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The cemetery of al-Suyuti, Cairo

The *qarafa* in the 19th century

A report by Khaled Fahmy
New York University
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Introduction:

Based on research done in the Egyptian National Archives (ENA), this report presents my findings and preliminary ideas pertaining to the history of the Qarāfa during the nineteenth century. The decision to limit the period of research to the nineteenth century is based on the fact that this century constitutes a distinct period of Cairo's history as well as of that of *al-qarāfa*. Also, over the past ten years I have accumulated significant experience while conducting research in the ENA on such practices as urban planning, quarantines, smallpox vaccination, census taking and forensic medicine—all practices that have significant overlap with *al-qarāfa* area given this area's association with death, burial methods and funerary practices.

To prepare this report I conducted research in the ENA combing through the registers of the Cairo Police (Dhabsiyyat Misr) as well as of the Cairo Governorate (Muhfāzat Misr). Specifically, I consulted the registers of the sub-division within the Cairo Police that summarized investigations in preparation for trial in criminal courts. This sub-division is called *qalam da 'āwā*. I also consulted registers of the registers of a legal body within the Cairo Governorate called *Jam'iyat al-Muhāfaza* that acted as a criminal court of first instance. Both these sets of registers are not catalogued.

Over the past few years the ENA has been conducting a huge cataloging project with the aim of properly identifying and cataloging the entire collection, which is estimated to be around 100 million documents. The resulting database has not been launched on the internet yet, and access to it is still limited to employees in the ENA. I therefore hired one of these employees, Muhammad Mabrouk, and instructed him to use the database to search in the following archival units: the catalogued units of the Cairo Police (mainly the outgoing letters, i.e. the *sādir*), the Cairo Governorate (again the *sādir*), and the Council of Ministers (*Majlis al-Nuzzār/al-Wuzarā*). I specifically instructed him to use the following search terms:

قرافة ، جبانة/ جبانات ، حانوتي/حانوتية ، تربي/ تربية ، سيوطي/السيوطي ، دفن الأموات ، الجمالية ، الخليفة

the last two being the two neighborhoods that are closest to the *qarafa* and whose correspondence most likely contain information about this cemetery.

From this government correspondence it becomes clear that the Egyptian administration in the nineteenth century had four main concerns when it came to Cairo's cemeteries in general. These were:

1. upholding security during *moulids* and religious festivals;
2. maintaining law and order within the cemeteries;
3. supervising undertakers (حانوتية) and gravediggers (تربية); and
4. preserving public hygiene.

Below is an analysis of each one of these concerns as revealed in government correspondence.

I. Upholding security during *moulids* and religious festivals:

As is well known, *al-qarafa*, had numerous shrines and mausoleums that attracted large numbers of visitors during *moulids* and religious feasts. This was not a nineteenth century innovation, but was an old habit that can be traced back to Fatimid times. Al-Maqrizi, for example, says that on the night of 15 Rajab 402 / 11 February 1012 “people gathered in *al-qarafa* as their custom for pleasure and fun (واجتمع الناس بالقرافة على عاداتهم) (في كثرة اللعب والمزاح).¹ The large number of men, women and children who went to the cemeteries during feast days to eat, drink, sing and dance was what prompted calls to stop this practice and specifically to prevent the intermingling of the sexes.² The 14th-century Mālikī ‘*ālim*, Ibn al-Hāj, for example, wrote in his characteristically strong language admonishing women when they visited the cemeteries for

walking at night alone with men [in an area] which affords privacy [*khulwāt*] ... and without covering their faces. They behave [on such visits] as if they are with their husbands in the intimacy of their homes. They not only talk to strange men, but do so in a cheerful and joyous way. They laugh and sing a lot in a place [that is supposed to be a place] of humility, piety and meekness.³

The authorities in the nineteenth century were similarly concerned about Cairenes visiting the cemeteries during feast days. However, their concern was not about moral

¹ Taqī al-Dīn Ahmad ibn ‘Alī al-Maqrizī, *Itti ‘āz al-Hunafā bi-Akhhār al-A‘imma al-Fatimiyyīn al-Khulafā* (اتعاظ الحنفا بأخبار الأئمة الفاطميين الخلفاء) (Cairo, 1971-73), v. 2, ed., Muhammad Hilmī Muhammad Ahmad, p. 89.

