A *tadhkira* (memorandum) prepared some time in the 1280s, which gave general instructions for the management of Egypt during the absence of Sultan Qalawun from that land, also provided a fairly clear general picture of where the trouble spots of Cairo were. The memorandum directed those in charge of the city to take special care in patrolling certain areas, especially “the Nile bank, the cemeteries, and ponds such as the Elephant’s Pool (*Birkat al-Ful*) and the Abyssinian Pool (*Birkat al-Ýubash*)...and certain public halls in the Husayniyya Quarter known as *Qāʿat al-Futuwwa*, where turbulent folk hang out.”  

Fatā is a young man. *Futuwwa* literally means “youngmanliness” and, more specifically, the qualities that should be possessed by a young man—honor, generosity, courage, and solidarity with his confreres. (The corresponding Iranian term is *javānmardī*.) Although there is, I think, no evidence for the existence of *futuwwa* prior to the tenth century, its devotees traced the origins of *futuwwa* back to ‘Ali and, through ‘Ali, back to Ibrahim. In the course of the tenth to thirteenth centuries the institution spread through Iran, Iraq, Anatolia, Syria, and Egypt. *Futuwwa* lodges seem to have been meeting-places for “les jeunes” (to borrow the term used by the historian of medieval France, Georges Duby). That is to say, they were places where men who were too young to marry could get together and...well, it depended. Sometimes these lodges were no more than sports clubs; sometimes they acquired political interests and turned into local factions; sometimes they became closely linked with particular crafts and produced something akin to guild solidarity; but sometimes they turned away from the world and dedicated themselves to mystical devotions. In the early thirteenth century, a number of Sufi writers produced treatises that were devoted wholly or in part to the inner aspects of *futuwwa*. (Most notable among them was Ibn al-‘Arabi, who addressed three chapters of *al-Futiḥāt al-Makkiyya* to the subject).

The earliest surviving treatise on *futuwwa*, written in the tenth century by Ibn al-Husayn al-Sulami, stressed the importance of feasting, hospitality, and good fellowship. In the early fourteenth century, Ibn Battuta received a great deal of hospitality in Anatolian towns from the *akhis*, the Turkish equivalents of the Arabic *fitān*. Ibn Battuta’s welcome as a visiting stranger may suggest that a primary function of *futuwwa* lodges was to offer hospitality to visitors, as does...
the special status of Ibrahim, or Abraham, as one of the patrons of *futuwwa*, for it was reported of Ibrahim that he never dined alone, since he always had guests at his dinners. In the 1180s there was an attempt to regularize the existence of such lodges and to bring them under central control, as the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad, al-Nasir li-Din Allah (r. 1180–1225) declared himself the head of all the *futuwwa* lodges in Iraq and elsewhere. Al-Nasir’s patronage was perhaps designed to reconcile his Sunni and Shi’i subjects in a broadly tolerant umbrella organization. It was also a means of extending the caliph’s influence beyond his frontiers, since he conferred investiture on foreign princes as an honor—a sort of Middle Eastern anticipation of the chivalric orders prominently in modern Egyptian novels and films—*futuwwa*. The rival strong-arm men in the *hāra* chronicled by Mahfouz are all descendants of Jabalawi (namely, God), and the novel only ends with the explosive destruction of these small-time local gangsters. Mahfouz’s novel *Malhamat al-harāfīsh* (1977; translated in 1994 as *The Harāfīsh*), an epic saga of urban riffraff, is similarly dominated by gang wars and intrigues. The very word used by Mahfouz in his title, *harāfīsh*, is no longer part of modern Egyptian. In a study of medieval urban life under the Mamluk sultans, Ira Lapidus described *harāfīsh* as “beggars and menials” who “formed a turbulent and dangerous mob.” As I have noted in a review of this novel, Mahfouz in *Malhamat al-harāfīsh* has shaken off Western fictional models and “gone back to the oral storytelling tradition and revived the traditional romance, which dealt with the activities of such legendary urban criminals as Mercury Ali, Crafty Delilah, and Ahmad the Sickness. Such tales, which celebrate the craftiness and courage of rogues, have always been popular with the *futuwwa* gangsters who ‘protect’ the various quarters of Cairo.”

