

## BOOK REVIEWS

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*al-Fustat: Its Foundation and Early Development.* Wladyslaw Kubiak. Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa, 1982. 220 pages (47 notes + 6 maps).

One of the many consequences of the Arab/Islamic expansion of the seventh century A.D. was the eventual foundation of several cities, many of which thrive until today. Thus, Basra, Mawsil, and Kufa were founded (in Iraq) within a decade after the beginning of the expansion to be followed by Fustat in Egypt and Qayrawan in Tunisia, among many others. Fustat, even before the foundation of al-Qahira (Cairo) adjacent to it, had evolved into a major political, economic and cultural center in the Islamic world. Its population continued to grow in size and diversity since its foundation. The book under review deals with the early history of Fustat and is divided into nine short chapters discussing the following subjects: the source materials for the study; the geography of the site; previous settlements; foundation of Fustat and its demographic and territorial evolution; the city, its districts, features and architecture. In presenting this material, Kubiak offers valuable information regarding the early history of Fustat. However, this book suffers significantly from various assumptions that the author used in his analysis. These assumptions predominate in the study of Islamic history and are related to Arabia, its inhabitants, Islam and its expansion. Such assumptions not only mar an otherwise excellent presentation but lead the author to contradict himself, and the sources for his study, on several occasions.

Since there is value in reading this book, these assumptions must be challenged so that the reader can reach conclusions obtained from the evidence found in the book. To Orientalists, Arabia is perceived as a desert area inhabited by nomadic tribes. Accordingly, tribal antagonism was the main dynamic in their socio-political relations. Superimposed over this conflict is the North-Arab vs. South-Arab dichotomy. Kubiak admits that Arabia was diversified socially, economically, politically and geographically. He admits also that the Arabs were similarly diversified as some lived in cities, and towns while others were pastoral or nomadic. But when it comes to Fustat, Kubiak bows to the Orientalist generalization and says that "it is improbable that at this early date the Arabs founding al-Fustat had any clear idea of town planning and understood it in a precise, preconceived and practicable way, as the Romans would have done." (p. 97) Kubiak claims that even if the Arabs knew all of this they would not have been able to carry out any practical plans because of one essential factor, that they were Arabs. This is not only preposterous, but also

a perpetuation of the sinister myth that to be an Arab is to be a nomad, unable to agree on a common plan, rebellious, individualistic, and lacking discipline. Such factors, Kubiak claims, were evident in the division of land at the time of settlement in Fustat. (Chapter four, especially pp. 98, 99 and passim.)

Kubiak discusses the reasons behind the differentiation of land value in Fustat (such as closeness to the Nile, closeness to the administrative center, productivity of the land and its topography). Such reasons would make it natural that the settlers compete for the best available plot. Such a "scramble", however, is ascribed to the nomadic character of the settlers when in reality there is no evidence of a scramble. To the contrary, the settlers settled according to a plan devised for that very purpose. Such "scrambles" are not evident either in any of the other newly founded cities.

Kubiak, like many Orientalists before him, accepts the sources in their unsympathetic portrayal of Amr b. al-As, the army commander who conquered Egypt and was responsible for the foundation of Fustat. He casts Amr in a suspicious light when he says that there was "lack of confidence in the famous commander." Kubiak hastens to add that this lack of confidence was not in the commander's superior diplomatic, administrative and military skills but in his "excessive self-reliance and policy-making to his own advantage." Portraying Amr in this manner is deduced from some sources that accuse the commander of delaying the excavation of the Khalij, an ancient canal that connected Fustat with the Gulf of Suez. Amr is asked to subdue a country and other points further east, build a city, and dig a major communication artery all in the span of a year. This, of course he did as fast as he could. But rather than discussing Amr's endeavours from the point of view of their social, economic and political implications many Orientalists continue to see them as evidence that the Islamic expansion was haphazard, individually motivated, and carried out largely by nomadic tribes. The cities that came into being after the Islamic expansion were thus regarded as "garrison towns" or as Kubiak phrases it "camp-towns" built to house the nomads away from the "natives" or to keep them under control.