² Ahmad ‘Abd- al-Rāziq, *Al-Mar’ā fī Misr al-Mamlūkiyya (Women in Mamluk Egypt)* (Cairo: al-Hay’ah al-Misriyya al- ‘Ammā lil-Kitāb, 1999), pp. 49-50; quoted in Muhammad Hamza Ismā‘īl al-Haddād, *Silsilat al-Jabbānāt fī al- ‘Imāra al-Islāmiyya: Qarāfat al-Qāhira min al-Fath al-Islāmī ilā Nahayāt al- ‘Asr al-Mamlūkī* (n.p.: Maktabat al-Thaqāfa al-Dīniyya, n.d.), p. 297.

³ Ibn al-Hāj, *Madkhal al-Shar’ al-Sharīf ‘alā al-Madhāhib* (Dār al-Fikr, 1981), v. 1, pp. 267-68; quoted in Haddad, *Qarāfat al-Qāhira*, p. 297.

misconduct or the intermingling of the sexes. Rather, their concern was about any breach of security that may result from over-crowdedness. Thus,

- a) On 13 July 1848 the Cairo Police wrote to the officer in charge of the Artillery Battalion (*urtat al-tubjiyya*) in the Qaramaydan area to open the Gate of the Qarāfa (*bāb al-qarāfa*)⁴ from the 13th to the 15th of Sha‘bān as per the request of al-Shaykh al-Bakrī “in order to allow the passage of the visitors to the *moulid* of the Bakriyya *sayyids* in the *qarāfa* as is the annual custom, while making sure to maintain law and order (*ma‘ al-hifz wa ‘l-hirāsa*).⁵ (Fig. 1)
- b) On 30 November 1872 the Cairo Police wrote to the district head (*mu‘āwin*) of al-Dar al-Ahmar quarter telling him that since it is incumbent on them (i.e. the Police) to be on full alert (*iltizām al-mulāhaza al-tāma*) during the upcoming feast, ‘īd al-*fiṭr*, they were ordering him to save no effort (*kamāl al-himma*) in appointing enough guards (*tūf*); to prevent over-crowdedness during the expected visits of dignitaries and consuls (*hadarāt al-zawāt wa la-qanāsīl*); and to be diligent in implementing police regulations (*al-iltifāt li-ijrā usūl al-dhabtiyya*) in his quarter especially in the *qarāfa* of Bāb al-Wazīr. They added that they had already sent a letter to the officer in charge of the battalion (of Qaramaydan?) to provide the necessary guards.⁶ (Fig. 2)
- c) In August 1875 the Cairo Governorate issued two orders to the Cairo Police to prepare for the *moulids* of al-Imām al-Shāfi‘ī and al-Imām al-Layth ibn Sa‘d, whose mausoleums (*darīh, maqām*) are located in *al-qarāfa al-sughrā*. The *moulid* of al-

⁴ For the location of this gate, see Haddād, *Qarāfat al-Qāhira*, pp. 128-29n.1.

⁵ ENA, Dhabetiyyat Misr, Reg. no. 14, code: 2003-000014, doc. no. 804, p. 501, 11 Sha‘bān 1264 / 13 July 1848. Emphasis added.

⁶ ENA, Dhabetiyyat Misr, Reg. 601, Code: 2003-001137, doc. no. 172, p. 21, 29 Ramadān 1289 / 30 November, 1872. Emphasis added.

- Imām al-Shāfi‘ī was to last from 7 to 16 Sha‘bān and that of al-Imām al-Layth ibn Sa‘d from 17 to 25 Sha‘bān. “Discipline and order (*al-dhabt wa ‘l-rabt*) were to be maintained during the two *moulids* as is the custom every year (*kamā al-jārī bi-kull ‘ām*)”.⁷ (Fig. 3)
- d) In November 1876 the district heads (*mu‘wāins*) of the different quarters of Cairo were instructed to maintain discipline and order (*dhabt wa rabt*) and to be diligent in “preventing any misdeeds (*husn al-iltifāt wa- ‘adam husūl saqāmāt*) in the *qarāfas* of Bāb al-Nasr, al-Mujāwirīn, Bāb al-Wazīr, and al-Imāmayn, during the upcoming feast, ‘īd al-adhā.⁸ (Fig. 4)
- e) On **????** 1878 an order was issued from the Cairo Governorate to the Cairo Police who in turn wrote to **????** to prepare for the *moulid* of al-Imām al-Layth ibn Sa‘d and to protect and safeguard (*hifz wa siyānat*) the *moulid*.⁹ (Fig. 5)

II. Maintaining law and order within the cemeteries:

Another area of official concern that is reflected prominently in government correspondence is the need to maintain law and order in the cemeteries not only during *moulids* and feast days, but all year round.