In portraying these toughs, Mahfouz seems to have been drawing on childhood memory as much as on imagination. Interviewed by the novelist Gamal al-Ghitany, he looked back with actual nostalgia on the toughs of the Gamaliyya quarter of Cairo in the opening decades of this century—in particular, their storming of the local police station had lodged in his memory. But if we move on to the twentieth century and consult a dictionary of colloquial Egyptian, we find *futuwwa* defined as “neighborhood strong-man and protector of local interests, bully, tough-guy, hood.” Moreover, Sawsan al-Messiri’s article on the sociology of *futuwwa* in modern Egypt does not deal with any sort of chivalric revival à la Mark Girouard. Rather the article is about neighborhood protection rackets and roughnecks. The modern roughnecks discussed by Messiri and others, though they usually belong to gangs, do not appear to have undergone initiation rituals, nor do they trouble to trace the spiritual origins of what they are doing back to ‘Ali and Ibrahim.

Staying with modern *futuwwa*, one finds that it features prominently in modern Egyptian novels and films—most notably the novels of Naguib Mahfouz. *Futuwwa* toughs make a minor appearance in one of Mahfouz’s early works, as the bullies of schoolchildren in *Bayn al-gasrayn* (published in 1956; the English translation of 1990 is entitled *Palace Walk*). Their importance grows considerably in his later fiction. Mahfouz’s religio-sociological allegory, *Awdād hāratīnā* (1967; translated in 1972 as *Children of Gebelawi*), is ostensibly devoted to *futuwwa* toughts who dominate the *hāras*. The rival strong-arm men in the *hāra* chronicled by Mahfouz are all descendants of Jabalawi (namely, God), and the novel only ends with the explosive destruction of these small-time local gangsters. Mahfouz’s novel *Malhamat al-harāfīsh* (1977; translated in 1994 as *The Harāfīsh*), an epic saga of urban riffraff, is similarly dominated by gang wars and intrigues. The very word used by Mahfouz in his title, *harāfīsh*, is no longer part of modern Egyptian. In a study of medieval urban life under the Mamluk sultans, Ira Lapidus described *harāfīsh* as “beggars and menials” who “formed a turbulent and dangerous mob.” As I have noted in a review of this novel, Mahfouz in *Malhamat al-harāfīsh* has shaken off Western fictional models and “gone back to the oral storytelling tradition and revived the traditional romance, which dealt with the activities of such legendary urban criminals as Mercury Ali, Crafty Delilah, and Ahmad the Sickness. Such tales, which celebrate the craftiness and courage of rogues, have always been popular with the *futuwwa* gangsters who ‘protect’ the various quarters of Cairo.”

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becomes the “Vegetable King.” In the 1950s Mahfouz was also involved in the making of Tawfiq Salih’s Futuwwat al-Husayniyya (Tough-guys of the Husayni Quarter), a period gangster movie set in 1905.

Indeed futuwwa has come to designate a whole genre of modern Egyptian cinema. As the authors of Arab and African Film Making observe, “The word futuwwa in the Middle Ages and in religious contexts generally designated ideals of chivalry and brotherhood. By now, in Egypt at least, its meaning has degenerated so that it denotes a kind of bully system, a sort of marketplace Mafia, in which any boss who loses his iron grip on his followers will rapidly be replaced by the next-toughest aspirant around.” (As Lizbeth Malkmus notes, this is perhaps faintly reminiscent of the Khal-dunian cycle of corruption and decay.) In the films devoted to futuwwa, the plot usually revolves around the theme of an honorable man becoming corrupted in the course of trying to fight the system (as in Salah Abou Seif’s film referred to above). The futuwwa system always wins (just as Al Pacino is progressively corrupted in The Godfather). In futuwwa films and the Coppola Godfather series alike there is great play with the themes of honor and shame, though the honor in question is, of course, that of thieves. This gangster corruption quite often carries overtones of political allegory, and the political fatalism of such films is vaguely reminiscent of the cynical watchword of di Lampedusa’s great novel, The Leopard: “Things must change in order that they stay the same.”

