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Food and Foodways in the Medieval Islamic World

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Introduction

What did people eat in the medieval Arab world? A priori a simple question for connoisseurs of the history of food, yet an enquiry into this topic reveals a complex story of everyday life concerning the most basic and necessary act for survival: eating. The subject of food in the medieval Arab world has not escaped scholastic interest as witnessed by the growing number of works by historians in recent years. These oeuvres depended largely upon a legacy of excellent sources far more extensive than the traces bequeathed to the historian in the West. Of astonishing diversity they have permitted the drawing of a clear picture of the power structure and its' operation at various times during the era of the Arab-Muslim empire and it is therefore appropriate that from these sources that we propose to examine the foodways created to serve this extensive, eastern culture.

The Arab empire was geographically vast; consequently, the terrains of the various regions and their inherent climates supported a diversity of natural produce, animal and vegetable which under local cultural influences led to the creation of very different cuisine in large urban centers. To the East, for example, cooking accommodated both Persian and Indian influences, enjoying plentiful native spices, while in the West these condiments being rarer, appeared less frequently. Similarly for frontier maritime regions such as Ifrīqiya or al-Andalus where the abundance of fish and seafood was more pronounced, food was prepared with the produce derived from a Mediterranean climate.

The present study reflects upon this diversity with the examination of foods consumed in three prominent medieval towns, i.e. Baghdad, Cairo, Damascus, the latter two will be reviewed together since they had a common governing and legal structure resulting from the Fatimid (969-1171) and Ayyubid (1169-1250 in Egypt, in Syria in 1260) eras respectively, notwithstanding their geographical proximity which suggests that the food was not very dissimilar.

Another interesting source of variety is provided by the social background of the consumer. The table as a focal point of community reveals the presence of hierarchies both social and cultural. Cuisine and its elemental rituals pass not simply for blind ceremony but as an interpreter of social standing. Levi-Strauss described it as follows: *“The cuisine of a society is a language which translates unconsciously its structure and without knowing how best to avoid the consequence, must resign itself to the revelation of its contradictions.”* Symbol of conviviality, food is representative of the sociological and cultural foundations of ancient societies and whether daily consumption, holiday celebration, or a time of crisis, food expresses a system of values that convey a series of distinctions between social groups. Obviously rich and poor classes did not eat either the same comestibles, or in the same manner and it is the similarities and differences in the practice of eating between these urban classes which is a central theme of this study. There was also marked diversity in the behavioral traits from among the same social classes. For example, for the inhabitants of a city eating out was not uncommon. Travelers, workers, those not possessing a kitchen, or a

place dedicated to the kitchen art, compile a social group that usually had, though to a lesser extent than the affluent, access to an elaborate choice of ingredients and cooking at the market. This study will describe the richness of what amounted to a primary means of consumption in medieval society, whether to be eaten on the premises or taken away, in direct contrast to the kitchens of the elite where teams of cooks and servants were at the disposition of the Court.

Sources

The food and feeding practices of ancient societies can be traced either directly, or indirectly, through a number of sources of different types. For the present study we have selected two kinds: cookbooks and documents on the regulation of markets called “*ḥisba treatises*,” these sources offer different perspectives on food and foodways¹.

In any society cookbooks are seldom considered essential works. Indeed, for a long time, culinary literature was ignored by historians on the basis that the information they stored was non-exploitable, a fault of being too specific. However, changes in research trends qualified these texts as valid historiographical sources for the “history of material culture,” or the “history of everyday life,” which convey an understanding of certain mechanisms of a society’s function. Written for a generally prosperous class, familiar with leisure and expectant of consuming good food, examples include the cookbook entitled *Kitāb al-Tabikh* compiled by Sayyar Ibn al-Warraq² during the 10th century or that written by al-Baghdadi during the early 13th century³.

Although the content of cookbooks from the Arab world is impressive and its importance as a source of information on the history of cuisine cannot be underestimated, it remains almost exclusively a record of the cooking of the wealthy classes, the popular diet most frequently being absent. The dishes that are proposed are often elaborate and frequently ostentatious, even if they contain numerous preparations of staple foods such as cereals, legumes, dried fruits or common vegetables.

The existing culinary texts should not be entirely discounted for their lack of direct information regarding the diet of the popular classes since the compilation of each cookbook will have been supported by background material comprising both the oral tradition and the customs of the period. The descriptions of less ornate food that are found share a tendency to adopt a simplified, even abrupt style explaining recipes that use a limited number of ingredients reflecting an everyday mode of cooking which has no more in common with *haute cuisine* than the titles of the recipes or the basic ingredients, such as cereals, vegetables and

¹ *Ḥisba* (Arabic: حِسْبَة: calculation, verification) is a system of control of full compliance with the laws of God. The doctrine is based on the koranic principles. At the beginning of the reign of caliph Al-Mahdī (775-785) appeared the first muḥtasib or controller of prices in charge of the *ḥisba*, whose mission was also to preserve public morality, faith and protect Muslims against charlatans and scammers.

² *Kitāb al-Tabikh wa-islāh al-Aghdīyah al-Ma’kulat*, Abu Muhammad al-Muzaffar ibn Nasr Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq ed. Kaj Ohrenberg & Sahban Mroueh (1987), *Studia Orientalia*, 60, Helsinki, Finnish Oriental Society. Engl. Transl. Nawal Nasrallah « Annals of the caliph’s kitchens », Brill, Leiden, (2007).

³ *Kitāb al-Tabikh*, Muhammad ibn al-Hasan ibn Muhammad ibn al-Karīm al-Kātib al-Baghdādī. Engl. Transl. A.J. Arberry, in “Medieval arab” cookery, (Ed. J Arberry, M. Rodinson), Prospect books, Totnes, Devon, 2001, p.24-89.

boiled meat⁴. Nevertheless, they do grant access to a study of the daily lives of thousands of bureaucrats, students, merchants and others in the medieval society.