It is widely believed that using the cemeteries of Cairo for habitation is a modern phenomenon that is connected to population increase and housing shortage in Cairo. Gamal Hamdan, the famous Egyptian geographer, for example, claims that “the living encroached on the dead to the degree of chasing them; the city of the living intermingled with the city of

⁷ ENA, Dhabtīyyat Misr, Reg. 536, Code: 2003-001026, doc. 383, p. **????**. 25 Rajab 1298 / 27 August 1875. **double check page number, addressee and date.** Emphasis added.

⁸ ENA, Dhabtīyyat Misr, Reg. 538, Code: 2003-001028, doc. 1243, p. **????**, 7 Dhū al-Hijja 1293 / 24 December 1876. **(Get page no and name of the atman)**

⁹ ENA, Dhabtīyyat Misr, Reg. 801, Code: 2003-001565, doc. 1416, p. **? date???**

the dead in a suffocating manner.”¹⁰ Sociologist Ahmad Zāyid, on his part, claims that over time the *qarāfa* independently expanded and its expansion overlapped with that of Cairo proper so that in some parts living dwellings intermingled with graves and living within graves became a matter of fact.¹¹

However, archival evidence as well the historical chronicles leave no doubt that the *qarāfa* had been inhabited from a very early time. This continuous habitation as well as the need to protect the graves, mausoleums, schools and mosques is what prompted the authorities from Fatimid times to pay attention to questions of policing the *qarāfa*. For some periods, the *qarāfa* was designated as a separate “city” apart from al-Qāhira and Misr and even had its own *wālī*, or chief police officer, to maintain order there.¹²

During the nineteenth century the *qarāfa* did not constitute a single administrative unit; rather, different parts of it were administered by the closest *tumn* (lit. one-eighth, i.e. a residential quarter).¹³ Thus, the Imāmein part was administered by the Misr al-Qadīma *tumn*, the Bāb al-Nasr part by the Bāb al-Sha‘riyya *tumn*, and the Bāb al-Wazīr part by al-Darb al-Ahmar *tumn*. When an incident occurred in any of these areas, the shaykh or the *hakīmbāshī* (chief resident doctor) of the closest *tumn* was to conduct thorough investigations. For example, when a fifteen-year boy who was studying in a *kuttāb* in the Imāmein cemetery died after falling in a waterwheel well, and when it was discovered that the area was not properly supervised, the shaykh and *hakīmbāshī* of Misr al-Qadīma were instructed to add the whole area to his jurisdiction and to make the daily rounds checking

¹⁰ Gamal Hamdan, “al-Qāhira al-Kubrā: Dirāsa fī jughrāfiyyat al-mudun,” Preface to Desmond Stewart, *Cairo*, tr. Yahiyā Haqqī (Cairo; Kitāb al-Hilāl, 1969), p. 60; quoted in Haddād, *Qarāfat al-Qāhira*, p. 258.

¹¹ Ahmad Zāyid, “Suknā al-maqābir fī madīnat al-Qāhira,” *al-Kitāb al-Sanawī li-‘ilm al-Ijtīmā’*, v. 3, 1982, pp. 116, 117; quoted in Haddād, *Qarāfat al-Qāhira*, p. 259.

¹² Haddād, *Qarāfat al-Qāhira*, pp. 362-63.

¹³ For most part of the nineteenth century, Cairo had 10 eighths: Azbakiyya, Bab al-Sha‘riyya, Qusūn, al-Jammāliyya, al-Darb al-Ahmar, ‘Abdīn, Darm al-Jamāmīz, al-Khalīfa, in addition to Misr al-Aqdīma and Būlāq.

for security and public hygiene problems.¹⁴ Similarly when a man fell to his death from the rooftop of a certain *hūsh* (*hūsh al-Sharqāwī*) within *al-qarāfa* in Hārat al-Duwidārī close to al-Azhar, it was the *hakīmbāshī* of *tumn* al-Jammāliyya who conducted the post-mortem examination to ascertain the cause of death.¹⁵ (Fig. 6)

Given that the *qarāfa* was not only a cemetery but a residential area, albeit not as heavily populated as the ten *tumns* of Cairo, disputes were bound to arise between its different residents. On the eve of ‘Īd al-Adhā of 1279 (May 1863), for example, a certain Zubair Agha, who was the deputy of the female overseer (*nāzirat*) of the waqf of al-Hāj Khalīl al-Nimr, went to visit the family *hūsh* in *al-qarāfa* only to be prevented from entering by a man called Muhammad al-Leisī and his wife, the salve (*al-jāriya*) Halīma, who had already been living in the *hūsh*. Khalīl then presented a deposition with the police complaining of the couple’s foul language (*qillat hayā*) and asking for their eviction since the *hūsh* belonged to the waqf of which he was the *nāzir*. Halīma denied the charges and argued that the house she lived in belonged to her and that it was not part of the Nimr family *hūsh*. To clarify the matter, the Dhabtīyya wrote to Dīwān al-Awqāf asking them to inform them of the exact limits of the *hūsh*.¹⁶ (Fig. 7)

