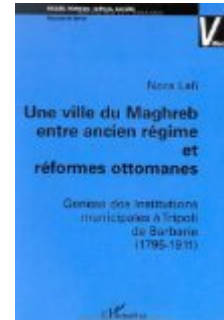


Nora Lafi. *Une ville du Maghreb entre ancien régime et réformes ottomanes. Genèse des institutions municipales à Tripoli de Barbarie (1795-1911).* Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002. 305 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-2-7475-2616-6.



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A North African City between the Ancien Regime and Ottoman Reforms: The Birth of Municipal Institutions in Tripoli of Libya, 1795-1911--as this book's title might be translated--is a landmark contribution to the study of North African urban history, adding unprecedented documentation and synthesis to the scholarship on modern Tripoli prior to Italian colonization. Lafi has performed an extraordinary feat of research, and this research was informed by important and well-formulated historical questions. This is not entirely surprising given that Lafi's Ph.D. dissertation (of which this book is a revised version) was supervised by Robert Ilbert, the social and cultural historian extraordinaire of Mediterranean urbanism. Much in the vein of his exemplary work on Alexandria, here the wealth of previously unpublished documentation is scrutinized through lenses of urban and municipal history, in combination with close lexical analysis. In sum, Lafi's is the richest and most reliable book yet on modern Tripoli.

Lafi's unique accomplishment is due in part to the fact that hers is the first work of western

scholarship to be thoroughly grounded in documents held in Tripoli's Municipal Archives. (Studies on Tripoli usually make use of Italian, French, and British archives and published sources in many languages, including Arabic.) These are supplemented by sources in the Ottoman archives and diplomatic papers in both France and Italy. Altogether, the book presents an impressive scholarly edifice that seamlessly blends these diverse sources into clear narratives and incisive questions, for which Lafi finds firm answers (or at least, viable hypotheses).

At the heart of the book is its demonstration--thanks to one merchant's journal especially - that the city was managed by an assembly (the *jama'a(t) al-bilad*), headed by the mayor-like "chief of the city" (*shaykh al-bilad*), a notable elected by the other members of the *jama'a*. This contradicts the impression conveyed by many historical works, that Arab cities did not generate stable civic institutions of this sort, and have instead followed amorphous, enigmatic, and/or disordered civic trajectories under their reign from above by Ottoman delegates or puppets. In Lafi's

analysis, instead, we find urban and civic self-management at the middle levels. As early as the eighteenth century, long before the Ottoman reforms (*tanzimat*) of the following century, or subsequent European incursions, Tripoli's municipal organization operated on a well-functioning, autonomous system of its own making.

Specific topics on which Lafi provides impressive, comprehensive detail and sophisticated descriptions are the city's physical layout and the place of trade, privateering, and piracy in its development. The various roles played by the *shaykh al-bilad* are parsed with memorable texture. Among these passages one of special interest concerns the *shaykh's* coffeehouse, a hinge of Tripoli's social, municipal, and political activity. In addition, Lafi advances new material regarding the composition of the population, and the various city quarters. Of notable nuance is her discussion of different terms used for "the city" according to context: *bilad* was used to mean "the city" in terms of the society inhabiting it, and *madina* was used, on the other hand, to designate "the city" as composed of its physical structures.

The book's many factual contributions inevitably raise significant comparative issues and some larger historical questions: Lafi finds some indication that the *shaykh al-bilad* may have existed several centuries earlier than the eighteenth, but has to leave this exploration for a further study, along with the question of whether this political figure had counterparts in other Arab cities.