To be able to discuss more fully the daily foods of the popular classes the historian must employ other sources. The *hisba treatises* yield a unique insight into the feeding of the large urban population during the middle ages. *Hisba* is a word of double meaning being at once an administrative tool which entreated Muslims to do their duty by 'doing good and avoiding evil,' while also defining the laws which designated the function of the *muhtasib*, or market inspector. The principal site of activity of the *muhtasib* was the *sūq* where he oversaw trades people and artisans including, medical and pharmaceutical fields and personnel. The powers of the *hisba* were later extended to cover all aspects of the social life of Muslims.

Baghdad: A luxurious cuisine for the Caliph

A new art: Gastronomy

Baghdad was both capital and heart of the Abbasid powerbase until the eleventh century. The city was equally the religious and cultural center of the Arab-Muslim Empire, the symbol of its force and fountain of the knowledge accrued by Islam. Baghdad was also known as, "the navel of the world."

Comprising a million and a half inhabitants Baghdad, with the exception of some Chinese cities, was the largest urban center of its time. This centrality and strength provided a crucible of development for science and art, among which we can count gastronomy. From the foundation of the city, the Caliph attracted the best scientists, astronomers, physicians, mathematicians, etc. which encouraged the entrenchment of an affluent and educated class that wanted to possess and enjoy wealth.

The emergence of this socially privileged category also gave rise to an elaborate system of leisure-oriented court in which the representation of power was essential and requiring ostentatious display. The table became one of the focal points where a staging of both the prestige and power of the Abbasid dynasty could be acted out. Meals became expanded and transformed to accommodate ceremony, etiquette and social diplomacy. How to eat and behave at the table became codified behavior designed to reveal qualities of invited and host as connoisseurs resulting from breeding and good education. Every simple detail carried its own weight of importance: The variety of wines, the nature of desserts, table arrangements whether in baskets or trays, pyramids or in symmetrical rows.

These banquets were not exclusive to the Caliphate court but were given by all of the elite class who saw the opportunity to enjoy and share their wealth. In Abbasid high society a very important cultural point was not simply what was eaten or drunk, but rather the manner in which it was eaten or drunk. With this in mind reasons or gestures defending economy or moderation were deemed inappropriate and offensive to the guest and put at risk the success of the banquet and the reputation of the host. Alternately, behaviors such as greed provided a serious breach of table culture as they transgressed the rules of hospitality sacred to Islam.

The dining table provided an opportunity for all manner of food extravaganza, with the upstream logistics of buying and preparing well documented. Ingredients came from all over

⁴ *Kitāb al-Ṭibakha*, Ibn al- Mubarrad known as Jamal al-Din Yusuf b. Abd al-Hadi (d. 1503) who lived in Damascus during the Mameluk era. engl. tr. in Charles Perry, "Petits Propos Culinaires, 21, (1985) or in Prospect books, Totnes, Devon, 2001, p. 469-486.

the Empire with prestige and not cost the highest consideration, only the best must be laid before the guests at the prince's table.

The annual expenditure accounts for the pastries consumed in the palace of the Fatimid Caliph al-Aziz (975-996) have been preserved. The consumption was astronomical. For the purposes of the kitchen, the requirements were for more than 11 tons of flour, 30 tons of sugar, 250 pounds of blanched pistachios, 350 pounds of almonds, 175 pounds of hazelnuts, 30 tons of various fruits, 23 tons of raisins, 225 pounds of honey, 9 tons of sesame oil, 150 kilograms of anise, 22 kilos of rose water, five bladders of musk, 450 grams of saffron and 50 grams of camphor. Imported products are legion; they come from all over the empire: apples from Syria, premium sugar of Ahwaz, raisins, rosewater, candied fruits and a mixture of honey and rosewater, all from Fars in Persia, Isfahan honey, pomegranates and dried peaches from Rayy and even fresh melons from Khwarezm, transported by ship to Baghdad in lead containers filled with ice.

A savoury and refined cuisine

The ostentation was not only reflected in the financial accounts and the beautiful glass and tableware but also in the pans and dishes. Elsewhere in the kitchen the use of the most expensive food became as standard. Accompanied by a variety of fresh products such as vegetables, fruits and herbs, meat as the apex of the pyramid of social hierarchy aliments, was the highly prized central ingredient of the meal. Within medieval society an invitation to share meat provided a particularly salient example of the relationship that existed between prestige and food consumption.

Dressed in a variety of different ways, the meat, predominantly sheep, kid or chicken was cut into strips or pieces and served in a sauce as a stew with which vegetables, fruits or flowers provided accompaniment. Meat dishes took their name from the plant or fruit that brought character to it, for instance the stew *tuffāhīya*, was named after *tuffāh*, an apple ingredient of slightly sweet and sour taste. Other examples tempting the medieval palate included: *hisrimīya* from acidic grape juice, *hummādīya* with citron, *rībāsiyya* with rhubarb, *summāqiyya* with sumac, *safarjaliyya* with quinces, *līmūniyya* or *narānjiyya* with lemon or sour orange. One of the most famous and much appreciated dishes of the oriental cuisine of the period was called *sikbāj*¹⁵, a meat stew cooked with spices, onions and coriander, sweetened with sugar or honey or the concentrated juice of dates or raisins and acidified with vinegar. Another popular dish was the *maḍīra*, a meat stew with leeks and spices acidified with curdled milk or yogurt to give it a characteristic white color. In praise of this dish a poet invited to the table of the Caliph Mustakfi (944 – 946), left a complimentary ballad:

*“Maḍīra on the festive tray is like the moon in its fourteenth night,
It gleams on the table like a light banishing the night,
As the silver disc of the moon which appears among the clouds
Upon a platter it is brought to fill in an onyx Tehama amphora
[...] There is nothing such as maḍīra to heal the sick's man malady,*

⁵ From Persian *sik* : vinegar and *baj* : stew

It is not a forbidden fruit, it is delicious and it is good, a very miracle of food.”⁶