The literally marginal status of *al-qarāfa*, located as it was on the fringes of the city, might have meant to some people that it was beyond the reach of the law. This is probably what promoted ‘Aysha bint Hasan al-Saifī, a professional prostitute from Būlāq, to abandon her two-year old daughter in *al-qarāfa*. When she was interrogated she said that her

¹⁴ Muhāfazat Misr, Reg. L/1/20/5 (old no. 1043), case no. 36, pp. 162-165, 18 Shawwāl 1277 / 29 April 1861. See also Ma‘iyya Saniyya, Awāmir, Reg. S/1/1/24 (old no. 1907), Khedival Order to Dhabtīyyat Misr no. 32, p. 80, 13 Sha‘bān 1280/23 January 1864 where it is recorded that the entire area was to be administered independently and a new doctor was to oversee the whole medico-legal process there.

¹⁵ ENA, Dhabtīyyat Misr, Reg. 123, Code: 2003-000235, doc. no. 802, p. ???, 15 Jumādā I 1280 / 27 November 1863.

¹⁶ ENA, Dhabtīyyat Misr, Reg. 120, Code: 2003-000232, doc. no. 35, p. ???, 15 Dhū al-Hijja 1279 / 3 June 1863.

husband had deserted her three years earlier; that she had been struggling to raise the child on her own and that eventually “the devil seduced her to leave her daughter in the cemeteries in the hope that someone picks her up and raises her properly.”¹⁷ The *qarāfa*’s marginal location is also probably what prompted the slave women, Fātma, to flee from her mistress and to claim that she had been owned by another woman only to be caught at the Gate of al-Qarāfa (*bāb al-qarāfa*) and to be returned to her legal owner.¹⁸ (Fig. 8)

III. Supervising undertakers and gravediggers:

The need to keep the undertakers under close scrutiny was also one further reason why the entire area of *al-qarāfa* came under the purview of the government. This, in turn, was due to a. the need to collect and update vital statistics, a) task in which that the undertakers (*hānūtīs*), as explained below, played a significant macabre role, and b) the need to deal with disputes among gravediggers (*turabīs*).

a) Before the nineteenth century there was no noticeable attempt by the authorities to collect vital statistics or to have an estimate of the population. It was primarily as an index of the wealth of his empire that the Ottoman Sultan was interested in the residents of Egypt. The Sultan, his viziers and his governors were mainly concerned about Egypt’s ability to feed the empire and also to provide enough food for the poor and needy pilgrims during the annual Hajj.

Remarkably absent from the Ottoman administrative mind was any effective means to deal with the repeated plague epidemics that were known since the middle of the 14th

¹⁷ ENA, Majlis al-Ahkām, Reg. S/7/10/3 (old no. 665), case no. 455, pp. 152-153, 15 Jumāda I 1275 / 21 December 1858. ‘Aysha was sentenced to one year in the *iplikhane*, a women’s prison in Cairo.

¹⁸ ENA, Dhabtīyyat Misr, Reg. 444, Code: 2003-000824, doc. no. 434, p. ???, date ???

century to hit the country every nine years.¹⁹ Indeed, Nasser Ibrahim who studied Egyptian social and economic crises in Egypt during the 17th century remarks that it was very rare for Ottoman governors or for Mamluk emirs to pay any attention to matters of public hygiene. “It is absolutely impossible to notice any significant presence of an overall administrative policy in light of the near total absence of specialized bodies [that provided] ... health services.”²⁰

It is not that the Ottomans had no interest in monitoring the dead in Egypt especially during the repeated devastating epidemics. Rather, their interest was mostly a pecuniary one and was not related to concerns about public hygiene. For example, al-Damurdāshī (d. 1755) says that in the wake of the 1695-96 plague the Ottoman governor was quick to collect the administrative tax paid on title deeds, the *hulwān*, from peasants who were keen to get hold of lands made vacant after their owners had died.²¹ Following the devastating plague epidemic of 1791 an imperial *firman* was sent to the governor in Cairo ordering him to provide information of who among the Ottoman officials had fled the country so that the state could seize their property and moneys.²² Jabartī says that after the 1801 epidemic the Ottoman governor ordered the Mamluk emir Muhammad Bey al-Alfī to “seize the inheritance of those who had died of the plague.”²³

¹⁹ Michael Dols, “The second plague pandemic and its recurrences in the Middle East: 1347-1894,” *JESHO*, 22 (1979), pp. 167-68; quoted in ry; Alan Mikhail, “The nature of Ottoman Egypt: Irrigation, environment and bureaucracy in the long eighteenth century,” PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2008, p. 330.

