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The Social Life of the Urban Caravanserai in Egypt: A Literary Survey

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Abstract

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This paper examines the urban caravanserai in Egypt (Cairo and Alexandria) not much as an architectural type nor in a strictly urbanistic context, but as a socially dense and culturally dynamic space embedded in the everyday life of a city. Through a literary survey, it investigates how “caravanserais”, in their various forms and typologies, were described, experienced, and imagined across a range of textual sources, with particular attention to travel accounts, topographical descriptions, and narrative observations produced by both European and Egyptian authors. The study considers the ways in which texts reveal the caravanserai as a site of exchange extending beyond trade to include hospitality, sociability, negotiation, religious encounter, as well as political violence.

Keywords: Urban Caravanserai; Egypt; Everyday Life; Literary Survey; Cultural Exchange.

1. Introduction

The urban caravanserais of Mamluk Egypt served as far more than mere utilitarian storage hubs or nodes of international commerce. While their architectural footprints have largely vanished or undergone centuries of radical alteration, a vibrant tapestry of their internal life remains preserved within the rich literature of the era. Authors such as al-Maqrizi and Ibn Iyas, alongside European travelogues, and even the vernacular tales of *The Arabian Nights*, offer invaluable windows into these complex spaces. These buildings functioned as ecosystems where trade directly intersected with domestic life, religious practice, and social regulation. By cross-referencing these diverse narrative accounts, this paper explores the multifaceted social life of the Egyptian “caravanserai” (see *infra* for the terminology). It examines how these buildings accommodated a highly cosmopolitan population, facilitated diverse daily interactions, and operated under a complex web of legal, spiritual, and civic frameworks that defined urban existence in Mamluk Cairo and Alexandria.

1.1 Context

1.1.1 Egypt as Commercial Hub

To fully understand the urban caravanserai system in Egypt – best documented in Cairo and Alexandria – its geographical location must be considered. The country sits between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea; the Sinai Peninsula gives access to Western Asia; the Nile connects Egypt with the Sudan, and even though the Cataracts have always presented a formidable obstacle to navigation, caravan routes would still reach the Christian Kingdoms of Nubia (at least Makuria until the late 15th century) and further south the Sudanese heartland; the Sahara is a “Sea without Water” that needs intense logistic preparation to be crossed, but once crossed, it connects Egypt with Western Africa. Trade, as much as Hajj, the holy pilgrimage of Islam, would motivate the movement of people, goods, and ideas.

Located at the southernmost point of the Nile Delta, Cairo did not solely represent Egypt’s capital, but also the main exchange point for trade, connecting the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea networks with Mediterranean and trans-Saharan routes. At the westernmost extreme of the Delta, Alexandria was the northern harbour of Egypt at least until the 7th century, then replaced by Rashid, on the Nile, until the construction of the Mahmudiyah Canal in the first quarter of the 19th century. Even though trade networks within Egypt were quite laborious (a ship coming from the Red Sea would typically unload its cargo at Suez, then the goods would proceed via desert to Cairo, take the way of the Nile to Rashid and Alexandria and finally change vessel to cross the Mediterranean), Alexandria remained an important city and foreign consuls/merchants resided there throughout the Mamluk and Ottoman periods.

The Ayyubid period (1171-1250) strengthened the trade network by opening Alexandria's and Cairo's markets to Italian maritime merchants. This pattern eventually formed a route where "western" buyers met "eastern" goods inside Egyptian commercial spaces. Demand for lodging and storage infrastructure emerged as a result. Between 1250 and 1517, during the reign of the Mamluks, the Mongol destruction of northern trade routes led to an influx of transcontinental trade through the Red Sea, concentrating in Cairo. The Mamluk regime depended on this trade as much as on the trade between Egypt and the Black Sea via Constantinople, through which it sourced its own political and military strength, i.e. the ability to co-opt and maintain a Mamluk elite on top of the Egyptian populace.

1.1.2 Terminology

The urban caravanserai was known by several terms. These carried specific historical, geographical, and functional meanings across different periods and regions. The main sources for this survey use *qaysariyyah* (translated here consistently as 'market hall'), *khan*, *funduk*, and *wakala*, signifying changes in governance and authority, trade routes, and architecture.

Qaysariyyah and khan existed already in the Umayyad period (661-750), the former being a taxable warehouse, officially owned by the state, that also functioned as a manufacturing facility (Moussa, 2026). Raymond and Wiet (1979) clarify that qaysariyyahs sometimes featured covered galleries dedicated to different trade specialisations. Qaysariyyah markets in this specific meaning are still existing in many Egyptian cities to this day; one can find examples in Madina al-Fayyum and Jirja, just to mention a couple. The khan found in Syria, Iran and Anatolia was originally a fortified structure built outside cities along trade and Hajj routes, providing shelter and a transregional trade centre for travellers, merchants, and pilgrims. The term funduk emerged in the 'Abbasid period (750-969, in Egypt); its function was providing lodging for foreign travellers and merchants.

The *wakala*, an Egyptian trademark institution, emerged originally from the Fatimid *dar al-wakala* (Moussa, 2026); this was a regulatory establishment controlling merchants and goods arriving from Syria and Iraq to Egypt. This establishment evolved into a building with social and economic functions during the Mamluk period and boomed in the Ottoman period. The wakala featured a stone doorway that led to an open-air central courtyard, which was surrounded by deep vaulted storerooms (*makhazin*) that secured goods, provided space for trade, and inhabited domestic animals. Above this commercial floor, a residential complex, the *rab'*, housed working families and passing merchants. As a result, the architecture of the wakala functioned as commercial-residential, holding a densely multi-functional urban life (Moussa, 2026). Financial, religious, and governmental functions would also be attached to the building, as the following pages will show.

Because our sources sometimes use the terms interchangeably, this study will sometimes refer to the buildings with their specific name, e.g. Khan al-Khalili, Wakala of Qawsun, or Market Hall of Baktamur, and sometimes generally as "urban caravanserai" whenever a more refined definition is not necessary.