Guests of honor at the table are the vegetables. Ubiquitous in recipes and highly appreciated for their pleasing colors, shapes and their beauty, they whet the appetite and provided a source of distinction between dishes created for the princes and those of more modest kitchen fayre. Like fruit they too gave their names to the meat dishes they accompany: *isfānākhiyya* (spinach), *kurnubiyyah* (cabbage), or *saljamiyyah* (turnip). Spices were also common and being brought from distance proved expensive though the belief that cost meant goodness held sway. Foods were colored with saffron and supported by cinnamon and ginger. Saffron was also used in fried pastries to give a beautiful orange color while sauces were often white or green following addition of cilantro or parsley juice. The vinegar and verjuice were also colored and almonds carefully peeled and mashed were added to milk-based sauces to convey a virgin-white appearance. Further color effects were obtained with melted honey, caramelized sugar or ground pistachios. The dishes were also decorated with egg yolks and flower petals and before presentation rose water was sprinkled upon them to bring a slight floral flavor.

In preparation certain products were processed to create appetizing differences in texture to contrast other more traditional presentations. Ground meat, for example, arranged in crown covered with saffron and herbs was served in the form of soft meat balls and added to dishes which already contained coarse meat chunks. Chicken was boiled, deboned and stuffed with almonds and pistachios and then basted with rosewater and saffron mixed with sugar to give a golden color during cooking. There were also recipes in which a chicken was suspended in the oven over flat bread, which absorbed all of the juice. Very sweet chicken dishes were particularly enjoyed as were salty-sweet dishes in general, especially during the banquets. Among these the *jawdāba* or *jūdāba*, the most highly appreciated dish in Baghdad. Nothing symbolized celebration and feasting more than the variations of this dish, for example *jūdhāb al-rutab* with fresh dates, from the *Kitāb al-Baghdādī*:

“Take a tinned copper dish, and spray with a little rose-water. Spread a thin cake therein, and cover with newly gathered khastāwī⁷. Sprinkle with fine-ground pistachios and almonds, and toasted poppy, to form a layer. Add another layer of dates, and so continue until the dish is half-filled, making the layer of almonds and pistachios. Put on half a ratl⁸ of syrup, and a ūqīya⁹ of rose-water which has been colored with half a dirham¹⁰ of saffron: cover with a thin cake. Hang over it a fat chicken stuffed with sugar, almonds and pistachio kneaded with scented rose-water, and smeared with saffron inside and out. When thoroughly cooked, remove.”

The *jūdāb* is in fact a combination of meat and dessert. The basic ingredients consist of meat, sugar, starch and fat. The meat is roasted in a clay oven (*tannūr*), then minced fine and served with a sweetbread that has absorbed its dripping juice. This sweet accompaniment gave the dish its character and was made by mixing fat and meat juices with goats and sheep kidneys, walnuts and almonds, all chopped with sugar and cooked like dumplings. There were many

⁶ *Murūj adh-dhahab wa-ma'ādin al-jawhar*, Al-Ma'sūdī, Fr. Tr. Les prairies d'or, Barbier de Meynard et Pavet de Courteuil, Tome I à IX, 1861-1877, [Nouvelle édition revue par Charles Pellat, Paris, Société asiatique, 1962-1997, 5 vol.], T. 8, p. 401. (Personal translation).

⁷ A variety of soft and small date considered as the best one in Iraq.

⁸ c.a. 440 gr.

⁹ c.a. 36 gr.

¹⁰ c.a. 4 gr.

variations of which one contained rice. Almost all of the recipes contained different forms of bread rendering them bread-based desserts. Over time the recipe varied to include other products such as rice, honey, eggs and fat.

Sweetness symbolized celebration and gave rise to the greatest creativity in the kitchen, where the desserts were found. Stimulating to the eye and taste, desserts came in various forms such as cakes, nougats, jellies and syrups colored with multiple ingredients that revealed the richness and diversity of fruits. Among the best known desserts and sweets are the *fālūdhaj*, made from ground almonds, sugar, rose water, sometimes with the addition of spices or camphor, and cut into triangles or wedges. Here we also find the *lawzīnaj*, a nougat with almonds, breadcrumbs, rose syrup, sugar and sesame oil, the *zalābiyya*, a pastry filled with almond paste and sugar, flavored with rose-water, musk or camphor or a paste dropped into hot oil to form coils, dipped in a honey and saffron syrup and taking a very strong and bright orange color and finally the *khabīṣ*, a form of colorful pastry with a fragrant jelly and fruit syrup¹¹.

Eating at the markets, or the art of street food

In cities such as Baghdad, the market, generic name *sūq*, which then as now was situated on a broad, usually flat open space at or near the town center, was a major attraction for much of the population. An examination of the sources reveals a profusion of goods, varied and readily available for purchase, consumption being limited only during periods of comparative poverty. This abundance resulted from sound economic application as well as the support of a rich, efficient and controlled agriculture and rendered the market a principal distribution and commercial center. However, despite the widespread variety of goods a sense of organization was instilled. By arrangement between the merchants the *sūq* was thematic with vendors specializing in one type of food only that was eaten either on-site or taken home. As most of the medieval Cairenes did not cook at home, the most usual meal preparation for the inhabitants was to buy ready-made food at the markets; this could be consumed either at the vendor's stand, or be carried home in a special container.

In the next part, we will report the various types of food goods sold in these markets. Indeed, the *ḥisba treatises* relate certain details concerning cooks or roasters, the equivalent of our modern-day caterers, offering hot prepared food.

Dishes based on bread, cereals, rice and pulses

There can be no doubt that bread, just as in Christendom, became a staple in the Islamic world being above all essential to the everyday survival of the poor, so much so that the Arabic word "life", *ʿaish* (عائش) can equally refer to all things necessary to sustain life, such as bread and other staple foods and in some countries remains a vernacular form to designate a "piece of bread."¹²

In the East, varieties of breads were distinguished as much by the quality of cereals used in their composition as by their form and method of baking. The vast majority of bread is made from wheat flour, sometimes mixed with barley. Rye bread or barley alone was not baked, which came as a surprise to fourteenth century European travelers in Egypt, when they

¹¹ The actual version is called *loukhom*.