²⁰ Nasser Ibrahim, *al-Azamāt al-Itmiā’iyya fī Misr fī al-Qarn al-Sābi’ ‘Ashar* (Cairo: Dār al-Āfāq, 1998), p. 184.

²¹ Ahmad al-Damurdāshī, *al-Durra al-Musāna*, pp. 31-33. See also ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Jabartī, *‘Ajā’ib al-āthār fī l-tarājim wa’l-akhbār*, Thomas Philipp and Moshe Perlmann, eds. and trans. (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1994), 1: 163.

²² BOA, HAT, 1412/57500 (29 Z 1205 / 29 August 1791); quoted in Mikhail, “The nature of Ottoman Egypt,” p. 335.

²³ al-Jabartī, *‘Ajā’ib*, 3: 295.

At the same time, various Ottoman governors were aware that a balance needed to be struck between this “exaction logic” and the need to preserve the peace following a plague epidemic. In normal times it was incumbent for *bayt al-māl* to evaluate the legacy of the deceased in preparation for distributing the inheritance according to shari‘a, a process called “registration of the dead” (*al-kashf ‘alā al-amwāt*). Seeing that this process might cause distress due to the necessary delay in burial that it entailed, Maksūd Pasha, the Ottoman governor in 1643, ordered the *bayt al-māl* officials to suspend their usual duties and to allow the survivors to bury their dead without registration (*bidūn kashf*).²⁴

A fundamental change can be detected in the nineteenth century with regards how the Egyptian state dealt with the dead. This shift can be exemplified by the different meaning that the phrase “*al-kashf ‘alā al-amwāt*” came to acquire. Instead of meaning assessing the deceased’s legacy, it now meant conducting a post-mortem examination. This post-mortem examination, also called *al-kashf ‘alā al-amwāt*, was essential for the authorities to be able to identify any unnatural death, weather due to an epidemic or to homicide.

Starting with the early 1830s a concerted effort was made to account for the population of Egypt, so much so that one can say that the “population” in the Foucauldian sense of the term became a major concern of the Egyptian state starting from that time.²⁵ By the 1850s the collection of vital statistics became one of the most important

²⁴ Muhammad ibn Abī al-Surūr al-Bakrī, “al-Kawākib al-Sā’ira fī Akhbār Misr al-Qāhira”, fol. 80; quoted in Ibrahim, *al-Azamāt*, p. 187.

²⁵ For Michel Foucault’s concept of “population” see: Michel Foucault, “Fourth lecture, 1 February 1978,” in *Security, Territory, Population* Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978, ed. Michel Senellart, trans., Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2009), pp. 87-114; Bruce Curtis, “Foucault on Governmentality and Population: the Impossible Discovery,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, v. 27, no. 4, 2002, pp. 505-33; and Danica Dupont and Frank Pearce, “Foucault contra Foucault: Reading the ‘Governmentality’ Papers,” *Theoretical Sociology*, v. 5, no. 2, 2001, pp. 123-58.

functions of a complex government machinery. This information was to be collected from the local barbers (*hallāq̄s*), midwives (*dāyās*), and undertakers (*lahhāds*, *hanūtīs*).²⁶ A general health blueprint issued in 1872 reiterated an earlier order that stipulated that corpses were to be buried only after being examined by a physician. The physician was to provide to the health office in which he worked (there was a health office in each of the 10 *tumns* of Cairo) a burial certificate that would specify the name, sex, and age of the deceased, in addition to the cause of death, the name of the doctor who had treated him/her, the name of the pharmacy from which any medicine was issued, as well as any suspicious signs detected on the body.²⁷ This information was submitted to *bayt and māl*. (Fig. 9) At the end of every day physicians appointed to health offices had to submit detailed reports on the deaths that had occurred in their *tumns*. (Figs. 10 & 11) Crucially, this information had to be double-checked against information supplied by undertakers. Specifically, undertakers had to issue burial certificates of their own for every body they bury stating the name of the deceased, his/her age, and the cause of death. (Figs 12 and 13) And at the end of each month these death certificates that had been handed by undertakers were compared to the information supplied by physicians to make sure

²⁶ For an idea of how meticulous the authorities were in recording this data, see the registers recording the daily statistics of the dead in Cairo (apparently compiled from information supplied by the undertakers and not by the health officers): DWQ: Bayt a-Mâl, Dafâtir Qayd al-Amwât, J (Arabic "jîm") /2/1/1, covering the period 1844-1880.