However most of the above is by way of digression. To return (a little reluctantly) to the Middle Ages, it seems that some time between 1261 and modern times a sea change took place in the nature of futuwwa—a descent from caliphal patents of honor to muscling in on small-time rackets in the local markets of Cairo. And in fact Qalawun’s tadhkira, quoted earlier, strongly suggests that by the 1280s futuwwa had already acquired pejorative connotations. It seems that al-Husayniyya was the chief stamping ground of the adherents of futuwwa. This area lay to the north of Qahira proper, outside the Bab al-Futuh. From Fatimid times onwards it had been settled by low-grade troopers, and in the early Mamluk period the area continued to provide lodgings for military men. In the 1260s, during the reign of Baybars I, the suburb was further colonized by immigrants of Mongol origin, who had fled to the Mamluks from the Mongol Ilkhanate; still more of them arrived in the 1290s. Baybars probably built his mosque on the northern edge of Husayniyya in order to encourage colonization in the area.

In the thirteenth century Husayniyya was the most dangerous of all the suburbs of Cairo, for it was the home of the “Sons of al-Husayniyya,” otherwise known as the harāfīsh. The harāfīsh appear to have had a degree of organization and, at times at least, a recognized overall leader, a Sultan of the Harāfīsh.

In a late Syrian version of the Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars, the medieval folk epic devoted to the largely fictional exploits of the historical Sultan al-Zahir Baybars (1260–77), we are told that Baybars as a young mamluk was in the service of an amir called Najm al-Dīn al-Bunduqdārī, who had his palace in al-Husayniyya. (There is, of course, no truth in any of this.) In this quarter the young Baybars found his friends and allies among the good-hearted thieves and beggars who described themselves as the Sons of Husayniyya. In general, the Sīra takes a very benign view of the harāfīsh and other lowlife types who inhabited al-Husayniyya and the other squalid suburbs of Cairo, such as Bab al-Luq. Usta ‘Uthman, “Flower of the Gangsters,” a liveryman and one of the main heroes of the popular cycle, is identified as being one of the shuṭṭār (and I will come to the significance of this term shortly).

In the real, non-fictional world, al-Husayniyya was also a recognized recruiting ground for zuʿar, or neighborhood militias of young cudgelmen, and was notorious for vice and crime. As the already-mentioned tadhkiras indicate, al-Husayniyya was an area over which it was necessary to exercise special vigilance. It was perhaps also not entirely coincidental that Shaykh Khadr al-Mihrai, the populist, rabble-rousing Sufi shaykh and spiritual guru of Baybars, had his zaqūqa just outside the Bab al-Futuh. According to al-Maqrizi, in the early fourteenth century the suburb improved a bit, becoming gentrified to some extent even though it was still the place to watch acrobats, prizefighters, and other street performers. But then in the 1360s the quarter was attacked by a plague of worms that ate food, paper, and wood. Roofs collapsed, and many houses were abandoned. A flood followed in 1375. The suburb reverted to its squalid ways and in al-Maqrizi’s own time—the early fifteenth century—the place was miserable, underpopulated, and controlled by zuʿar racketeers. According to al-Qalqashandi, the soldiers who used to live in al-Husayniyya moved to lodgings closer to the Citadel. However, later yet in the fifteenth century, the area was particularly favored by Qaytbay, whose powerful ally, the amir Yashbak, built his qubba there. Moreover, there is evidence of continued settlement in Ottoman times, when the butchers and abattoirs were concentrated in this area.
From the eighteenth century onwards, the butchers, a notoriously tough body of men, linked their activities with the Sufi Bayumiyya order, which was powerful in the quarter. During Bonaparte’s occupation of Egypt, al-Husayniyya, with its turbulent population, proved to be one of the main foci of resistance to the French, so that in the end the French were driven to attempt to raze at least part of the quarter.