¹² As in Egypt for example, *Dictionnaire français-arabe*, Ellious Bocthor, Armand Pierre Caussin de Perceval, 1828, p. 119.

discovered only white bread¹³. Cheaper, coarser breads however were prepared from unrefined flour rich in bran, *al-khubz khushkār*, these were designated for the poor and the starving. The preferred bread made of finely sifted white flour was called *al-khubz al-huwwārī*, while bread made from a mixture of fine white wheat flour mixed with semolina¹⁴ was called *al-khubz al-samīd*.

Egyptian bread was often round and flat and not in the form of a loaf. The raising depended upon several factors such as the quantities of salt and leaven, the control of oven temperature, the amount of moisture and the time the baker spent kneading and resting. In practice, much cheating was observed and severely punished by the *muhtasib*. The leavened bread was sometimes sprinkled with grains of cumin, sesame, black caraway (*nigella sativa*) or ground mastic¹⁵.

Various ingredients were added to the dough; the author of the *Wusla* devoted a chapter to the preparation of breads (*makhbūzāt*)¹⁶, such as *khubz bi-jubn khayysi* or *mujjaban*, breads kneaded with cheese, *khubz bi-bayḍ*, bread with eggs, a bread called *iflāghūn* which the author states was made by the Franks and Armenians and which contained eggs, ginger, salt and pepper, sesame, cumin, caraway, poppy and aniseed seeds, a mixture of spices, fresh rue leaves, coarsely ground cheese and spread with saffron, poppy seeds and pistachios before being baked in the oven in the form of a flattish round loaf with raised edges. In several cases, water was substituted with milk and spices or seeds or nuts were added to the dough before baking.

Some other preparations based on wheat were very basic such as one called *nayda* made with wheat germ boiled in water and filtered; flour was then added to the liquid and boiled to thickness¹⁷. When cooled down, it must have had the consistency of a solid *béchamel* and was sold at the same price as bread. This preparation was found exclusively in Egypt. Another simple way to use wheat was to mix it with water and to bake it; the resulting preparation had the consistency of a biscuit such as the very popular *ka'k* to which was added sugar, butter, rosewater, and musk. Shaped into a disc or a ring biscuit, it was fried in oil or baked¹⁸. Simple and cheap, while it was a staple food for the poor it also served as a base for more elaborate recipes, such *hais* made from pounded *ka'k* and bread macerated with pitted dates and mixed with peeled walnuts, almonds, toasted sesame seeds and pistachios transformed into a paste with a mortar, to which boiled sesame oil was added. The mixture was then shaped into small balls and dusted with icing sugar to make a delicious and nourishing pastry¹⁹. A preparation called *khushkanan*, a sort of long and fine shaped biscuit kneaded with sesame oil and perfumed with spiced sugar and almonds, was sprinkled with rose-water and dipped in syrup or honey before serving²⁰. Dried or leftover bread was used in a number of recipes, both sweet

¹³ Eliyahu Ashtor, *The Diet of Salaried Classes in the Medieval Near East*, J. Asian History, 4, (1970), p. 1-24.

¹⁴ Semolina contains wheat grains of intermediate size between coarse grain and milled flour; see Charles Perry in "Medieval Arab Cookery", *The Description of Familiar Foods*, Prospect Books, Totnes, (2001), p. 284.

¹⁵ *Nihāyat al-rutba fī ṭalab al-ḥisba*, 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Naṣr al-Shayzarī; Eng. Tr. R. P. Buckley. "The book of the Islamic market inspector", J. Semitic Studies Supplement 9, ch. 6, p. 48.

¹⁶ *Kitāb al-wuṣla ila al-ḥabīb fī waṣf al-ṭayyibat wa al-ṭīb*, Engl. Tr. Charles Perry, "The Book of the Bonds of Friendship or a Description of Good Dishes and Perfumes", Prospect Books, Totnes, (2001), p.143.

¹⁷ *Al-Ifadah Wa'l-Iṭibar*, Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi, Fr. tr. Sylvestre de Sacy, « *Relation de l'Égypte* » Impr. Impériale, Paris 1810, Livre I, Ch. 6, p. 311.

¹⁸ *Wusla*, p.143.

¹⁹ *Kitāb waṣf al-aṭ'ima al-mu'tāda*, Eng. Tr. Charles Perry, "The book of the description of familiar foods", Prospect Books, Totnes, (2001), p. 435

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 425.

and salted. Bread soaked into milk was incorporated in a pudding called *jūdhāb al-khubz* which accompanied meat and was prepared according to the following recipe²¹:

“Take crumbs of leavened bread and steep them in fresh milk until it sours. Place sugar and finely ground almonds over the top and underneath it. Color it with saffron and leave it on the fire until fragrant. And it is stirred and taken up.”

A typical Egyptian recipe, which called for breadcrumbs, was *asyūṭiyya*²², a sweet preparation named after the town of *Asyūt*, which lies on the southwest bank of the river Nile. Made of two flat breads it was stuffed with a thin layer paste made of day-old bread crumbs combined with honey, syrup, poppy seeds, dates, saffron, almonds and pistachios, musk and rose-water. This was then spread with fat and sesame oil and steamed-cooked in the *tannūr*.

Bread was also the basic ingredient of the most emblematic recipe of the Arab world, the *tharīd*. This was the Arabic dish *par excellence*. The base consisted of crumbled bread in a broth with added fat. This thick porridge was the simplest and most popular diet. Although this is a food with little culinary attraction, it enjoyed great prestige due to its links with the origins of Islam. The *tharīd* was, according to his descendant, Hashim ibn Abd al-Manaf, the favored dish of Muhammad the prophet. Though certainly legendary, the story cultivated the reputation of this dish.