²⁷ ENA, Dīwān al-Dākhiliyya, Reg. 1320 (Daftar Qayd al-Awāmir), Order no. 35, pp. 9-11, 16 Sahwwāl 1289 / 17 December 1872. See also 'Alī Mubārak, *al-Khitat al-Tawfiqiyya al-Jadida li-Misr al-Qāhira*, 2nd ed. (1969; rpt. Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organization, 1980), I, p. 217.

that there was no discrepancies. On discovering such discrepancies an investigation would be opened and invariably this meant that some foul play had been committed and that someone had been trying to cover up a case of homicide.²⁸ In this way undertakers came to play a crucial role in the process of collection of vital statistics and were therefore under close government scrutiny.

b) The archives of the Cairo Governorate contain an interesting set of documents that date from 1898-1899 and which deal with a dispute in the Sayyida Nafisa cemetery. Although dealing with a part of *al-qarāfa* that is distinct from the Suyuti area, these documents are significant as they shed light on the practices of the gravediggers and how the government tried its best to deal with the occasional disputes among them.

The documents reveal a long-standing dispute between a 60 year-old *turabī* called Muhammad 'Amrūsh, on the one hand, and a 25 year old *turabī* called Ibrāhīm Mutwallī and his mother, Fattūma, on the other hand. The dispute was triggered by Ibrāhīm and his mother trying to snatch areas of *al-qarāfa* that 'Amrūsh had controlled for over 40 years. During funerals and burials performed by 'Amrūsh, Ibrāhīm and his mother would disrupt the services and try to take over. In response, 'Amrūsh would go to the Khalīfa polics station to present one deposition after the other insisting that he did not "control" any part of *al-qarāfa*, that he was no more than a servant of the owners of the *hūshs* and it was based on the desire

²⁸ For an example of a homicide case in which there was an attempt to cover it up by forging the registers in which the names of the dead were recorded see Khaled Fahmy, *Al-Jasad we'l-Hadātha* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub, 2004), pp. 62-64.

of these *hūsh* owners that he be their *turabī* that he managed such a large area of the Sayyida Nafisa cemetery. From the deposition of the shaykh of the *turabīs*, however, it appears that 'Amrūsh had swindled the younger Ibrāhīm many years earlier when he acted as his guardian (*wakīl*).²⁹ (Figs. 14-22)

Two tentative conclusions can be drawn from the copious correspondence on this particular case. The first is that the *turabīs* were not organized in a guild which managed their internal matters and dealt with their disputes that arose among themselves. The repeated references to *shaykh al-turabiyya* in these documents show him with no real power or authority. Moreover, one can detect a hint that the *turabīs* did have a guild (*tāyfa*) which used to arbitrate disputes among its members and which, more importantly, set physical boundaries within *al-qarāfa* clearly delineating the area assigned for each *turabī*. The existence of a guild for undertakers, *hanūtīs* (as opposed to *turabīs*), is known for sure from a law that was passed in November 1887 abolishing the so-called monopoly (*iẖtikān*) of *hanūtīs*.³⁰ According to this old practice, each *hanūtī* had an exclusive responsibility with a given residential area in Cairo to carry the dead and transport them to outside the city for burial. With regards *turabīs*, and as said above, this set of documents pertaining to this dispute between two *turabīs* in the Sayyida Nafisa cemetery, there

²⁹ ENA, Muhāfazat Misr, Carton no. 177, Code: 2002-006230, docs. nos. 7, 9, 10, 11, 284-287, dated 1898-1899.

³⁰ For the text of this law, see Filīb Jallād, *Qāmūs al-Idāra wa'l-Qadā'* (Alexandria: al-Matba'a al-Bukhāriyya, 1890), v. 2, pp. 351-54; see also Dhabtiyyat Misr, Reg. no. 739, Code: 2003-000818, doc. no. 316, p. 20, 3 Jumāda II 1283 / 13 October 1866 for a reference to electing the shaykh of the *hānūtīs*' guild.

is only an oblique reference (but nothing more) to the prior existence of a similar guild. Regardless of whether or not such a guild existed, what these documents show clearly is that the *shaykh al turabiyya* had no authority to adjudicate disputes among the *turabīs* or to mediate between them and the state.