1.1.3 The Waqf System

Although the caravanserais had a vital economic function, its expansion was heavily dependent on the *waqf* system, the Islamic pious endowments. Given the Mamluk's non-hereditary regime, sultans and amirs were constantly under threat of their wealth being confiscated upon death or political downfall. However, by endowing a wakala, the system could legally protect the owner's assets while generating rental income. This would in turn be used to sustain the owner and their inheritors as well as religious and social institutions such as mosques, *madrasas*, or *khanqas*. As a result, the wakala was more than a mere commercial building and its architecture was shaped by political influence and *fiqh*, the religious jurisprudence.

1.1.4 The Urban Topography of Caravanserais

The spread of urban caravanserais across Cairo was influenced by the value and nature of the goods they housed. Under the Mamluks, al-Qasaba – the commercial spine extending from Bab al-Futuh to Bab Zuwayla – was the primary axis along which these buildings were concentrated, in close proximity to specialised retail markets (*aswaq*). Such choice of location facilitated the distribution and exchange of goods and linked bulk storage and long-distance trade to the wider urban marketplace (Raymond, 1973).

High-value imports such as spices, silks, and precious gems were grouped in northern and central sectors, specifically in the al-Jamaliyyah and Khan al-Khalili districts. The latter, still world-famous, was established in 1382 by Jaharkas al-Khalili, a prince serving Sultan Barquq (1382-1399), as a caravanserai to accommodate travelling merchants and their goods (Behrens-Abouseif, 2007; Raymond, 1973). Bulkier goods like grain, timber and livestock were located at the outskirts, closer to the Nile ports of Bulaq and Old Cairo (Raymond, 1973).

2. Sources

This paper surveys a range of Arabic and European-language sources spanning the 14th to the early 16th century, with sporadic references to periods before and after. The central source is the work of al-Maqrizi, particularly *al-Mawā'iz wa-l-I'tihār fī Dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa-l-Āthār* (known simply as *al-Khiṭaṭ*). It provides a comprehensive topographical description of 15th-century Cairo. Al-Maqrizi's writings cover not only physical locations, but also patronage, changes in function, and the surrounding urban activities (Behrens-Abouseif, 1998). Moreover, his descriptions provide evidence on trade, hospitality, religion, authority, and administration.

Of great importance are also the writings of Ibn Iyas (Salmon, 1921; Wiet, 1945, 1955, 1960), who witnessed the conquest of Egypt by Sultan Selim I in 1517, Ibn Taghribirdi (Popper, 1915-1933), al-Sakhawi (1896), and Ibn al-Furat (Zurayk, 1936-1942). These provide invaluable details on how the community, state authorities, and merchants used these spaces throughout the Mamluk period.

European travel literature was also explored. Narratives in French, Italian, Castilian, and Latin help cover travel experiences, practices, and formal and informal encounters. Narratives include those by Leonardo di Niccolò Frescobaldi and Simone Sigoli, who visited in 1384, the Baron Ogier d'Anglure (1395), Pedro Tafur (1435-1439), Bernard von Breydenbach and Felix Fabri (both 1483), Jean Thenaud and Domenico Trevisan (both 1512), and Leo Africanus (around 1517). As much biased as these sources sometimes are, they still offer interesting insights into the life of the Egyptian urban caravanserais.

In addition to historical and travel accounts, this paper occasionally references tales from *The Arabian Nights* (Lyons, 2010), in which Cairo merchants often feature.

Despite the inclusion of a multitude of records, this study was limited by several factors. All sources reflect male perspectives, although from different backgrounds, and do not reflect experiences of all users of caravanserais. Furthermore, both historical and travel accounts mostly provide incidental narratives rather than systematic ones. This demands a contextual study for a fuller understanding. The Mamluk sources considered are only a fraction of what is available; waqf documents were not consulted. For these reasons, this study is truly just a survey rather than a full study.

3. The Space

3.1 Literary Topography

The large majority of urban caravanserais attested in Cairo during the Mamluk period does not exist anymore (Warner, 2005); none of the many funduqs attested in Alexandria stands today and of those in Upper Egypt, there is very little information, with only the Ottoman wakala of Jaddawy in Esna being of a certain renown (Takween Integrated Community Development, 2020). The extant buildings have gone through an intense work of modification and adaptation that lasted centuries and is still ongoing. Literary sources are therefore helpful in reconstructing a topography of the city that can be cross checked with waqf deeds and other documents, and of course with the architectural remains themselves. This is particularly true for works such as *al-Khitat* of al-Maqrizi, which is, indeed, a topography. The position of markets and caravanserais attested in written sources has already been successfully attempted.

The position of such buildings within the city suggests logistic preferences, as mentioned above. This is particularly true for the wakalas that were assigned as arrival points for international trade, such as that of Qawsun in al-Jamaliyya. Since caravanserais were also renting out shop and workshop spaces, some trades must have clustered according to their mutual interactions and perhaps interdependence, but not necessarily: for example, Ma'ruf the cobbler's neighbour in the *Arabian Nights* is shaykh Ahmad the apothecary (Lyons, 2010, vol. 3). Some buildings indeed suggest a clustering of trades, such as luxury items in the case of the Market Hall of Baktamur ("This hall, located in the market of the silk merchants, close to the market of the paper manufacturers, used to be called the Jewellery", Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 129) and that of Tashtamur in the same area ("Near the market of the paper manufacturers: a large gate overlooks the market of the silk merchants, to the left as one moves towards the market of the glass makers; another gate overlooks the market of the paper manufacturers", Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 129) or metalworking in the case of the so-called Long Market Hall ("It is located on the main street of Cairo, in the hardware market, between the spur makers' market and that of the drapers", Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 124).