Another popular dish was called *sawīq* although Al-Warraḡ considered it a drink rather than a dish. He also recommended it to travelers because it was refreshing when served cold. Despite its popularity nothing is found in the princely book al-Baghdadi, though Al-Warraḡ gives several recipes. A kind of porridge, it was made from toasted barley or wheat soaked in water, with melted butter or sheep’s tail fat added to give it a little taste. The whole formed a gruel that was sucked rather than eaten with a spoon. There were sweet versions with sugar, almonds and spices such as saffron, mastic and camphor or a slightly fruity variety with addition of dried and ground pomegranate seeds.

Bread could also be stuffed with a meat or sweet filling and fried in oil in the form of a triangle called *sanbūsak* that was an easy “pick and eat” food. For the salty version, the pastry was filled with thoroughly pounded meat with vinegar or lemon juice and herbs such as parsley, mint and onions, a mixture of spices, including dry coriander, cinnamon, pepper, caraway and mastic and a variety of nuts such as pistachios, walnuts and almonds²³. The sweet version contained pounded walnuts and pistachios with sugar; the pastry was fried in sesame oil colored with saffron and was then coated with honey and sprinkled with rose-water, camphor and a little crushed sugar. Bread in the form of a roll and cut in to pieces was used in a recipe called *bazmāward* in which fillings of roasted minced meat flavored with lemon and vinegar made kinds of “sandwiches”²⁴. The most inexpensive of all snacks was surely dried fruits and particularly dates, sometimes so abundant that they were given freely. Eaten with a piece of bread they were an excellent appetite suppressant and often provided the poor with the only food they could afford.

²¹ Ibid, p.411

²² Ibid, p. 413.

²³ *Kitāb waṣf al-aṭ`ima al-mu`tāda*, several recipes with slight variations in the ingredients, p. 379, 382, 384.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 381 and 448.

Rice played a significant role in the diet of the disadvantaged social groups. Of tropical origin, though not mentioned in the Koran or in the *Hadith*, it was introduced via Persia to Iraq in the eighth century before becoming known in Syria and Egypt²⁵. According to Ibn Al-Awwam, rice was a food lacking nourishment whose flour was used to replace wheat flour in times of scarcity²⁶. Rice flour was also an ingredient of various types of porridge which Mas'udi described as not being valorized²⁷. Most frequently prepared in the form of a cake of low quality and often served with fish, this combination was considered of little value, casual and typical an all-year-round food of the poor. Rice was used especially in food distribution on Friday at the mosque where the poor received a hot meal consisting of bread, lamb and rice, honey and pomegranates.

Some dishes sold in the markets contained rice as mentioned by al-Shayzarī; one could find *labaniyya*, a dish made of meat, leeks and onions cooked in yoghurt with crushed rice, or the *muḥallabiyya* also called *bahaṭṭa*, a stew made of boiled meat, rice, sugar and spices such as coriander, mastic and cilantro. There was also a simple porridge made of rice cooked in milk and also called *bahaṭṭa* in regions where rice was grown. Although not so well known as *tharīd*, these dishes were consumed on a daily basis by many people as this permitted them to avoid the more technical process of making bread. Rice pudding, *arruz bi-laban*, was also served, containing sugar or honey or date's molasses, sometimes colored with saffron and flavored with cinnamon and mastic, sometimes served with sheep's tail fat. A version without sweet was called *rukhāmiyya* and prepared as follows:

*"Boil rice in milk and when almost cooked take a qadah [a plate] and cover it. Then collect the rice in the palm [of the plate] and layer alternately with sheep's tail fat until you have used all the rice. Then cover for an hour or two and serve. The fat must be hot, and rice too. You understand."*²⁸

Sometimes, the rice was cooked to the consistency of porridge, the more solid texture created by the addition of rice flour as in this '*asida*'²⁹:

"Toast 3 raṭl of white flour and remove. Pour it into a pan on the stove with 3 ūqīyas of sesame oil and ¼ ūqīya of cumin seeds. When boiling and smelling good, pour about 2 raṭl of water and further boil for a while. Then add an ūqīya of washed rice, when it boils and the rice is cooked, sprinkle with the flour, stirring all the time with a stick. When you have poured all the flour, add gradually an ūqīya of sesame oil. When it is solid, well cooked and smells good, remove from heat. Grease a dish with sesame oil and pour in until covered by hot sesame oil, walnuts and pistachios and finely ground sesame peeled and grilled. Then add syrup or honey and serve. If preferred, you can use butter to serve in place of sesame oil."

²⁵ Marius Canard, *Le riz dans le Proche Orient aux premiers siècles de l'Islam*, Arabica, 6, (1959), p. 113.

²⁶ Ibn al-Awwam, *Livre de l'agriculture* (Fr. Tr. J.J. Clément-Mullet), 1864, Tome 1 p. 62.

²⁷ *Murūj adh-dhahab wa-ma'ādin al-jawhar*, Al-Ma'sūdī, *Les prairies d'or*, (Ed. et Trad. par C. Barbier de Meynard et Pavet de Courteil), Tome VIII, p. 54.

²⁸ *Wasf*, p. 332

²⁹ *Kitāb al-ṭibākha*, p. 473.

These sweet preparations brought satisfaction and satiety to a low-priced meatless dish to which they probably owed their popularity.

Grains and pulses were good sources of protein available all year round and despite having a strong popular connotation they were very much appreciated by all classes. Used either dry or fresh these legumes such as lentils, chickpeas, broad beans, lupines served boiled or fried were foods eaten on the run and provide perhaps the best food symbol of the Middle East of the period. Egyptians were so fond of them that the names of several varieties refer to the country, for example, *bāqillā Misri*, literally "Egyptian beans" known as lupine, or *bāqillā Qibṭī*, the "Coptic beans", an Egyptian variety of fava beans. The vendors of chickpeas and beans are listed among the professions of the *ḥisba* treatises. Neither simple nor elaborate recipes appear in cookbooks which underlines their association with the popular classes as mentioned by Wusla in the following recipe suggestions for lentils³⁰:

"These recipes are used by the lower classes³¹ and all ordinary people; it would therefore be pointless to describe it here; I have however seen carrots, beets, large colocasia and saffron added to it. It can be made into a tasty dish in this way."

