away services of any of the ordinary street cooks' stands. Of the two examples of late Mamluk

century Egyptian food warmer see George T. Scanlon, *Fusṭāṭ Expedition: Preliminary Report 1968*, JARCE XIII, 1976, pt. II, p. 69–101.

[39] S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, IV: *Daily Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1983, p. 141.

[40] Idem, *Urban housing*, loc. cit.

[41] While discussing the meal hours of the Geniza Jews, Goitein maintains that their morning meal, *ġadā'*, was taken at work. "The morning meal of the laborers was provided by their employers. This was not done in kind but in money, since food of all descriptions was prepared by specialists in the bazaar and could be bought from them. A master mason who received $1^1/_4$ dirhems for his lunch, could buy for himself a varied nourishing meal for this sum, whereas his helpers, who got no *ġadā'* at all, probably had to be content with bread and onions or the like, the usual fare of the poor."; *Daily Life*, pp. 229–230. It is not unlikely that the Muslim employers of Cairo followed similar rules.

[42] This kind of service is mentioned in only one of the medieval *ḥisba* handbooks, namely that by Ibn Bassām al-Muḥtasib, *Nihāyat ar-Rutba fī Ṭalab al-Ḥisba*, Baghdad 1968, p. 181. David Waines confirms that catering services were also practiced in medieval Baghdad: "the communal oven would also cater to any household's requirements on festive occasions" (*Caliph's Kitchen*, p. 17).

porte-manger boxes that are in possession of the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, one belonged to an *amīr* of a hundred (nr. 3953), the other to *amīr ḫāzindār* (nr. 3954) – both high-ranking, and thus of some financial status, officers[43]. Considering, however, the military profession of the vessels' owners, we can by no means be sure that they were designed for carrying warm food from the bazaar and not for the field use. Moreover, one can take it for granted that another extant example of a vessel of this kind, in possession of the British Museum, was not used by its unknown though well-to-do owner for bringing the street food home. This XV century Damascene triple brass box of richly engraved tinned copper is provided with a lid that served as a lunch bowl[44] (a feature that differs this object from the previous two), which suggests that this example of *porte-manger* could rather be taken for a picnic, journey, pilgrimage, hunting, or war expedition. We cannot rule out, however, that the man was a merchant who used the box to get the lunch to, and eat it in, his shop.

But even if all three lunch boxes were not used to carry the bazaar meals home, as were the similar though more modest objects mentioned in the Geniza papers[45], we still should not exclude the possibility that their rich owners ate, if only occasionally, this kind of food. Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ's references to the procedure of taking warm meals from the cook's stand are not too helpful here: the *qudūr* or pots he mentions, with cover or without, could signify the brass carriers, but it remains unknown whom they belonged to. Although it is clear from the text that the persons who carried them were generally servants and not the meal owners themselves, it is not possible to define the social status of the latter[46], for having a servant or a slave was a common practice among the Cairenes and not an exclusive privilege of the richest. There is, however, a passage in *Ḫiṭaṭ* that sheds some light on the question: Al-Maqrīzī mentions certain Taqī ad-Dīn ʻAbd al-Wahhāb, *nāẓir al-ḫawāṣṣ aš-šarīfa*, who every night, after the evening prayer, used to go down to Bayn al-Qaṣrayn street and buy things for the *wazīr* Faḫr ad-Dīn ʻAbd Allāh ibn Ḥaṣīb: fried (*muṭaǧǧan*) chicken, sand grouse, small pigeons and fried sparrows, which cost him 250 silver dirhams[47].

The habit practiced by the high-ranking state employee who, though no doubt an owner of a big house, preferred to have his favorite foods brought from Bayn al-Qaṣrayn rather than be prepared in his own kitchen, allows us to make a number of observations. First, the account suggests that for some reasons it made no sense for this bird-meat loving minister to use his own kitchen. Either the street cooks prepared the dishes better than

[43] Gaston Wiet, *Catalogue général du Musée Arabe du Caire. Objets en cuivre*, Le Caire: IFAO 1932, repr.: L'Organisation Égyptienne Générale du Livre, Le Caire 1984, pp. 98–100 (plates LXVI and LXVII). The third example of *porte-manger* presented in the *Catalogue* (nr. 3368, pl. LXIX) is composed of single container and belonged to certain Mamluk cupbearer of XVI century.

[44] Rachel Ward, *Islamic Metal Work*, British Museum Press, London 1993, p. 119.

[45] Goitein, *Daily Life*, p. 141.

[46] Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ, *Madḫal*, IV, p. 189.

[47] Al-Maqrīzī, *Ḫiṭaṭ*, II, p. 29.

his own staff, or the operation of getting such a quantity of fresh (live) birds and preparing them at home was too annoying – after all, why bother if they do it better just around the corner? The price, apparently, did not matter. Whatever were his reasons, it goes without saying that what he ordered every night must have been of good, if not of perfect, quality. What is the most interesting about this fragment, however, is that it lets us assume that the *wazīr* was not an exception among the financial (and political) elite and conclude that his fellow-officials, big merchants and officers of the military elite, also ate the food from the cook's shops – even if they did not do it so frequently and in such quantities.