Other caravanserais seem to have little business with the surrounding buildings: the Khan of Mankuwirish was in the neighbourhood of the tentmakers (*khiyamiyyin*, crafting appliqué fabrics still popular today), not far from the market of the wood turners; the Market Hall of Ibn Quraysh was "close to the entrance to the market of the paper manufacturers. One gets to it by the [Great] Jamalun [Market] and the market of the ankle boots, to which one has access through the market of the crossbow makers" (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 112); the Market Hall of Raslan was "between the al-Saffira blind alley and the stonemasons" (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 115); the Market Hall of Safflower had a gate on the market of the spur makers and another on that of the paper manufacturers; the Market Hall of Ibn Yahya "used to be in front of the gate of the Market Hall of Jaharkas, in the place where there was the market of the birds and the confectioner's shops" (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 129). Other caravanserais were close to totally different buildings, indicating that the topography of the city centre was much more varied than a continuous network of trade-related buildings: by the city gates (Bab Zuwayla, Bab al-Futuh, Bab al-Bahr), by mosques (Ibn Tulun, al-Azhar, al-Hakim. Mu'ayyad) or khanqas (Dar Sa'id al-Su'ada), and by bathhouses (Bath of Khushayba, Kharratin Bath). One can imagine the kind of interactions going on in such crowded places.

Changing toponymy, whenever recorded, offers a glimpse in past interactions. This is the case of the Market Hall of 'Abd al-Basit, of which al-Maqrizi states: "This hall is located in Cairo at the entrance of the market of the wood turners; its location was formerly called the dyers' ascent; it was then called the second-hand clothes dealers' market, before taking the name of the wood turners' market" (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, pp. 132-133).

3.2 Features

3.2.1 Caravanserai between Trading and Housing

The Egyptian caravanserais, in whatever specification, function and plan, shared the same layout: a courtyard with storage space and shops on the ground floor, and apartments on the elevated floors. The description of the house of 'Ali al-Misri in the *Arabian Nights* gives an example of what even the private house of a merchant would have looked like: "The procession continued on its way, the men with 'Ali and the women with his family, until they came to his house, where they dismounted. The laden mules were led into the centre of the courtyard, where their loads were removed and placed in the storerooms. The women went with 'Ali's family to the upper room" (Lyons, 2010, vol. 2, p. 265). The scene is set in Baghdad, but the author clearly has Mamluk Cairo in mind. In 1483, Bernard von Breydenbach describes the Catalan funduq in Alexandria as "a large house where the merchants and the warehouses are located, as well as the marketplace"¹

¹ "Une vaste maison où se trouvent les marchands et les entrepôts, ainsi que le lieu du marché".

(Larrivaz, 1904, p. 68). He also says that “there are not in Alexandria houses more beautiful and more ornamented than these warehouses”² (Larrivaz, 1904, p. 76). A century earlier, in 1384, the Florentine Leonardo di Niccolò Frescobaldi had described the house of the French consul in Alexandria as “very large and well placed”. The consul, he writes, “assigned us four rooms above a small courtyard, and he assigned us nothing else but the empty space, each having a large cage like a cage for capons, on which we placed our mattresses to sleep over. In front of the door of the room there was an open, colonnaded vault, five arms large, with a parapet running around the courtyard like a monastery cloister; inside the lower chambers they keep the merchandise”³ (Frescobaldi, 1818, p. 76). Just as the consular position at the time was a diplomatic as much as a commercial one (and perhaps more commercial than diplomatic), so the consular residence was a trade hub similar to a funduq, even in its spatial characteristics. That the lines are blurred seems to appear also in Otto von Nyenhusen’s (also known as Wilhelm von Boldensele) earlier account. He visited Cairo in 1332 and the short description he produces seems more in tune with that of a grand house than that of a caravanserai. He describes “hospitia” (inns), which the Mamluks are accustomed to decorating “not outside, but inside, with marble, both on the floors and on the walls, and with marvellous mosaic work”⁴ (Canis, 1725, p. 340).

That the housing aspect was as important as the trade one surfaces in most description of caravanserais; the list of buildings erected by Sultan al-Ghawri (1501-1516) compiled by Ibn Iyas includes “the Mosque and the College, which he built at Sharabishiyin (i.e. the market of the makers of robes of honour, etc.), the depot, stores, and quarters behind the college, near the dyeworks, and the double-pinnacled minaret which he added to the Mosque al-Azhar. He also built the quarters there, and the shops in the markets behind the Mosque, and the dwelling places at Khan al-Khalili. He restored the building of Khan al-Khalili, and erected stores and shops there. He built two dwelling-houses and two shops at Bab al-Kantarrah, and two dwelling-houses between the two walls and the mill near the dye-works. He also built and highly decorated a house for his son at Bundukaniyin, and erected a dwelling quarter and an inn there” (Salmon, 1921, p. 62).

3.2.2 The Courtyard

The courtyard of a caravanserai could be equipped with several features. The Market Hall of al-Fadil in Cairo, with accommodations on the upper floors, offered an ablution basin, while Khan Masrur even had a mosque, “in which the Friday prayers are performed” (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 135). The Public Khan in Cairo sported a waterwheel and a watering trough. The funduq of Dar al-Tuffah (Palace of the Apple) was seemingly unique in its courtyard arrangement, due to the nature of the merchandise stored inside: “The space between the shops is covered by awning to preserve the fruits from the heat of the sun, and the place is always deliciously cool” (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 143).

3.2.3 Dimensions

The size of the building could be considerable: while the Market Hall of the Mosque of Ibn Tulun had thirty shops, Khan Masrur had ninety-nine rooms and the Wakala of Qawsun was “of immense surface, which he surrounded by shops [...] The upper floors comprised three hundred and sixty apartments, which I saw all occupied: we could estimate the number of tenants to around 4,000 people, men and women, children and adults” (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 141).