Crushed lentils seasoned properly could be prepared as a thick soup; just before serving, sumac, fried onions, parsley, vinegar and a little olive oil were added. The introduction of oil was common especially for beans because according to the dietary theory in progress, oil facilitated digestion. For the same reasons, it was recommended to eat chickpeas seasoned with black pepper and thyme.

A poet called Abū Shadūf, in the 17th century, sang the deprivation of the favorite foods of the peasant and several verses are dedicated to beans and pulses³²:

*"And the only thing I miss is mudammas³³ and its odor
Exhaled from the half-loaf
Filled with a scoopful of it;
O! For him who brings bīsārah³⁴ to the threshing-floor
He'll gobble them up, even if his intestines are weak.
[...] Even sweeter would be julubbān³⁵ and ripe lentils."*

Dishes based on meat

The list of professions linked with preparing and cooking meat in the markets, as reported in the *ḥisba* treatises, proves that meat was the most appreciated and valorized staple food. In the markets, despite there being all kinds of meat the preference was for mutton or lamb with chicken next ahead of beef and less consumed meats such camel, horse or game little found on the stalls. Meat was prepared in several ways: stewing, roasting, frying, baking in the oven

³⁰ Wusla, p. 156.

³¹ Interestingly, this category of population is called *al-sūqa*, i.e. people from the market.

³² From *Hazz al-quhuf bi sharh qasid Abi Shaduf* (Brains Confounded by the Ode of Abu Shaduf Expounded) is a humorous 17th-century text. The main subject of the book is everyday Egyptian rural life. For comments on the text see Abd al-Raheim, JESHO, 18, (3), (1975), p. 245-270.

³³ Dried and boiled fava beans, the process of drying turns them into a nice shiny brown color.

³⁴ A paste of fava beans.

³⁵ Grass pea (*Lathyrus sativus*) legume from the family of fabaceae.

or minced and was included in preparations such as pies, pastries, sausages etc. Interestingly, no traces indicate meat being cooked directly over a fire, either on skewers or barbecued.

The preferred cooking method was simmering or stewing and the dishes of the populace and the prince's table differed only in the quality of the ingredients and availability of herbs or spices. The range of stews found in the market for eating directly, or for taking away was rather narrow and while their preparation involved mixtures of vegetables and meat the choicest selection were reserved for those who cooked at home. Yet despite the limited number of stews available they did have the advantage of being cooked on site in large amounts using fresh ingredients, as ensured by the *muḥtasib* and were eaten from wooden or earthen bowls emptied before being returned to the vendor.

The cookbooks mention two kinds of stews the *ḥawamīd*, which contain an acidic element such as vinegar in a *sikbāj* for example, or a fruit, or juice (orange, lemon, grapes etc.) as mentioned in the previous section, or the *sawādhij*, which is a "simple" or "plain" stew, made from meat, onions and spices. Both types of stews could contain a single vegetable, a non-acidic fruit such as banana in a *mawziyya* or apricot in the *mishmishīya* or a selection of vegetables (carrots, eggplants, spinach...), pulses (chickpeas, lentils, fava beans...), all sorts of nuts (almonds, pistachios, hazelnuts, walnuts ...) and were always seasoned with coriander, parsley or mint.

One of the favorite dishes of the Caliph's court and the entire Middle East and Maghreb was *harīsa*. The base was always a kind of thick potage made with ground wheat or rice and mutton, lamb and/or beef which was constantly beaten until the meat shredded. Generally served in a bowl and mixed with a little honey, cinnamon and vinegar, optional additives included a little melted fat, lemon juice and *murrī*³⁶. The dish, prepared in large quantities, required a long, slow cooking period usually overnight in a clay oven, the *tannūr*. This made preparation at home difficult and it was rather made and consumed at the market by the "makers of *harīsa*," a special category of cook which fell under the supervision of the *muḥtasib* who detailed the precautions to be taken for its preparation as follows:

*"The meat used for harīsa should be lean and young, free of dirt and tubercles, veins and muscles. It should be tender, not scrawny and its smell should not be tainted. It must be soaked in salted water for an hour until all the blood has come out of it. It is then taken out and washed in some other water, put in the cooking pot in the presence of the 'arīf³⁷ and stamped with the muḥtasib's seal. In the early morning, the 'arīf will come and break the seal and they will make the harīsa in his presence. [...] The oil used for the harīsa should be pure and with a pleasant smell, and should have mastic and cinnamon added to it."*³⁸

The type of meat used for a given preparation is not always identified in the recipe of the cookbook however, as mentioned earlier, very often if the name of the meat is omitted it implies lamb or mutton. The use of beef would almost always be indicated. Offal, more specifically meats such as liver, heart, kidneys or intestines along with sheep heads and trotters are also rarely mentioned in the cookbooks though the presence of vendors in the

³⁶ It is a sauce made of fermented loaves of raw barley dough wrapped into figs leaves for 40 days. The dough is then ground and mixed with water, flour and then left to ferment for another 40 days in a warm place, usually the rooftop. The resulting dark brown paste mixed with water formed a liquid used as a sauce or a condiment. Its taste must have been very close to the taste of soy sauce.

³⁷ Assistant of the *muḥtasib*, literary means "he who knows", he possessed an in-depth knowledge on the trades laws and was thus able to detect various tricks of the tradesmen to swindle the customers.

