

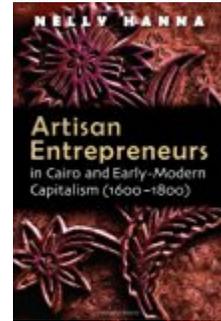
# H-Net Reviews

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Nelly Hanna. *Artisan Entrepreneurs in Cairo and Early Modern Capitalism (1600-1800)*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011. 280 S. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-3279-5.

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## N. Hanna: *Artisan Entrepreneurs in Cairo and Early Modern Capitalism*

The declared intention of Nelly Hanna is “to show that prior to incorporation [into the European capitalist expansion 1800-1850 into the Ottoman Empire, T.P.] regions such as Egypt, that became eventually part of the capitalist world system, had rich and complex economic histories and societies” (p. 8). She emphasizes that she is not trying to write an economic history of Egypt during the period but rather a “study of one trend that is significant because of the links it has to local, regional, and world trends” (p. 29). She argues that “Modernity did not start through contact with the West but had its root in the inner workings of a particular society and economy and that only in the 19th century did it take on numerous Western features” (p. 192).

Hanna approaches her topic by analyzing the phenomenon of the “artisan entrepreneur” in the period 1600-1800. She begins with an astute observation: an earlier generation of scholars dealing with guilds had relied mainly on books of rules and regulations, which led them to conclude that they were mainly state controlled, rigid and introvert (p. 30). Hanna herself relies for her study on the Cairo court registers. She is probably today the scholar with the greatest experience studying these archives and draws, based on the court documents, a vivid picture of the artisans, living and working with and in spite of the regulations of guilds. Her book is a valuable addition to our knowledge of the guilds in the Middle East going beyond official rules and regulations. She offers an alternative perspective of flexibility, change, innovation and greater autonomy, characterizing the functioning of guilds in society, economy and

state. Through an impressively wide range of readings she traces the history of some families over several generations and follows the developments of some institutions, especially the Mamluk ruling elite of Egypt.

Her study of individual “artisan entrepreneurs” offers convincing evidence of this flexibility. Artisans could expand their activities horizontally and vertically: they could buy slaves or even Mamluks to work for them; in addition to their artisanship they could go into business, related or not to their craft; they also could create various partnerships, often engaging in long-distance trade. The vertical expansion of the family of Ahmad al-Jalfi was even more remarkable. Originally from the Fayyum, the men in the family were by the middle of the 17th century all members in the guild of the linseed oil pressers in Cairo. By the turn of the 18th century Ahmad was head of the guild, traded in linseed oil and owned several oil mills, managing some himself, with the help of Mamluks he owned, and leasing some to other managers. He had placed some of his Mamluks in the Azab Ojaq corps, where they rose in the military hierarchy. This gave Ahmad eventually access to the Mamluk ruling elite (pp. 108-112).

This was a time, when in various places – Aleppo comes to mind – Ottoman military units inserted themselves into the economic life of the cities. The Ottoman government’s inability to pay them adequately facilitated this trend. In this process the units also opened their ranks to some civilians, preferably merchants, heads of guilds, owners of mills and shops, with whom they could

invest their money or acquire contacts in trade networks. In return, the military offered protection for traded goods and financial privileges, such as control of tax farms and custom collection.

This alliance of civilian and military elements for economic activities worked only as long as the military did not use its monopoly of violence to extort too much from civilian entrepreneurs and merchants. A trend in this direction appears to have developed in the early decades of the 18th century in Egypt, when various Mamluk households battled with each other over control of guilds, raw materials and production, squeezing out individual entrepreneurs and merchants. Nelly Hanna sees here the Mamluks' attempt "to construct a capitalist network to link agriculture to transport, production and trade" (p. 141). She points also to the difference between two economic modes: The "command mode" of the Ottoman state, "ensuring that this commodity [grain] would be made available to the population" (p. 136) at a reasonable price, on the one hand and on the other, the "capitalist mode" of the Mamluks which aimed at "making money" (ibid.) for themselves. In this context she mentions the yamak arrangement by which one guild became responsible not only for payment of its own taxes, but also that of another guild. The reason for taking on this onerous task voluntarily probably was in most cases the opportunity for an upstream integration which begins with the cultivation of raw materials and/or downstream integration and ends with the selling of the end product on the market. Thus one could control the whole process of converting raw materials to end products, and thereby also the costs. The individual entrepreneur par excellence was Zahir al-'Umar, who began the continuous expansion of cotton cultivation through careful investments in the Galilee and then established by the middle of the 18th century a monopoly, over the production, transport and sales price of raw cotton.

Here one may ask Nelly Hannah: Were all these phenomena part of a "capitalist mode"? We will never know whether this was a "modernity [that] did not start through contact with the West" and whether this modernity would have developed its own transformation of so-

ciety because - as I would agree with her - "in the 19th century it [modernity] did take on numerous Western features." Furthermore one may ask: Was the striking social mobility, which Hanna describes so vividly, the beginning of something new or rather the traditional pattern of a society, never encumbered by a feudalist order or narrowly circumscribed social estates? The case of the guild waqf, apparently an innovation at the time, can be seen as an example of joining traditional and capitalist modes of economy together (p. 172). But we have evidence in Egypt from a period, long before the one Nelly Hanna is analyzing, when the waqf was used as a highly sophisticated and manipulative financial instrument, be it for investment in urban development or simply for high income, protected and tax free. Lucian Reinfandt, *Mamlukische Sultansstiftungen des 9./15. Jahrhunderts: nach den Urkunden der Stifter al-Ashraf Inal und Mu'ayyad Ahmad ibn Inal*, Berlin 2003, see especially chapter 2, "Fromme Stiftungen im spätmamlukischen Sultanat": Endowments for mosques, madrasas, khans and baths in a terrain belonging to the donor, would increase the real estate value of the rest of the land considerably; likewise, an over-invested waqf, would return a dividend much higher (up to 90% of the total return), than was needed to finance the defined purpose of the foundation. Were the Mamluks, who tried to exercise control over various branches of the economy "in order to make money", working the capitalist mode or only pursuing what so many ruling elites before them had done, simply siphoning off as much surplus production as possible for their own advantage - to the limits of economic exhaustion and sometimes beyond?

These questions are not easily answered and will probably be discussed for a long time to come. They also do not detract from the significant contribution of this book, specifically to the history of guilds and, generally, to the history of Egypt by drawing dexterously from the court records of Cairo a much more differentiated and rich picture of the life of society so far unexplored. The book is highly recommended to those interested in the history of Egypt and the history of guilds as well as those generally interested in the transition from "traditional" to "modern" societies.

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