3.3 Management

3.3.1 Waqf and Revenues

Patronage of caravanserais in Mamluk Egypt was reserved for the princes, who endowed them for different purposes. The revenues could simply go to the inheritors of an amir, such as in the case for the Market Hall of Jaharkas and the Market Hall of Safflower. Most commonly the revenues were invested in pious endeavours, reinforcing the link between caravanserai and fiqh. In many cases the waqf would cover the running of an institutions, such a khanqa (Market Hall of Raslan, Market Hall of Baybars, Wakala of Barquq, Funduq of Dar al-Tuffah), a hospital (Market Hall of al-Fadil) or a sabil-kuttab (“A part was constituted waqf [...] for the fees of filling the cistern of the Mulukhiya blind alley” (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 124). In the case of other caravanserais, their revenues were “constituted in waqf for the benefit of charities” (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 139); this is the case of the Khan Mankuwirish and of Khan al-Khalili, whose waqf served “to bake bread that had to be distributed among all poor people of Makkah, on account of two small loafs per day” (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 145), and of Khan Masrur, which was “for the benefit of the war prisoners and the poor of the two Holy Cities” (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 134). The Public Khan, on the other side, had no revenues because it was founded by Prince Baha al-Din Abu Sa’id Qaraqush ibn ‘Abdallah al-Asadi “in favour of travellers and passing guests. One would be received free of charge” (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 138).

As endowments have generally a very long life, and the political and religious landscape in Egypt would shift multiple times, so would the purpose and ownership of a waqf. For example the Market Hall of ‘Abd al-Basit, was established in the Fatimid period as the waqf of Tamurtash al-Mu’azzami; it was then confiscated by the Ustadar Jamal al-Din; then at the beginning of the 15th century al-Malik al-Nasir Faraj made it a waqf for the mausoleum of his father al-Zahir Barquq. The building was eventually demolished and rebuilt as a Market Hall by Zayn al-Din ‘Abd al-Basit ibn Khalil as an endowment in favour of his madrasa and mosque (Raymond & Wiet, 1979).

Given the great variety of caravanserais in terms of size, location, and services, the rental price would also vary accordingly. Al-Maqrizi informs us of two extremes, the Wakala of Qawsun, with a low, fixed price, and the Market Hall of Baybars, rented out at an extortionate rate. Of the former, he writes that Qawsun “stipulated that no tenant of each shop

² Il n’y a pas dans Alexandrie maisons plus belles et plus ornées que ces fondiques

³ “Ed assegnòci quattro camere sopra a una cortella, nelle quali non ci assegnò altro che lo spazzo, ed in ognuna una gabbia grande, quasi come una stia da capponi, sopra le quali ponemo i nostri stramazzi per sù dormirvi. Dinanzi all’uscita delle camere era di larghezza di braccia cinque una volta in colonne con uno parapetto dinanzi ed iscoperta; questa va intorno alla corte a modo di un chiostro di Frati, e di sotto alle camere tengono mercatanzia”.

⁴ “Consueverunt, non deforis, sed intrinsecus ipsarum hospitia marmoribus, tam in pavimentis, quam in parietibus, et opere mosaico mirabiliter decorare”.

had to pay more than five dirhams and that no tenant could be expelled. But these shops were passed down through inheritance because of the modesty of the rent and the multiple advantages that they offered” (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 140). Of the latter he indulges in an interesting anecdote, which is recounted in Book II 89: “When the building was completed, all the merchants of the qaysariyyah of Jaharkas and Fadil were invited to leave their shops in these two buildings and to relocate in this one; they were even forced. The rent of each shop was fixed at 125 silver dirhams [...] The clerk found that his master, the Prince Baybars [II], had in the meanwhile become sultan. The luck of the sultan made it possible – he told him – that the qaysariyyah was rented out in a single day. The sovereign considered these words and replied: ‘Judge, if you found tenants in a single day, it will be emptied in one hour’. [...] In fact, the night following the flight of Baybars from the Citadel, the tenants of this place did not leave behind even a piece of cloth and took away all that belonged to them” (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, pp. 122-123).

3.3.2 Maintenance and Operations

According to al-Maqrizi, twelve thousand shops lined up the al-Qasaba in Cairo, and the crowd of sellers, buyers and everything in between must have been immense. Von Breydenbach describes his visit to the market in these terms: “There was a crowd, a throng reminiscent of St Peter’s in Rome during the Jubilee years; the number of sellers and buyers was so great that one could hardly believe one’s eyes, it was almost beyond belief. I do not think there exists in the world today a city as populous, as large, as rich and powerful as this Cairo-Babylon”⁵ (Larrivaz, 1904, p. 50). Such traffic prompted the authorities to issue strict regulations, some of them aiming at making sure that public space and the shops themselves were clean. Ibn Furat (Zurayk, 1936-1942) reports that in 1391 merchants had to paint the front of their shop white, a piece of legislation that was reinforced again in 1498, when shops had to be painted white with the addition of coloured figures (Wiet, 1945). A decree of 1477, addressing the illegal occupation of public space and other issues related to street circulation, ordered “the washing of shops and the cleaning of the facades of buildings facing the street” (Wiet, 1945, p. 154).

Despite a daily service of garbage collection (Wiet, 1911), dirt kept accumulating in the streets of Cairo. An order from 1426 imposed “all shop owners to remove the soil that had accumulated in front of their shop and to dump it on the hills of rubble, so that the level of the ground of all streets in Cairo and Old Cairo would be the same” (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, pp. 53-54). Such decrees were repeated in 1430 (Popper, 1915-1933), 1442 (al-Sakhawi, 1896), 1503 (Wiet, 1955), and 1516 (Wiet, 1960).