As has already been noted, Mongol immigrants were settled in al-Husayniyya as early as the 1260s. In the years 1294 to 1296 a new wave of immigrants, the Oirats (that is, the western tribe of Mongols, also known as Kalmuks), deserted to the Mamluks, and Sultan Kitbugha settled them in al-Husayniyya. The Arab chroniclers remarked on a number of things concerning the Oirats: First, that they were not Muslims and therefore did not observe Ramadan and also un-Islamically clubbed horses about the head before eating them. Second, that they were astonishingly beautiful, and therefore Oirat women were much sought-after as brides by the Mamluk elite. Also, according to al-Maqrizi’s Kitbugha, the Oirats “became known for their zu‘ara (gangsterism) and shuj‘a‘a (boldness), and they were called al-Badūra. So an individual Oirat might be called al-Badr such-and-such. They adopted the dress of futuwwa, and they carried weapons. Stories about these people proliferated.” Later on their fortunes declined, and many ended up working as menial servants in the Citadel. These Mongol immigrants may be seen as the medieval Cairene precursors of the Sicilian mafiosi of New York. It also seems likely that they organized their activities on the basis of futuwwa lodges. (Indeed it is possible that there was no such thing as popular futuwwa in Egypt prior to the arrival of the Oirats and that they brought their rituals with them from Ilkhanid Iraq. While al-Maqrizi clearly did not think that the Oirats were Muslims, they may still have thought of themselves as such.)

If one turns to al-Turkumani al-Hanafi’s treatise on bi’d’a, or irreligious innovation, entitled Kitāb al-luma‘ fi ‘l-ḥawādidh wa ‘l-bida‘, which was completed around 1300, one finds the relationship between membership in futuwwa and disreputable behavior confirmed. According to al-Turkumani, futuwwa is something that angers God and delights Satan, for it fosters crime and sedition. The young men in futuwwa lodges organize themselves into militias. They learn to become handy with knives, and if one of their number should be apprehended and taken off to prison they will mass and organize to rescue him. Interestingly Ibn Battuta, who was in Egypt in the 1320s, reported the harāfīsh massing to enforce the release from prison of one of their patrons, the amir Tashtamur Hummus Akhdar. The (somewhat Masonic) practice of members looking after each other was taken to such an extreme that, according to al-Turkumani, a man might even prostitute his wife in order to support his needy brethren.

Equally reprehensible for the pious Muslim was the futuwwa’s un-Islamic initiation rite, which required the drinking of a cup of water and salt and featured another, even more dubious, practice by the group’s elder, who stripped the blindfolded amrad, or beardless boy, and invested him with the trousers of futuwwa. The whole business of eyeing undressed and beardless boys was an abomination. As al-Turkumani put it, “the concupiscent glances of the older men are poisoned arrows from the quiver of Satan.” The homosexuality of the gaze was, according to him, as damnable as any other form of homosexuality. If members of futuwwa lodges did indeed sit and watch as beautiful youths were undressed before their eyes, then this practice may be linked to certain rather controversial Sufi meditation practices. In medieval Persia the religious contemplation of the unbearded was termed shāhid bāzī, or “witness play.”

However, to return to al-Turkumani’s case against futuwwa, another aspect of the criminality of this sort of brotherhood was the readiness of its members to take up cudgels against the agents of the state (ghulmān al-shurta wa-wulūt al-Muslimūn). Futuwwa members prided themselves on their skill with weapons, but al-Turkumani piously observed that a true fatā should not be identified by his skill with a knife but rather by his generosity to the needy. A little later in 808, al-Turkumani produced a brief risāla wholly devoted to futuwwa, in which he noted that its apologists presented the deliverance of people from prison or from enforced legal penalties as a charitable activity: the big man (al-kabīr) marches along at the head of his following and says, “Deliver your brethren in futuwwa,” but the right reply to this is “Listen, O you of little courage (maruwwa), this is all the deceit of the devil (talbis Iblīs), and his aim is to lead you away from the way of the Prophet.”