Kubiak painstakingly explains the excellent geographic, topographic, and militarily and economically strategic location of Fustat. He recognizes that the location was also valuable to previous rulers. But he ignores his scientific evidence and reverts to the realm of conjecture and value judgment when he implies that in selecting this site, the Arabs were troubled by "the apprehension of the destructive influence on the warrior, of the wealth, comfort and sluggish sybarism of the local populace which would result from the symbiosis of the conqueror and

the conquered in a cohabited city." (p. 92) This allows Kubiak to defer to an old misconception that the Arabs had to settle away from the superior or sybaritic culture of the "conquered" population, isolated in garrisons at the edge of the desert. Kubiak contradicts himself when he asserts that Fustat was more fortunate and superior to other newly founded cities because it contained a coptic town, a town large enough to supply the economic basis of the conquerors and to have large stores of grain and an administrative center. This town, Kubiak says, could not threaten the Arabs culturally. In fact, all of the newly founded cities were multi-ethnic.

Kubiak provides an excellent discussion on the assigned plots (Ar. Sg. Khitta) and their demographic evolution, the development of road networks, and other avenues of communication. But he stresses the military and nomadic character of this city. Thus, Arabs had to settle according to their tribal affiliation as well as their position in the deployed army. Although the latter hypothesis is interesting in terms of its socio-economic implications, this pattern of settlement is seen so that stronger tribes do not dominate weaker ones and so that the population could more easily be controlled and mobilized. But we find that these khittat had nearly equal number of inhabitants even if their size had varied. To maintain numerical equality, as administrative units, members of one tribe were incorporated into others. To say that settlements corresponded to tribal affiliation and to their position in the army is not only inaccurate but denies any transformation in Arab society after the rise of Islam.

By stressing the military and economic aspects of Fustat, Kubiak revives another outdated misconception, namely that the Arabs did not participate in the economic dynamic, that they did not engage in a profession. Professions, other than making war, were left for everybody else. "Possibly", Kubiak says, the Arabs regarded them as "dishonourable, with the exception of herding cattle and this possibly no longer than the first generation. . . . Even the merchant profession, although sanctioned by the prophet and his companions, was not favoured." (p. 111) The only evidence that Kubiak could muster for this twice-made assertion is a statement made against a merchant and ascribed to the Umayyad Caliph Umar II (720 A.D.). We find that this merchant was robbed of his consignment of pepper by the governor of Fustat. It was only when the merchant began to demand his due from the Caliph that the alleged disparaging statement was made against merchants. Such views of the economic dynamic of the Islamic state is in complete contradiction to the evidence found in the very source which Kubiak used for his study. Not only that, this view betrays a naive understanding of the conditions for the rise of Islam, its expansion, and the factors behind the tremendous wave of urbanization that took

place as a result, as indicated by the founding of cities in such diverse regions as those from Central Asia to Spain. The role of merchant capital in the development of Meccan society and the rise and expansion of Islam are totally ignored by such statements. Essential, this view is ahistorical and based on value judgements against nomads. It was in recognition of a social, political and economic transformation in the Islamic world that we see Umar II attempting to institute a major shift in the policy of the Caliphate. And it was for this attempt that Umar II is known in early Islamic history, although he ruled for a short, and otherwise uneventful two years.

In conclusion, this book perpetuates unfounded assumptions about early Islamic society and for this it does not bring anything new. One might regard it as a testimony to the tenacity of the static and ahistorical misconceptions of the Orientalist mind-set not only in Western scholarship but also in that of the socialist countries. With all of its drawbacks, including the poorly edited text and its low technical quality, this book is full of valuable and interesting information supplied by the primary sources regarding Fustat and early Islamic history; for example, Kubiak's discussion of the Khandaq, a defensive trench dug by the Khariji governor Ibn al Jahdam against the Umayyad army of Abd al-Malik. Historians should find the involvement of this Khariji governor here critical for the understanding of several aspects of early Islamic history such as the role of the so-called anti-Caliph Ibn al-Zubayr, the role of the Khawarij, and Umayyad policy. Kubiak also provides several good discussions on the territorial evolution of Fustat from which we learn that expansion was inward rather than outward (the spaces between the khittat were filled up). On the demographic evolution, we learn that the population continued to increase in size and diversity to reach several hundred thousands. Therefore, it is for these contributions and for its factual information that the value of this book should be recognized, not for its assumptions and conclusions.

Mahmood Ibrahim  
History Department  
University of California  
Riverside

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*Katakata for Sofahead.* Segun Oyekunle. Macmillan, London, 1983. 47 pages.

If the aim of literary work is to make a significant impact on its intended audience, the careful choice of the language of communication, the form or style and the story are particularly essential. Segun Oyekunle's Katakata for Sofahead,