Other regulations for public safety included the requirement to hang a lantern at night and to always keep a jar full of water, the former to facilitate the work of the *muhtasib*, the police officer in charge of the markets, and the latter as a precaution in case of fire (Wiet, 1911). The caravanserais had to be locked at night, and the streets were patrolled by guards: “In Misr there are big fondaks, with a street between them, and round the street the houses are shops with two, three, or four doors, which are closed every night, and there are always watchmen there”, in the words of rabbi Meshullam ben Menahem of Volterra in 1481 (Adler, 1930, p. 169). Von Breydenbach confirmed this: “Every night all the warehouses are closed by the Saracens and no one must enter nor exit; the same on the days when they gather at the mosques and at the time of their great feasts”⁶ (Larrivaz, 1904, pp. 75-76). In 1488, according to Obadiah Jare da Bertinoro “the people sleep on the ground before the shop” (Adler, 1930, p. 228). At the dawn of Ottoman rule in Egypt, Leo Africanus gives some specifics about the closing times, which were quite generous: “The food sellers keep their shops open until midnight, all the others close them before eleven hours”⁷ (1550, p. 93).

Beside the restrictions over working hours, it seems that the warehouses supplying the shops of Cairo had specific operational times, or perhaps specific fair days. Of the Great Market Hall of Ibn Muyassar, al-Maqrizi states that “the shopkeepers of Cairo came to get supplies on Sundays and Wednesdays” (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 132). Even later, Jean de Thévenot affirms: “The street of the bazar or market is very long and large, the Bazar runs on Monday and Thursday. One always finds a crowd of people so prodigious. But mainly on the market days, that one wouldn’t almost be able to walk” (Thévenot 1664, p. 272).

4. Trade Goods

In the commercial heart of Cairo, caravanserais were surrounded by all sorts of trades and shops, and a detailed list would be interminable, as much as outside the scope of this paper. Raymond and Wiet (1979) produce a most comprehensive overview of the trade goods available in Cairo in the Mamluk period, based on *al-Khitat* of al-Maqrizi and other sources. In the words of Rabbi Meshallam: “In the fondaks there are all kinds of goods, and the merchants and craftsmen sit near their shops, which are very small, and show samples of all their goods; and if you wish to buy from them, a matter of importance, of some value they bring you into their warehouse, and there you can see the wonderful goods they have, for you could hardly believe that there are one thousand and more warehouses in each fondak; and there is nothing in the world that you do not find in the fondaks in Misr, even the smallest things” (Adler, 1930, pp. 169-170).

Market halls specialised on the most varied merchandise, with anything ranging from weapons (the Market Hall of al-Fa’izi “survived under the name of the Hall of Arrows until the moment when the majordomo Jamal al-Din Yusuf seized it”, Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 128) to haberdashery items (the Market Hall of Tashtamur “was inhabited by the merchants of buttons”, Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 130). The Market Hall of al-Fadil sold wedding trousseaux and female jewellery, in the Great Hall of Ibn Muyassar “they sold new white and blue linen fabrics there, as well as fabrics called *tarh*”

⁵ “Il y avait là une foule, une presse qui rappelait Saint Pierre de Rome les années de jubilé; les vendeurs et les acheteurs sont en si grand nombre qu’on n’en peut croire ses yeux, c’est presque au-dessus de la croyance. Je ne pense pas qu’il existe aujourd’hui dans le monde une ville aussi populeuse, aussi grande, aussi riche et puissante que ce Caire-Babylone”.

⁶ “Chaque nuit tous les fondiques sont fermés (’) par les sarrasins et personne ne doit entrer ni sortir; de même aux jours où ils se réunissent dans les mosquées et aux époques de leurs grandes fêtes”.

⁷ “Gli artigiani che vendono le cose da mangiare tengono le loro botteghe aperte infino à mezza notte gli altri tutti innanzi à ventitre hore le serrano”.

(Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 132), while the Funduq of the Dar al-Tuffah had “all the kind of fruits that grow in the gardens at the outskirts of Cairo” (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 142). The names betrayed contemporary and past uses; the Market Hall of Safflower “was named that because safflower seeds were ground there. [...] It became the hall of amber” (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, pp. 124-125), while of the Long Market Hall, al-Maqrizi says, “we used to know it as hall of the saddles” (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 124) and Khan Mankuwirish “is now called the pit sawyers’ khan” (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 139).

As mentioned before, some wakalas were destined to function as trade terminals for goods coming from abroad. For Syria these were the Wakala of Qawsun for land trade and the Wakala of Barquq for merchandise coming by sea. Of the former, al-Maqrizi lists oil, sesame oil, soap, raisins, pistachios, nuts, almonds, carob, and fruit juice, while the latter is reported to similarly store oil, fruit juices, and syrups (Raymond & Wiet, 1979). The Funduq of Turuntay was also frequented by “the merchants of oil coming from Syria” (Wiet & Raymond, 1979, p. 145).

Of the caravanserais in Alexandria very little is known, but one must assume they traded in almost everything. Von Breydenbach speaks of spices being moved “on camelback from the warehouses to the harbour” (Larrivaz, 1904, p. 76). The author of the relation of the Venetian embassy of 1512 is so focused on textiles in his description of Egypt that there is no doubt that the two funduqs of the Most Serene Republic were stuffed with precious cloths: “They sell silks, moiré, and embroidered jackets that come from Persia [...] They also sell a large quantity of linen and cotton fabrics such as *lisaro*, Cambrai cloth, *sinabaffi*, muslins and an abundance of all kinds of silk and linen towels with ends on both sides” (Schefer, 1971, p. 212).

5. Peopling the Caravanserai

5.1 Nations

As expected from a territorial empire such that of the Mamluks, a bustling hub of international trade, the urban caravanserais in Egypt were packed with foreigners, both those passing by and residents of the country. We have already met the Syrian traders and their focal points, i.e. the Wakala of Qawsun and that of Barquq, together with the Funduq of Turuntay. According to al-Maqrizi, “the major Syrian merchants would come down with their goods” to Khan Masrur as well (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 135).