Overall, then, Lafi's book is an impressive exercise in reconstructive detective work, and one that points persuasively to a new scholarly model of urban Arab life in this period. The observation must be added here that while Anglophone scholarship has been far more concerned with "Islamic" cities than Arab ones, in Francophone scholarship the opposite is true: French scholars initiated western discussions of "the Islamic city" in the 1920s, but in the decades since then, their work has become more focused on "the Arab city" or

"Arab cities." Lafi's study must be understood in this framework; by showing that there were Arab civic institutions that scholars have overlooked, it aims to emphasize Arab urban life within the urban historiography of North Africa, which often emphasizes European or "Mediterranean" generalities, about which more is already known. This being said, the "Arab"-ness of Tripoli did not stem from a uniform population. Rather--and this is one of the most pleasing aspects of this book, for most do not closely examine the mix of populations--in Lafi's narrative, we see the city's variety, of Albanians, Turks, Maltese, Europeans, and so on. We learn how newcomers mastered Arabic and converted to Islam, sometimes rising through the ranks to become important public figures.

The same historiography that stands to be contradicted by this study--in which there are no mechanisms of "indigenous" Arab civic self-governance--tends unself-consciously to reproduce narratives in which cities such as Tripoli underwent change, or modernity itself, only when it was imported by Ottoman reformers, colonizing Europeans, or both. One question that often arises in current scholarship on modern colonialism--to what degree is modernity imported, if at all?--gets a finely wrought, provocative reply here, showing that the citizens of Tripoli were well on their way to working out their own modernity before Ottomans reasserted their waning authority in the late nineteenth century. On the one hand, Lafi's discussion of the new Ottoman clocktower gives us a clear image of the co-ordination of Empire that was envisioned in Constantinople. But Lafi also shows that Ottoman institutions had to contend with systems already in place--indeed, it is clear that Ottomans (and Italians after them) made use of the systems in place in order to establish themselves. The Ottoman overhaul of Tripoli's institutions was only possible because the administration lightly superimposed its reforms on the system that was there, leaving the mantles of responsibility on the shoulders of the same notables who were already in charge. Similarly, Lafi shows

that what is usually described as the Italians' "economic penetration" of Tripoli in the first decade of the twentieth century should be described more accurately as infiltration through municipal structures of administration and influence--without the support of the notables, it would never have been possible.

The historiography with which Lafi takes issue, in which the Arab world has failed to generate what the West recognizes as civic institutions, undoubtedly harks back to Montesquieu's or Wittfogel's ideas of "Oriental" "despotism" or "tyranny," not to mention the tacit prejudices delineated by Said. At the same time that Lafi proves these assumptions wrong, though, she also relies on the "ancien regime" (the French monarchic political structure in place until the revolution of 1789) as the best exemplar of the sort of institutional system she is sketching out for Tripoli. This is a relevant comparison in that it describes centralized power, religious and secular intermediaries, local nobles and notables, and so on. Yet it will seem problematic to some non-French readers, who are likely to quibble that describing Tripoli's early modernity in terms of a European early modern undermines the implications of this very study, that Arab cities' municipal arrangements can be understood as self-defined and self-generated. In the context of French historiography, however, the "ancien regime" is a given with which all readers will be familiar, and such a comparison strengthens Lafi's thesis.

Another aspect of the book that may be jarring to Anglophone scholars is that it is not contextualized with respect to Anglophone scholarship--I am thinking of well-known authors on the urban Middle East, such as Ira Lapidus, Janet Abu-Lughod, and others, who have tackled questions of civic institutions in Arab (or Islamic) cities, and whose conclusions would be worth mentioning in connection with Lafi's. At a more specific level, I am thinking of Ahmida's work on early state formation in Tripoli prior to Italian colonization.[1]

By not juxtaposing her findings with these scholars', Lafi does not bring out the importance of her contributions as much as she might--for an Anglophone audience, at least. But she affirms that this book marks the beginning of a wider, comparative undertaking, and undoubtedly she will develop such comparisons in the course of this follow-up work. In the meantime, the present book is without question a watershed, with respect to Tripoli, and to urban social formations in the early modern and modern Maghreb.

Note

[1]. Ahmida, Ali Abdullatif, *The Making of Modern Libya: State Formation, Colonization, and Resistance, 1830-1932*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.

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