Availing oneself of the take-away meals was not, however, an exclusive custom of the middle- and working-class or, from time to time, of the rich. There were also the city's poor, those "who do not have homes and sleep in the streets and are more numerous than the whole population of Venice, including the rabble."[48] The Western travellers generally believed that the number of the Cairo poor equalled 100,000[49]. The estimations, even if exaggerated, are significant; for even if we consider the fact that a part of this group had some income, the number of those who, for most of the day, hung around the cook's stands waiting for their chance to get something to eat, must have been very high[50]. A customer buying a take-away dish was often scrutinized by various beggars: poor, homeless, strangers, Sufis[51], or hungry mothers and children. Sometimes he was asked for some food, but he usually refused: the person who carried the meal was almost always not its owner, but only a cook's assistant or a servant who could not decide about somebody else's property. To prevent the poor from looking at the contents and made its smell less annoying to their empty stomachs, it was advisable to have the pots covered[52]. Only occasionally somebody gave them a bite to eat, "small enough to increase their hunger instead of eliminating it."[53]

[48] Breydenbach, *Peregrynacya*, p. 59.

[49] Frescobaldi, in: *Visit*, p. 49; Gucci, in: ibid., p. 100. Sigoli, in: ibid., p. 172, writes about 50,000 who "have neither house nor roof for a home"; also cf. Piloti, *L'Égypte*, pp. 3, 108.

[50] The food shops' owners were often bothered by scampish boys, who scrutinized a shop or a kitchen and jumped in from time to time in order to steal the chosen food. Sometimes, if there was no chance to catch anything, they just touched the food with their fingers (Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ, *Madḫal*, IV, p. 188). It is quite probable that they did not always do this out of hunger – rather, they were just killing time and wanted to get on the shop attendant's nerves.

[51] From what Ibn Baṭṭūṭa reports about the Sufis, it seems that even those of them who did not beg in the streets ate the bazaar food. According to Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's account, there was a custom in the Cairene *zāwiyas* that in the morning a servant (*ḫādim*; Ibn Baṭṭūṭa spells it "*ḫadīm*"; cf. *ḫādim al-ḫānqā* in Tāǧ ad-Dīn Abū Naṣr as-Subkī, *Kitāb Mu'īd an-Ni'am wa Mubīd an-Niqam*, ed. by D.W. Myhrman, Luzac & Co., London 1908, pp. 179–180) of the *zāwiya* visited the Sufis, each of whom told him what foods he needed. So when they gathered for a meal, each man was given his bread and his broth in a bowl (*inā'*), which he did not share with anybody; they ate twice a day; each Friday night they received sweets of sugar, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Riḥla*, I, p. 204.

[52] Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ, *Madḫal*, IV, p. 189.

[53] Ibid., loc. cit.

The beggars' position could not, however, be so entirely hopeless. It had probably been not much worse than in Lane's times, when the beggars were "almost sure of obtaining either food or money (...) in consequence of the charitable disposition of their countrymen and the common habit which the tradespeople have of eating in their shops, and generally giving a morsel of their food to those who ask for it."[54] It seems that generally asking for cash alms and then buying the food at the street cook's once a required sum was collected, constituted a more reliable method of day-to-day survival. Some ate their meal alone, often in the cook's shops mentioned by Trevisan and Al-Maqrīzī[55], some collected the money together and purchased a common bowl, then "gathered in a corner and sat there to eat their meal."[56]

Summing up, there was no group in the Cairene society that would, for any particular reasons, decline to accept what the street cooks cooked. Obviously enough, a well-to-do official who occasionally bought some exceptional food from a carefully chosen vendor would never approach the stand where the local poor were buying their cheap salt fish or boiled vegetables but, on the other hand, the beggar would not refrain from coming too close to the high-quality fried-chicken stand in order to bother the customers, even if the owner chased him away. Most probably, everybody had their favorite kitchens and stands where they particularly liked to buy: sometimes because of the cooked food quality, sometimes because of the good price, and sometimes because of the shop's location or, by the force of habit.

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[54] Lane, *Manners*, p. 327.

[55] In the travel account of Domenico Trevisan, a Venetian ambassador who visited the city in 1512, we read that "the Moors do not eat at home; they enter one of those little shops (*'boutiques'*) and they take their meal. When one passes by the shops, one breathes in a nauseating smell" (Thenaud, *Voyage*, p. 210). What Trevisan meant by "boutiques" could not constitute any kind of larger eating-houses; with much probability, they were similar to (if not identical with) Al-Maqrīzī's *ḥawānīt aṭ-ṭabbāḫīn*, the "cooks' shops", where only one dish (of a rather mediocre quality) was cooked and where the city's poor (*al-fuqarā'*) ate their food from the earthenware bowls (Al-Maqrīzī, *Ḫiṭaṭ*, II, p. 95). For discussion on the eating premises of Cairo see the author's forthcoming article.

[56] Fabri, *Voyage*, p. 109.