The second conclusion that can be drawn from this set of documents is that the state also did not impose boundaries within *al-qarāfa* so that different *turabīs* would have exclusive rights on clearly demarcated areas. Rather, the police officials and the governor of Cairo would repeatedly insist that the owners of the *hūshs* and graves were the ones who should choose the *turabī* they would like to employ to bury their dead and to take care of their *hūshs*.

IV. Preserving public hygiene

One of the most acute concerns that informed government attention to *al-qarāfa* area throughout much of the nineteenth century was public hygiene.

The public hygiene establishment put in place in the 1840s was obsessed with stench as a way to detect threats to salubrity and good health. The notion that stench was responsible for spreading disease is an old notion that can be traced all the way back to the Greek medical authors and to subsequent physicians in the classical and medieval world who considered illness to be the result of some disturbance in the natural balance of the four bodily humors: bile, phlegm, blood and black bile. The Greek authors believed that the imbalance between these four humors caused the symptoms of the disease, but the question was what caused the misbalance of these humors in the first place. A concept that seemed to

provide the answer to this crucial question was that of miasma, a concept that was of an imprecise nature, shifting allusions over time but which was related, in its original Greek meaning, to pollution or polluting agent. Linked to the belief prevalent since the days of Hippocrates (c. 450-370 BCE) that the environment had an effect on health and disease, miasma seemed to provide an explanation to how disease occurs: the air, if tainted by miasma, is seen as causing outbreaks of disease, causing those who inhale or are exposed to it to have their own humors go out of balance and subsequently to fall ill.³¹

While the precise nature or character of these miasmas remained undefined, it was generally thought that they could be detected through their foul smell. The “thick airs” or miasmas (*‘ufūna, aryāh, awkhām, etc.*) emanating from stagnant lakes, decomposing animal or human bodies, excreta, decaying vegetables, or sick persons were thought to carry the very essence of disease. This connection between the environment and disease etiology remained in place well into the nineteenth century when it was challenged by the so-called contagionist theory that held disease to be an exogenous entity that attacked specific organs or structures of the body. But before the discovery of the actual transmitting agent, germs, through the microscope at the end of the nineteenth century, the battle between these two rival theories could not be decisively won. If anything, the miasmatisers seemed to be gaining ground as they could point out that even though miasmas could not be detected through scientific instruments,³² they revealed their existence through their smell. It is based on this common understanding of the nature of

³¹ See Vivian Nutton, “Humoralism,” pp. 281-291, Caroline Hannaway, “Environment and miasmata,” pp.292-308, Margaret Pelling, “Contagion/Germ Theory/Specificity” pp. 309-334 all in W. F. Bynum and Roy Porter, eds., *Companion Encyclopedia of the History of Medicine*, v. 1, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

³² On the attempt to construct an instrument, the eudiometer, that was hoped could measure the goodness of air see Simon Schaffer, “Measuring virtue: eudiometry, enlightenment and pneumatic medicine,” in Andrew Cunningham and Roger French, eds., *The Medical Enlightenment of the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1990), pp. 281-318.

“thick airs”, miasmas, and the olfactory sense that ‘Alī Mubārak and many other public hygienists before him derived their crusade against such sources of stench as cesspools, stagnant lakes, tanneries, slaughterhouses, fishmongers, and refuse dumps. The idea was that the fetid smell of these places was not simply aesthetically offensive but was morbidly dangerous, and therefore no effort should be spared in making these places more salubrious.

In Egypt the story of the preeminence of the miasmatic theory in the nineteenth century is a checkered one. From the time of founding the Qasr al-‘Ainī medical school in 1827 and modeling it on the “Paris School” Clot Bey, the chief medical officer of Mehmed Ali’s army and the founder and first director of the medical school, was more inclined towards the contagionist model in matters related to training medical students. The “Paris School” embraced Morgagni’s focus on individual organs as the site of pathology and in his own writings Clot Bey seems to have rejected miasmas as the cause of disease. However, in matters related to public health and contrary to his own contagionist ideas with regard to medical education, Clot Bey was a staunch miasmatist as he was deeply suspicious of the contagionist viewpoint to the degree of being dogmatic. In 1840, for example, he asserted that “all enlightened men, “except Italians and Spaniards,” had abandoned the idea of contagion for scrofula, scabies, leprosy, ophthalmia, phthisis, dysentery, typhus, yellow fever, and cholera as well as the plague. He

shudders at the “ridiculous and barbarous custom” of the Romans who segregated pulmonary consumption patients from other patients in their hospitals.”³³