Futuwwa, as al-Turkumani viewed it, was one of the worst bi’d’a’s of the age, and he treated with brisk contempt its partisans’ attempt to link it with caliphal futuwwa. The attempt to trace its lineage back to ‘Ali was, if anything, even more outrageous. Al-Turkumani’s discussion of futuwwa comes in the fifth fasā of the Kitāb al-Luma‘. It follows a chapter devoted to the evil of chess and precedes the one on the wickedness of brotherhoods devoted to hunting.
Al-Turkumani also wrote a short treatise devoted solely to attacking futuwaa, and this has a colophon testifying that it had been endorsed by Ibn Taymiyya and, allegedly, by all the muftis of Egypt.36 Al-Turkumani had indeed studied under Ibn Taymiyya, and it is plausible that it was his teacher who had taught him to loathe futuwaa, for the latter had also issued a fatwa against the institution. In it, Ibn Taymiyya indicated that all sorts of vices might flourish in these meetings of young men. According to him, a futuwaa meeting was known as majlis al-daskara, or “session of the village.” He added that daskara had been a neutral word, but in his time it acquired pejorative overtones, because it was applied to gatherings for the purpose of fornication, wine drinking, and singing.37 The entry on daskara in Lane’s Arabic-English Lexicon offers the meaning, “a town or village,” but two of the earlier definitions are more germane: “a building like a qasr, which is surrounded by houses, or chambers, and in which the vicious or immoral (shuttar) assemble”; or “houses of the foreigners, a’ajim, in which are wine and instruments of music and the like.”38 Incidentally, al-Turkumani in his Risala on futuwaa twice refers to the ritual of induction as a taskira. Although Labib proposed emending this to tadhkira, another possibility is that taskira represents a mishearing of daskara.

A fatwa by the fourteenth-century Aleppan Zayn ‘Umar al-Din b. al-Wardi (1292–1349) echoed al-Turkumani’s writings in denouncing the prominence of livāt, or homosexuality, in futuwaa.39 It is indeed easy to imagine that the futuwaa’s cult of the young man may in certain circumstances have become confused with a different sort of cult of beardless youths. A number of litterateurs in the Mamluk period, among them al-Badri and al-Nawaji, produced anthologies devoted to the joys of the beautiful boy. Al-Badri’s was entitled “The Shining Dawn: On the Description of Fair Faces”; al-Nawaji, who died in 1455 and is better known for his anthology on wine-drinking, the Halbat al-kumayt, compiled at least two treatises on beautiful young men: “The Throwing-off of Shame in the Description of the First Growth of the Beard,” and “The Prairie of the Gazelles in the Purity of the Beauty of Servant Boys.” Mamluk moralists were also much vexed by the mukhannath, or transvestite prostitutes, who worked the streets.40

Ibn Taymiyya, al-Turkumani, and other Mamluk experts on bid‘a rejected the claim of members of popular futuwaa lodges that their chain of initiation could be traced back to the Abbasid caliph al-Nasir. In so doing, they denied any link between popular Cairene futuwaa of relatively recent date and the more respectable and longer-established futuwaa of the courts. On a related issue, studies of twelfth-century Iraqi futuwaa have suggested that one of al-Nasir’s aims in promoting the institution was to reconcile Sunnism and moderate Shi‘ism under its umbrella. The futuwaa’s slogan Lā fatā illā ‘Ali (‘Ali is the youth par excellence) and its tracing its lineage of initiation back to ‘Ali might be taken as hinting at Shi‘i aspects to the organization, and it is probably true that Shi‘ism was more of a vital force in Mamluk Egypt than has hitherto been realized. However, as far as the Mamluk period and Mamluk sources are concerned, there is no real evidence to suggest that futuwaa was linked to Shi‘i sympathies or practices—and this was not one of Ibn al-Turkumani’s or Ibn Taymiyya’s grumbles. (Incidentally, Bulliet in his work on tenth-to-twelfth-century Nishapur found that members of futuwaa, when their affiliation was identifiable, were invariably Shafi‘ite Muslims.41)