A part of the Market Hall of Ibn Quraysh served “as residence to some Armenians”, while Ibn Iyas informs us of several Greeks living in Khan al-Khalili, which, just prior to the fall of the Mamluk regime in 1517, were suspected of spying on behalf of the Ottomans and were arrested (Salmon, 1921). The same source informs us of the presence of Turks, and that, in the final months of Mamluk rule, “it was also rumoured that the imported Memlooks had planned to come down from the barracks to loot and burn Khan al-Khalili and kill the Turkish merchants there, for they said, ‘These merchants are on the side of Ibn ‘Othman, and exulted in the death of our master’” (Salmon, 1921, p. 54). In the time of al-Maqrizi Turkish boys were also employed as apprentices in some of the most exclusive trade establishments, such as the Market Hall of Tashtamur: “These merchants were distinguished, for most of them belonged to the highest society. Each employer had a certain number of apprentices, Turkish or of other origins” (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 130). Jean Thénau in 1512 reports that “there are the bazars and the warehouses of particular nations such as the Turks, the Yemenis, people of the Maghreb, Indians, Persians, and others” (Schefer, 1971, p. 48).

There were also Europeans, and Ibn Iyas reports a not-very-edifying anecdote: “A foreigner, a sausage-maker, was arrested; he was found to have taken a fat black dog, and to have killed it, and made it into sausages. On his arrest he was taken before Amir Mamai, the Inspector of Markets, who caused him to be beaten with rods, and publicly exposed in Cairo, with the dog hung round his neck. After taking him round the town, he was imprisoned at Makshara. The Franks had been constantly committing atrocious acts of this nature” (Salmon, 1921, p. 89).

In Alexandria the situation seemed even more international, as fit for a port city. Leonardo di Niccolò Frescobaldi in 1384 speaks of a French consul, together with consuls of Venice, Genoa, and Sicily (Frescobaldi, 1818). A hundred years later, Bernard von Breydenbach paints a very similar picture, attributing one funduq to Genoa, one to the Kingdom of Sicily, called Funduq of the Catalans, and two to the Republic of Venice. He then adds: “We entered the funduq of the Turks, where the merchants were making a great commotion. We also visited those of the Moors, of the Ethiopians, of the Tartars”; here was the slave market (Larrivaz, 1904, p. 75). Rabbi Meshullam in 1481 adds a few details on the topography: “In Alexandria I saw four large fondaks, one for the Franks and another for the Genoese and their Consul and two for the Venetians and their Consul, and they are all on the right hand of one street as you approach Alexandria, and opposite them in the middle is the great fondak of the Ishmaelites” (Adler, 1930, p. 162). In 1395 Ogier d’Anglure had already painted an even wider community: “Also know that in the aforementioned city of Alexandria there are several beautiful houses for the foreign Christians, i.e. for the merchants and for the pilgrims. These houses are called funduq, and there is a great number of these houses, such as the funduq of France, the funduq of the Venetians, the funduq of the Genoese, the funduq of the Castillians or Aragonese, the funduq of the Cypriots, of the Neapolitans, of the people of Ancona, Marseille, Crete, and Narbonne” (Domenech, 1858, pp. 183-184).

5.2 People of the Caravanserai

5.2.1 Trade and Its Spin-Offs

The pages of al-Maqrizi are full of human encounters in the markets of Cairo. The incredibly diverse crowd would reflect the standing of the city as an international trade hub. Brokers, for example, would be an important part of the human capital of the caravanserai and different trades would be gathered under corporations, each with their heads; there would be one for every significant business, including representatives of the thieves’ corporation and that of prostitutes. Speaking of the patron of the Market Hall of al-Fa’izi, al-Maqrizi informs us that “he leased out, for considerable sums, the trade of goods prohibited by religious law, such as wine, beer, and hashish, and did the same with brothels” (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, pp. 126-127).

Streets vendors would often occupy spaces between shops, or even in front of shops, hence the many decrees aimed at clearing the streets from illegal occupation. Other sellers would be more mobile in their business, such as barbers and even cooks; the price of fuel being so high that, according to various sources, Egyptians would rather buy street food than cook their own at home. Leonardo di Niccolò Frescobaldi so describes this business in Cairo: “In the city there are many cooks, who cook in the street as much at night as during the day in beautiful large pots of tinned copper, and they cook beautiful and tasty meats. No citizen however rich cooks in his own house [...]. And often they eat in the street, where they lay down a leather sheet and put the food in a bowl in the middle and they sit around it crossed leg. And when they soil their hands, they just lick them”⁸ (Frescobaldi, 1818, pp. 98-99). Ibn Iyas (p. 373) mentions cooks and “sambousak makers”.

Of course, there would be people transporting good between the river harbour of Bulaq and the city centre. Speaking of the Wakala of Qawsun, al-Maqrizi recounts: “I visited this wakala: its exterior and interior appearance are truly astonishing because of the abundance and diversity of the goods stored, the large crowds of people, and the cries of the porters who transport the goods and deliver them to the customers” (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, pp. 140-141).

Among the throng of sellers and customers, there would be another one related to spin-off activities, such as money changers, police patrols, bonesetters (to fix people after brawls!), and water carriers who would go back and forth with camels and donkeys to supply the city cisterns. These alone were estimated to be around 42,000 people.

Pedro Tafur in the first half of the 15th century gives us a good picture of the city: “There are certain men who come and go through the streets of Cairo carrying a kind of mirror fastened to the breast. These are the barbers who shave the heads and the necks of the Moors, and they pass through the streets, crying as they go. [...] For every requirement there are traders in the streets enquiring if anyone has need of them. Even the cooks go up and down, carrying braziers, and fire, and dishes of stew for sale; others have plates of fruit, and innumerable men go to and fro selling water which they carry on camels and asses, or on their backs, since there are many people, and no water is to be had except from the river” (Letts, 1926, p. 100).