³⁸ *Nihāyat al-rutba fī ṭalab al-ḥisba*, 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Naṣr al-Shayzarī, ch. 14, p. 60.

markets of Cairo and Damascus specializing in their preparation attests to them being both consumed and appreciated in forms such as boiled and spiced sheep's head or roasted heart, kidneys and liver or boiled and seasoned brain³⁹. Fat was used in several recipes and many of them call for *alya* i.e. sheep's tail fat which was clarified and sometimes colored with saffron and perfumed with mastic, coriander, aniseed or cinnamon.

Meat was also processed, minced and applied as stuffing in several preparations, for example, guts were filled with different mixtures for making sausages. The sausage makers were particularly surveyed by the *muḥtasib* to avoid cheating by the filling of cavities with ingredients of little value, such as leftover food or rotten meat, their genuine tastes being masked by spices. One kind of sausage the *sukhtūr* was prepared with meat, rice, chickpeas and seasoned with mastic, cinnamon and other spices, it was simmered in a pan full of water and left overnight in the *tannūr* while another, the *naqāniq*, was made of meat, onions, spices fried in oil⁴⁰.

Frying meat was relatively rare but a whole section of cookbooks was dedicated to it and particularly for a sort of dish called *muṭajjanāt* made with lamb or kid boiled prior to being roasted over a medium fire in a *tājin* pan of sesame oil, seasoned with the usual spices and served with vinegar and *murrī*. An alternate dish, the *qalāyā* differs from the *muṭajjanāt* only by the fact that it was fried in a pan called *miqlā*. The two pans differ in size and in matter, the *tājin* being larger and made of iron or soapstone, while the *miqlā* was formed by tinned copper.

Very often the meat was pounded in a mortar to form a paste which was then mixed with different spices according to a range of recipes and cooked in the form of meatballs; the variations of this dish were infinite and bear witness to the popularity of this method of serving meat which was both cheap and tasty. A version called *makābīb al-yahūd*, meaning literally "the meatballs of the Jews," was made from pounded boiled meat with ground pistachios, cinnamon, pepper, parsley, mint, celery leaf and eggs before frying in sesame oil⁴¹.

Minced meat was also used to stuff a variety of vegetables, notably eggplants, but almost universally it was used in the preparation of *sanbūsak*⁴², a fried pastry in the shape of a triangle. The meat was thoroughly pounded with onions, leek leaves, coriander and mint, spiced with coriander seeds, cloves, black pepper and various other aromatic fragrances as selected by the cook. The mixture was fried in olive oil and at this point some ingredients such as dried yogurt, whey, sumac juice or even pistachios, walnuts, pine nuts or any other fruits were sometimes added. The meat mixture was used to stuff *ruqā*, a thin sheet of bread made in the form of a triangle and then fried. *Sanbūsak* could also be stuffed with chicken and there was even a dessert version called *mukallal* which was stuffed with sugar, finely pounded almonds and the dough was flavored with rose-water.

³⁹ Ibid., ch. 10, 11, 13.

⁴⁰ Ibid., ch. 15. and *Wasf*, p. 368; *sukhtūr* are also called *kībā*.

⁴¹ *Wasf*, p. 379

⁴² Has various names in the literature: *sanbūsay*, *sanbūsik*, all coming from the Persian *sanbūja*, i.e. "in the shape of a triangle", also find nowadays in the name of *samosa*.

Dishes based on eggs and dairy products

There was a variety of foods at the markets that did not contain meat. These were called *ḥawāḍir al-sūq* and were prepared from eggs or dairy products. Due to the large number of chicken incubators present in Egypt, in fact so many that the celebrated traveler and physician Abg al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī called them “chicken factories”⁴³, eggs were most frequently consumed. They appeared in recipes, were also used to decorate dishes, were eaten as omelets or hard-boiled with salt and cumin. Fried eggs were mixed with chicken livers, or salted fish, or even cheese or eaten alone with spices, onions and seasoned with salt and pepper. They could also be served cold in a sandwich as a cheap version of *bawārid*. Sometimes pickled in vinegar, they entered the category of condiments and preserves sold as cold snacks called *al-mukhallalāt wal-mamlūhāt*. Excepting hard-boiled eggs, they were applied to all fruits and vegetables such as cauliflower or carrots, pumpkin with mustard seeds, fried eggplants with a garlic and mint sauce, beans seasoned with olive oil and cumin, olives, turnips, cucumber, salted lemons, capers or even raisins and sultanas flavored with vinegar.

Some nourishing dishes were based on both locally produced and milk imported from Syria. There were also preparations with Lebanese yogurt as curd from Ba'albek or Sicilian cheese. The Egyptians were known to eat a lot of cheese they made themselves from fresh or sour milk that had been over salted⁴⁴, probably to help with preservation.

Despite the Cairenes and Damascenes being major consumers of cheese the absence of *mujjabanāt*, the little cheese fritters omnipresent at the markets in the Maghreb and al-Andalus, is very curious. While no trace of them could be found in the eastern sources the *ḥisba* treatises from the West are full of anecdotes about them. Salted cheese, a staple of the people of Cairo was so common it was considered a typical food for the poor. A tale featuring a conflict between two camps, each of which was represented by a significant number of personified edible goods⁴⁵ described no less than 30 varieties of cheese. They were made from goat, buffalo or cow's milk mixed with various herbs, *fromage frais*, melted or matured refined or moldy cheeses and were brought from all of the cities of the Empire, from the Mediterranean countries, from the Levant and sometimes beyond. A special dish made of fried cheese called *jubn maqlī* was served on warm bread by street vendors and proved very popular. This type of cheese, which did not melt when heated, was probably made from a local Egyptian cheese called *al-khaysi* by washing to remove excess salt before being fried.

Milk was used in various preparations, e.g. fermented condiments called *kawāmikh* with a sharp taste. The simplest *kāmakh rījāl* was a mixture of yoghurt with fresh and salted milk stored in a hollowed gourd and left in the sun from June to September, being rehydrated daily with fresh milk. This procedure led to a creamy cheese both very tasty and perfectly white, hence the adjective added to its name, *al-abyaḍ*⁴⁶, i.e. white in Arabic. Due to the heat and

⁴³ *Al-Ifadah Wa'l-I'Tibar*, ch. III, p. 135.