Although Ibn Taymiyya and al-Turkumani went out of their way to denounce various aspects of futuwaa, Abu ‘Abdallah b. al-Ha‘jaj al-Abdari (1336–66?), who similarly wrote a lengthy treatise on bid‘a, does not seem to have noticed the phenomenon at all. Ibn al-Ha‘jaj did deal disapprovingly with homosexuality, gazing on men, singing and dancing, various unacceptable Sufi rituals, and dodgy artisanal and commercial practices, but he does not discuss futuwaa (unless I have missed it). The evidence is too fragmentary and relies too much on the apparent silence of the sources for one to come to any firm conclusion here, but what this suggests is that popular, quasi-criminal, ritualized futuwaa was a phenomenon of limited duration in medieval Egypt. The futuwaa-loving Oirats had arrived at the end of the thirteenth century. Ibn Taymiyya and al-Turkumani lived and wrote at the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century.42 Gabriel Baer, who wrote several excellent studies of guilds in the Ottoman period, suggested that there was an essential continuity between medieval Egyptian futuwaa and the craft-based guilds of Egypt in the Ottoman period.43 However, the supposed continuity is doubtful. I have come across no references to futuwaa in the Mamluk lands in the late fourteenth or the fifteenth century. Ibn al-Turkumani had urged the Mamluk authorities to ban futuwaa, and it is indeed possible that recommendations from him and other like-minded “ulema” were eventually heeded. A new wave of futuwaa manuscripts was produced in Egypt in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, but, although al-Jabarti’s ‘Ajā‘ib
al-āthār contains plentiful information about criminal activity and popular disturbances in Ottoman Egypt, the word futuwwa does not seem to be in the author’s vocabulary. Compared to futuwwa, the brotherhood of the harāfisḥ had a longer existence. The first reference to the harāfisḥ was in 1298, but they were still a power to be reckoned with at least as late as 1516, when the shaykh of the harāfisḥ accompanied Qansuh al-Ghuri on his ill-fated journey to Syria.44

Futuwwa seems to have been linked, however vaguely, with another and more long-lived phenomenon, one that at first blush would not appear urban at all: the hunting lodge. Futuwwa treatises written during the caliphate of al-Nasir had spelled out the hunting privileges of young men, giving them special license to hunt with crossbows and pigeons. With respect to the belt of futuwwa, Louis Massignon has observed that “it was a military belt worn by an archer, a ‘tir-bent,’ an arrow belt, the insignia of the guild of ‘couriers’ (shāṭir, whence the Indian shattar, religious order, derives...).”47

It is noteworthy that, after al-Turkumani had finished discussing the wickedness of futuwwa lodges, he then immediately turned to the use of the crossbow. Hunting leagues that used the crossbow were reprehensible, according to him, because they were liable to break the Islamic law on slaughtering. The crossbow was cruel to birds and proscribed in Hadith. The shuṭṭār huntsmen were wicked because they valued marksmanship more than piety. They were also bad because they did not mind admitting into their ranks homosexual men—nor, for that matter, Jews and Christians. Shuṭṭār preferred to swear by the dirt, rather than by God. All that mattered to these awful people was the ability to kill certain birds—the manāṣīḥ birds. If one succeeded, one was acclaimed a shāṭir. Their group solidarity and their unquestioning obedience to their leaders were also to be abominated. So was their trampling through other people’s fields. Although a member of such a group is called a shāṭir, or cunning one, according to al-Turkumani, the only real cunning people are the good Muslims. (Interestingly and curiously, Ibn Turkumani’s aversion to companies of archers finds a parallel in the Western world in the fifteenth-century Malteus Maleficarum, whose authors, Krämer and Sprenger, wrote of “the witchcraft of archers.” According to the famous inquisitors, such skill as certain crack archers possessed could only be explained by their having entered into a pact with the devil.49 Also, more germanely with respect to Islamic archery’s association with vice, the sixth chapter of al-Badri’s treatise on beautiful boys was specifically devoted to archery and hunting and to the erotic prospects afforded by these activities.) Al-Turkumani’s view that hunting with a crossbow was illicit was backed up, to some extent at least, by Ibn Mangli’s fourteenth-century treatise on hunting, Uns al-malā bi-wahsh al-falāḥ, in which the author states that it is forbidden to hunt and kill animals using blunt weapons or projectiles, such as the balls fired from a bunduqa.50