5.2.2 Women

The presence of women in the streets of Egyptian cities underwent a series of restrictions throughout the 15th and 16th centuries. In 1437 a decree issued by Sultan Barsbay II (1422-1438) curtailed the free movement of women, allowing only female servants and old women to roam the markets undisturbed (Popper, 1915-1933). As severe as this may look, it was a version of the decree already softened after strong protests; the original intention was to simply forbid any woman from leaving her house. The issue was framed by jurists as a moral one, and the market was the main theatre, because women were often shopping for/in fine clothes and jewels (Raymond & Wiet, 1979). In 1518 the permission for female slaves to circulate on behalf of their female masters was revoked; in 1522 the order was repeated, with specific provisions to forbid women to visit the markets, but again protests were raised and the restrictions were softened, allowing old women to do it and other women to go anywhere else but only if accompanied by their husband (Ibn Iyas, n.d.).

In exceptional cases women were nevertheless able not only to frequent the market at their will, but even to own and manage caravanserais. It is of course restricted to high class women, but one should remember Night 17 of *The Arabian Nights*, where all the husbands were failed merchants and frauds, while the protagonist is a successful tradeswoman (Lyons, 2010). Al-Maqrizi mentions only a very few instances; for the Market Hall of Jaharkas he reports that “the hall passed to the inheritors, then passed in part to prince ‘Alam al-Din Aytмыш by inheritance of his wife, and to Bint Shuman, of Damascus. Then it was purchased by Umm Khalil, called Shajar al-Dur al-Salihiyya in 1257” (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 115). The Sultana Shajar al-Dur was also involved in the running of the Khan of Mankuwirish, which likely contributed to her financial independence and possibly to her accession: “The latter [al-Malik al-Salih] entrusted its management to Umm Khalil, setting aside a sum of money for her personally for the upkeep of the property” (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 139).

5.3. Crime and Punishment

One important aspect of the life of caravanserais and markets in general was public order. With the concentration of wealth (in the form of valuable trade items and cash) and of people of all extractions, crime must have been a daily occurrence. Markets were under the control of the muhtasib with a police force. Other forms of social control were exerted by the corporations that, as we have seen, gathered groups with common interests, including, paradoxically, thieves.

Ibn Iyas gives a number of cases, including theft and murder; executions were also occasionally carried out in the market area as a deterrent. He recounts for example the incident of a petty thief: “An Ottoman man was in Khan al-Khalili, and he seized a commoner and claimed that he had stolen four coins from his pocket. When he seized him, he took him to the prince, and when he stood him before him he told him his story and what he had done to him in Khan al-Khalili, and that he had seized his hand while it was in his pocket, and taken four coins from his pocket while he was walking” (Ibn Iyas, n.d., p. 271). He also reports a murder case, that of an elderly shaykh called al-Shaqifati, who was assassinated in the Wakala of Barsbay after the afternoon prayers by a messenger of the then-Dawidar, the future sultan Tumanbay II. He reports that no witness came forward, perhaps intimidated by the connection of the murderer with the powerful Dawidar, and so no punishment was carried out.

Punishment was instead enforced in the case of a saddler who had sold a slave and then claimed him back as his own property after the death of the new owner. Ibn Iyas recounts how the saddler defended himself in a way that offended his

⁸ “Nella città ha moltissimi cuochi, i quali cuocano fuori nella via così la notte come 'l dì in gran caldaie di rame istagnate bellissime, e cuocono bellissime e buone carni. E niuno cittadino per ricco che sia non cuoce in sua casa[...]. E molte volte si pongono a mangiare nella via, dove istendono un cuojo in terra, e la vivanda pongono in mezzo in un catino, ed eglino intorno a sedere in terra colle gambe incrociate, o coccoloni. E quando avessero imbrattate le mani se le leccano”.

judge, was therefore sentenced to death, “and was hanged at Khan al-Khalili” (Ibn Iyas, n.d., p. 305). In the final months of the Mamluk sultanate, the same threat was issued to anyone who would hide the Ottoman envoys: “The group from Ibn Uthman’s envoy numbered about forty people, and they disappeared in Cairo. When the Sultan learned of this, he announced in Khan al-Khalili that no one should shelter a stranger from Ibn ‘Uthman’s group, and whoever hinted that he had someone from the Ottomans with him would be hanged on his shop without further notice” (Ibn Iyas, n.d., p. 123). It is rather easy even today to imagine that Khan al-Khalili would be the ideal place to hide spies with its narrow alleys packed with people.

In case of disorders or in anticipation of disorders the markets could be forcibly closed, even though the occurrence of looting was not rare. When news of the death of Sultan al-Ghawri at the battle of Marj Dabiq reached in Cairo, Ibn Iyas describes a situation of panic and uncertainty. Among the internal threats there was that of looting and public unrest, the mind runs to a quote mentioned before: “It was also rumoured that the imported Memlooks had planned to come down from the barracks to loot and burn Khan al-Khalili and kill the Turkish merchants there, for they said, ‘These merchants are on the side of Ibn ‘Othman, and exulted in the death of our master’” (Salmon, 1921, p. 54).

5.4 Religion

Religion played an important part in the life of the caravanserai. It has already been highlighted that there was a strong relationship between wakala and fiqh, and how some of these buildings were either attached to a mosque or had an ablution fountain for prayers. A piece of legislation issued in 1343 allowed merchants to pray in front of their shops under the guide of an imam (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, p. 45). From 1388 clerics were allowed to go round the markets to instruct the faithful in basic religious matters, such as the *fatiha* and to learn parts of the Holy Qur’an (Zurayk, 1936-1942). The market area was nevertheless deemed too dirty and distracting to recite the Holy Book, and religious jurisprudence often sought to forbid it.