⁴⁴ From Michael W. Dols (tr.): *Medieval Islamic medicine: Ibn Ridwān's treatise 'On the prevention of bodily ills in Egypt'*. Arabic Text edited by Adil S. Gamal. Berkeley: University of California Press, (1984), p. 92.

⁴⁵ Joshua Finkel, *King Mutton, A curious Egyptian tale of the Mameluke period*, in *Zeitschrift für semitisch und verwandte Gebiete*, 8 (1932), p.122-148. It is literary example of an Egyptian allegorical work of the beginning of the 15th century, rather similar to the medieval battle between “Carême” and “Charnage”. It tells of the battle between King Mutton who reigns over the meats and King Honey who reigns over the sweets, vegetables and cereals. King Mutton wins in the end. For a detailed study of the “delectable war” see Paulina B. Lewicka “*The Delectable War between Mutton and the Refreshments of the Market-Place. Rereading the Curious Tale of the Mamluk Era*”, *Studia arabistyczne i islamistyczne*, 13 (2007), p. 20-29.

⁴⁶ Waṣf, p. 402

difficulties of preservation milk was frequently used in a sour or fermented form known as *laban*, or as curdled or strained yogurt and added to stews or to relishes called *ṣabā`igh* made of vegetables like eggplants or gourd served with yogurt, garlic and sprinkled with cinnamon and nigella seeds. Despite yogurt being a form of preserved milk, it does not last long without refrigeration and in a society where food waste did not exist, the Arabs invented a product called *kishk* which was actually yogurt, sometimes with added flour, which was dried in the sun and shaped in the form of loaves. With its slightly acidic taste *kishk* was both an additive to many recipes and a food of choice for travelers and soldiers. Dairy products and eggs were also basic ingredients in cake baking and sweet preparation as we will detail now.

Pastry, confectionery and sweets

Sweetness was –and still is- one of the favorite foods on the oriental market stalls; the *ḥisba* treatises report several professions linked with sugar confections, biscuits and cakes of all sorts and pastry. Considering the relatively low numbers of ingredients used in sweetmeats, namely flour, eggs, sugar or honey, oil and grains or nuts, the inventiveness of the confectioners was incredible and the diversity was so broad that the market inspector was helpless to make checks regarding the complexity of the professions as the muḥtasib complains:⁴⁷

“They are many kinds and different varieties of confectionery and it is impossible to understand all the characteristics and measures of the ingredients, such as starch, almonds, and poppy seeds and so on. Sometimes there may be much of one thing in one kind of confection, and little in another.”

The stalls are full of colorful and tasty cakes to be eaten on the spot or taken back home. For celebrations such as Ramadan however, it was more advantageous to prepare them at home, instead of buying and transporting them in large quantities. There were lots of pancakes, the *qaṭā`if*, thick or thin and filled with sweet ground almonds perfumed with sesame oil or pistachios kneaded with sugar and flour, or dipped in honey, or a sugar syrup fragrant with rose-water, or the essence of orange flowers. The pinnacle of creativity and beauty was reached though in the confection of cakes stuffed with marzipan, grounded nuts, pure honey and spices. Those found on the prince’s table were also sold in the markets, the nougat *lawzīnaj*, the sticky honeyed *zalabiya* and the colorful *khabīṣ*. The author of the *kitāb al-tibakha* summarized the most common preparations under the generic name of *ḥalwā*:⁴⁸

“Their varieties are so many. Among them are sweets made of nāṭif. You put dibs [date molasses], honey, sugar, or rub [boiled-down fruit juice] in the pot and then you put it on a gentle fire and stir until it takes consistency. Then you beat egg whites add them and stir until it thickens and becomes nāṭif. After that, if you want ḥalāwa lauziyya [almond candy], you put in toasted almonds and ‘you feed it’, that is, you bind them. You could make it ḥalāwa jauziyya [with walnuts], ḥalāwa bunduqiyya [with hazelnuts], ḥalāwa fustuqiyya [with pistachios], ḥalāwa quḍāmiyya [with toasted chickpeas], simsimiyya [toasted sesame seeds]. As for ḥalāwa ‘ajamiyya, toast flour with sesame oil until it becomes slack [like batter], and boil dibs or another sweet ingredient and put it on the fire until its foam rises and skim it. Dissolve starch in water and pour it in.”

⁴⁷ *Nihāyat al-rutba fī ṭalab al-ḥisba*, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Naṣr al-Shayzarī, ch. 16, p. 63.

⁴⁸ *Kitāb al-Tibakha*, p. 471

Conclusion

Towards the end of the eleventh century appeared the discord that fractured and then broke up the Empire into independent areas of power and permanently separating East and West territories. The final act in the demise of this great civilization took place symbolically in 1258 when the Mongols and Hulagu Khan entered Baghdad and after reduced to ashes. This event marks singularly the end of the largest known cultural center of the Arab world. The generations that followed preserved the cooking of their Arab ancestors who winged gastronomy to its apex.

This cooking remained mobile and welcoming, integrating new products from the distant east acclimatizing them to local agricultural conditions and later incorporating novelties from the New World. So much so that nowadays, ingredients such as tomatoes, peppers and zucchini blend harmoniously with many of the current recipes of oriental cuisine. Contrary to West, the culture of Arab cooking has retained tastes, table manners, products and the methods of medieval cuisine. Today, at a table in Tunis, Cairo or Damascus, one can be transported to a time ten centuries earlier by the expression of culinary ideas experienced by the guest or customer who formed part of the brilliant Arab civilization. Although more simplified and lacking the pomp that was once displayed on the princely tables, it has lost none of its generosity. Described as "Nouvelle Cuisine," the origins of Baghdad's culinary traditions continue to delight contemporary palates.