In medieval Arabic dictionaries, a shāṭir (plural: shuṭṭār) was defined as a wrongdoer, a clever thief, someone who is agile and witty or swift on his feet. But in the usage of al-Turkumani and other medi eval Egyptian writers, the word was also quite specifically associated with hunting and the use of the bow. While a shāṭir and a fūṭā were not necessarily one and the same man, Ibn Taymiyya discussed futuwwa and assemblies of archers in one and the same disapproving breath. These are people, he claimed, who have taken an oath of infidelity, and who celebrate together with feasting.51 It seems that they formed gangs, somewhat similar to the Mohawks of eighteenth-century London or the Apaches of Paris in the 1920s. If the adherents of futuwwa excelled with the knife, the shuṭṭār were more versatile, being enthusiasts also of single-stick fencing and wrestling as well as archery. In the early fourteenth century the sports and enthusiasms of the shuṭṭār and like-minded wastrels briefly enjoyed court favor under Sultan al-Muzaffar Hajji (r. 1346–47). This young sultan enjoyed watching the single-stick fencing of the awbāš (riffrāf). He gambled on racing pigeons and donned leather breeches in order to wrestle with servants and lowlife types. (His other enthusiasms were polo and torture.)52

In the folk epic devoted to Baybars, which we have already mentioned, Baybars as a young mamluk was initiated into a hunting lodge in Damascus with the assistance of Fatima bint al-Aqwasi, daughter of the bowyer, after he had proved himself by shooting at the manāṣīḥ birds with a crossbow. The corporation of archers to which he was admitted was under the leadership of a shaykh and a nāqīb; it had forty members and was dedicated to hunting the ten noble breeds of bird. On the day of the hunt, each sub-group of four archers was assigned one particular breed to hunt. After this first round, the winner—in the Sīra, the winner was of course Baybars—then had to use his crossbow to bring down forty birds, four from each species. The
anonymous author concluded his account of Baybars’s prowess as an archer with the lament that those were the days when people preferred hunting to games of tric-trac or dominoes.\(^{55}\)

The above was fiction, and moreover fiction from Ottoman Syria, but it may well reflect medieval realities. Historically, such jolly huntsmen may have been capable of providing sizable armed militias in times of crisis. When in 1524 Ahmad al-Kha‘im, the Turkish governor of Egypt, rebelled against Istanbul, he called upon the support of the zu‘ar and shuttār to help him dislodge the janissaries from the Citadel of Cairo. According to the geomancer and historical romancer Ibn Zunbul, the two leaders of the shuttār, Shaban al-Shagharti, Head of the Bowyers, and Ahmad al-Shiribini chose from their followers a squad to enter the Citadel by an underground passage and so come upon the janissaries unawares. Later on, when the Ottomans launched a counteroffensive, Ibn Zunbul tells us that the shuttār, along with the zu‘ar, the riffraff, and every dog and his brother, were among the last of the rebel’s supporters.\(^{54}\)

The tales of The Thousand and One Nights teem with with shuttār who get into scrapes but who, being infinitely resourceful, use artful dodges to get themselves out of those scrapes.\(^{55}\) Some of the shuttār featured in the Nights, such as Crafty Delilah or Calamity Ahmad, had epics in their own right devoted to them in medieval Egypt. Ali Zaybaq was the most famous of the janissaries added to later Egyptian recensions of the Thousand and One Nights.\(^{56}\) Other shuttār were specifically immortalized (or should that be “immoralized”? \(^{57}\)) in some of the stories added to later Egyptian recensions of Alf layla wa-layla, among them, “The Sharper of Alexandria and the Chief of Police,” “The Chief of Qus Police and the Sharper,” “The Simpleton and Sharper,” “The Tale of the Sharpers with the Shroff and his Ass,” and “The Story of the Three Sharpers.” Not all shuttār were all that sharp. Several stories indeed are devoted to their stupidity—stupidity heightened in some cases by drugs. And there is evidence that at least one real villain in fifteenth-century Egypt took to calling himself after the fictional Ahmad al-Danaf, or Calamity Ahmad. He was executed in 1485.\(^{57}\) In Cairo the legendary villains enjoyed the status of Robin Hood or Dick Turpin. The cult of such fictional “heroic” villains can be seen as a later and more vulgar version of the cult of crime and lawlowlife that was such a striking feature of the culture of the literary elite in Buyid Iraq, as represented by, for example, the tenth-century vizier and patron of Abu Dulaf, al-Sahib b. ‘Abbad.\(^{58}\) Moreover, the cult of the criminal can, of course, be traced further back yet, to the semi-legendary lives of the sa‘ālik poets of pre-Islamic Arabia.