The relationship of some caravanserais with Islamic religious buildings, at times through a waqf, gave them a special place in the collective imagination. Of the Market Hall of Fabrics, for example, al-Maqrizi says that “it was constituted into waqf [...] for the benefit of the congregation of the Sufis, i.e. the boarders of the khanqah Sa‘id al-Su‘ada [...]. This hall was treated with a lot of respect, for deference towards the Sufis” (Raymond & Wiet, 1979, pp. 112-113). Al-Maqrizi also reports an interesting anecdote related to the Market Hall attached to the Mosque of Ibn Tulun: “On the night of November 27 of the same year [1349], the Messenger of God appeared in a dream to a pious man, at the door of this qaysariyyah, and spoke to him in this way: ‘May God bless those who live in this building!’ He repeated it three times. The man recounted this vision, and since then the requests for rent flowed. This qaysariyyah has remained, until this very day, in a state of great prosperity, as all the market around it” (Raymond & Viet, 1979, pp. 131-132).

Christians too had their fair share of dealings at the market. Maundy Thursday was a special day for women of all denominations to attend the market in order to purchase perfumes and jewellery. The place was so crowded that circulation was difficult on that day (Raymond & Wiet, 1979).

The funduq, being the place reserved for a Nation to host their merchants and travellers, was also often the place used by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. In Alexandria, the funduq of the Catalans was reserved for this purpose, and it made it easier for the government to exact their taxes (Larrivaz, 1904). When pilgrims moved to Cairo, to visit the pyramids (the “granaries of Joseph”) and arrange their journey to Sinai and Palestine, they lodged at another funduq that was reserved for pilgrims (“The house where the pilgrims that go and come back from the Sepulchre and Saint Catherine”, Poggi, 1829, p. 18). In such establishments pilgrims belonging to the religious orders could often celebrate mass: according to von Breydenbach the funduq of the Catalans had a chapel (Larrivaz, 1904), while Felix Fabri recounts how they erected a makeshift altar in the house where they were being hosted (“Ibique in eorum camera altare ereximus et missas cottidie celebravimus”, Hassler, 1849, p. 22).

5.5 Animals

There would be animals too. Some would be kept for food, such as the turtledoves seen by Leonardo Frescobaldi in Cairo in 1384 or the exceptional pig kept by the Venetians in Alexandria, as witnessed by von Breydenbach in 1483, “the only one we saw in those overseas lands. The Saracens abhor this pig even more than the Jews; they certainly would not have allowed it to live if, at the Venetians’ request, the Sultan had not granted it life” (Larrivaz, 1904, p. 75). Other animals would be kept as curious specimens, again von Breydenbach mentions “a ferocious leopard tied up” in the funduq of the Catalans in Alexandria (Larrivaz, 1904, pp. 74-75), and “large ostriches wandering about” in the funduq of the Venetians. Of course, horse, mules, donkeys, and camels would be a familiar sight, and one can expect all sort of domestic animals that travellers and historians did not deem worth of recording, such as poultry and cats.

5.6 Activities

Due to their hybrid nature, part storage, part trade, part workshop, and part residence, the activities going on in the urban caravanserais of Egypt were diverse. Some other transcended the categories listed above and added other social and economic layers to the life of these buildings. Some were, as one could expect, daily activities, such as consuming a meal; von Breydenbach notices that in the wakalas of Alexandria “Christians and Muslims eat and drink together” (Larrivaz, 1904, p. 75). Many wakalas were also used as post offices, handling messages for the government. In the light of this, the doves seen by Frescobaldi (above) might also have served as carriers.

In other times of the year the caravanserais and the market areas surrounding them would be the theatre of special events and celebrations. Leo Africanus details the celebratory procession held by craftspeople in the market areas after they achieved anything notable: “Whenever happens that a craftsman made something new and ingenious, never seen before, they dress him up with a brocade coat and they carry him around all shops accompanied by several musicians as if he was

celebrating a triumph and each gives him some coins”⁹ (1550, p. 93). Thénau mentions the celebrations held by the Genoese and the Catalans in 1512 using “feuz de joye” (Schefer, 1971, p. 22). Occasionally even the ruler would pass by the market area in a procession and the communities would race to show their loyalty and deference: “Then a group of merchants showered silver on his head in several places in the city, and the voices of the people rose in supplication for him, and the women ululated for him from every side of the houses and shops, and silk cloths were spread for him under the hoof of his horse from Khan Masrur, and he continued in this grand procession until he ascended to the citadel” (Ibn Iyas, n.d., p. 383).

6. Conclusions

Ultimately, the literary record transforms our understanding of the Egyptian urban caravanserai from a rigid architectural type into a fluid, highly contested social arena. The chronicles of al-Maqrizi and Ibn Iyas, balanced against the outer perspectives of European pilgrims and diplomats, reveal that the wakala and funduq were not mere centres of commerce. Instead, they were deeply embedded in the daily rhythms of the Mamluk cities, functioning simultaneously as high-stakes tax repositories, residential neighbourhoods, and diplomatic hubs. The structural vibrancy of these spaces was constantly negotiated through an intricate matrix of state-enforced civic codes – ranging from fire-safety regulations to strict moral decrees governing the physical presence of women in the marketplace. Moreover, the accounts capture a space teeming with friction and diversity, where Syrian spice merchants, Ottoman travellers, and European pilgrims lived alongside transient labourers, local artisans, and even domestic and exotic animals. While political shifts, property confiscations, and the eventual dawn of Ottoman rule continuously altered the legal and financial frameworks of these buildings, the human geography within them remained remarkably resilient. By parsing these incidental narratives, this survey demonstrates that the true legacy of the urban caravanserai lies not merely in its role as an engine of international wealth, but as the chaotic, cosmopolitan heart of Mamluk social life.

CRedit Author Statement

Daniele Salvoldi: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing **Lama Yahya:** Investigation, Data Curation, Writing - Original Draft.

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⁹ “Gli artigiani quando avviene che alcun di lor mestiero faccia qualche bel lavoro nuovo e ingenuoso non mai piu veduto vestono colui d'una casacca di broccato e lo menano per tutte le botteghe accompagnato da diversi sonatori come sel trionfasse e ciascuno gli dona qualche moneta”.

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