As noted above, the caliph al-Nasir li-Din Allah had been an enthusiast for futuwwa, hunting with the crossbow, and pigeons. Like crossbow hunting, pigeon fancying could have disreputable undertones in medieval Islamic society, and indeed pigeon racing was condemned by most religious authorities. A pigeon racer could not bear witness in a court. According to its enemies, pigeon racing was invented by the citizens of Sodom (so the sport is of some antiquity);\(^{59}\) professsed pigeon fanciers used the excuse of pursuing errant pigeons to break into houses or to spy upon women from the rooftops. It was also forbidden to hunt pigeons, since it was not halāl to consume them. According to al-Jahiz’s treatise on animals, the rearing and flying of pigeons was a privilege of fityān.\(^{60}\) In The Thousand and One Nights story, “The Rogueries of Delilah the Crafty and Her Daughter Zaynab the Cony-Catcher,” Crafty Delilah’s father had been the caliph’s master of carrier pigeons, and eventually Delilah is awarded the same post. In another story, “The Adventures of Mercury ‘Ali of Cairo,” ‘Ali pretends to have eaten Delilah’s pigeons. So, to begin to conclude, one finds a skein of ill-defined yet indubitable connections between the young men involved in pigeon fancying, crime, hunting, boy-ogling, and the rituals of brotherhood.

Such lowlife denizens of Cairo’s poorer quarters can be seen as marginal figures—as subversives and representatives of a counterculture. However, it is doubtful that this was their own perspective on the matter, for their gangs and associations played a central role in the functioning of the city. As far as most of the inhabitants of Cairo’s hāras were concerned, it may be that it was the Mamluk elite whom they perceived as the marginal men and the representatives of an alien counterculture. The defense of poor and humble citizens from the oppression of the alien Turkish soldiery was surely one of the most important roles of futuwwa lodges and similar groups.

This study concentrated on the futuwwa and shuttār groups, but al-Husaynīya and the Bab al-Luq teemed
with other “hushrūt,” or “human vermin.” I have said little about the zu‘ar and the harāfīsh (for these ruffians have been well studied by Brinner and Lapidus). I have said nothing at all about the ji‘ aydiyya, or Curly-Haired Ones (possibly a confederation of Gypsy toughs: remarkably little work has been done on the Gypsies in the medieval Near East). According to a footnote in Quatremère’s Histoire des sultans mamlouks, Tenreiro claimed that Gypsies (Bohemiens) were called in Arabic “Xatres,” plausibly šāhir, plural: šuṭṭār. Nor have I had time to research and discuss the taxawābūn, or repentant bandits who turned “sultan’s evidence” and became policemen. Nor have I discussed the subdivisions of the Banu Sasan, as listed in al-Zarkhuri’s conjuring manual—including the Ashāb al-Mīn (or professional treasure hunters), the false ascetics, the Halwati snake-charmers, and the Saramiti occultists. Yet the lives of all these strange people deserve at least a footnote in the turbulent history of Cairo.

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NOTES


7. On this sort of futuwwa in general, and on futuwwa in Anatolia more specifically, see F. Taeschner, Zunfte und Bruderschaften im Islam (Zurich, 1979).


9. See, for an example of this, R. S. Humphreys, From Saladin to the Mongols (New York, 1977), p. 138.


25. On Husayniyya, see Behrens-Abouseif, “North-Eastern Extension of Cairo.” On Baybars’s mosque there, see Bloom, “Mosque of Baybars al-Bunduqdari.”


37. Ibn Taymiyya, Majmu’ al-rušû’d (Cairo, 1905), pp. 147–60.


42. On al-Turkumân’s dates, see Kitâb al-luma’, pp. 125–33.


44. Brinner, “The Significance of the Harâfîsh.”

45. Mason, Two Statesmen, pp. 118, 120.


49. Heinrich Krâmer and Jacques Sprenger, Malles Maleficarum (Nurenburg, 1494) pt. 2, chap. 16.


57. Miquel, Sept Contes, p. 63.