It was this obsession with miasmas as a source of grave danger that informed government efforts to monitor cemeteries as the decomposition of human bodies was considered the prime source of deadly miasmas. Throughout the nineteenth century a perceptible move to segregate the living from the dead could be detected. From as early as 1851 ordinances were issued forbidding burial within the confines of cities.³⁴ In December 1855 the Health Council issued an order to the supervisor (*mu‘āwin*) of Būlāq forbidding burial within his district and instructing him to summon the head of the guild of *turabīs* (*shaykh tāyfat al-turabiyya*) in order to inform him of the new ban.³⁵ (Fig. 23) In August 1876 a cemetery that used to exist in Azbakiyya was closed down and orders were issued to collect all human remains there and place them in *sahārīj* (literally cisterns, but may mean boxes) beneath the Mosque of al-Shaykh ‘Abdel-Qādir.³⁶ (Fig. 24) In April 1877 a cemetery (*qarāfa*) that existed in al-‘Ataba al-Khadra was to be removed.³⁷ (Fig. 25)

The concern about miasmas was also what prompted the authorities to regulate when and how to open graves in order to exhume bodies and to re-bury them in a new location. This was often the case with Europeans who were buried in Egypt but whose families subsequently requested via their consuls to repatriate the bodies. After lengthy

³³ Kuhnke, *Lives at Risk* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1990), p. 165, quoting from Antoine Barthèlme Clot-bey, *De la Peste observée en Egypte: Recherches et considerations sur cette maladie* (Paris: Fortin, Masson et Cie., 1840).

³⁴ ENA, Muhāfazat Misr, Reg. M/5/2, doc. 19, p. 37, on 7 Rabī‘ I 1268 / 31 December 1851.

³⁵ ENA, Dhabtīyyat Misr, Reg. no. 60, code: 2003-000078, doc. no. 924, 23 Rabī‘ I 1272 / 3 December 1855.

³⁶ ENA, Dhabtīyyat Misr, Reg. no. 216, Code: 2003-000425, doc. no. 888, Rajab 1293 / August 1876.

³⁷ ENA, Dhabtīyyat Misr, Reg. no. 170, Code: 2003-000360, doc. no. 504, 13 Safar 1287 / 15 April 1870.

deliberations, the Department of Health Inspection of Cairo agreed to these requests stipulating that under such cases, a new coffin should be secured and it should be tightly closed and stamped from four sides by the seals of both the Cairo Health Department and the relevant consulate. A special railway carriage would be prepared for the transportation of the coffin to Alexandria to be shipped to Europe. The cost of the whole operation would be covered by the family of the deceased.³⁸ Obsessed about the deadly brews that would emanate from decomposing bodies it was decided that no body could be exhumed before six months had elapsed after death.³⁹ Furthermore, the operation should take place either before sunrise or after sunset when the heat was thought not to be strong enough to allow the putrid air escaping from the grave to cause much harm.⁴⁰

This same fear of miasmas was also behind an 1879 ban on using taxicabs to transport dead bodies to be buried in *al-qarāfa*. The order banning such practice explicitly states that transporting a dead body “will result in the spread of miasmas (*intishār al-‘ufūna*) in the taxicab, and if the deceased had been afflicted with an infectious disease, then it is feared that this will cause the infection of [passengers] close to the body.”⁴¹ (Fig. 26)

Following the British military occupation of 1882 one can see a concerted effort to improve the state of cemeteries throughout Egypt. The new British medical authorities were partly alarmed by the devastating cholera epidemic of 1881. They were also informed by a long standing Victorian belief “that the only safeguard against epidemic diseases lay in abundance of fresh air, pure drinking water, sanitary disposal of organic

³⁸ ENA, Muhāfazat Misr, Reg. L/2/31/1, doc. 124, p. 44, 8 Sha‘bān 1296 / 28 July 1879.

³⁹ ENA, Muhāfazat Misr, Reg. L/2/31/1, doc. 279, p. 67, 1 Ramadān 1296 / 19 August 1879.

⁴⁰ ENA, Muhāfazat Misr, Reg. L/2/31/1, doc. 61, p. 74, 22 Ramadān 1296 / 9 September 1879.

⁴¹ ENA, Dhabtīyyat Misr, Reg. 536, Code: 2003-001026, doc. 1260, 13 Dhū al-Qa‘da 1296 / 28 November 1879.

wasters, avoidance of overcrowding, and temperate personal habits.”⁴² It was this anitontagionist attitude that informed the many reports on the sanitary conditions of Egypt’s cemeteries.

This short but comprehensive report triggered numerous fact finding missions that reported on specific cemeteries in Cairo from a hygienic point of view. On 26 August 1883 the Council of Ministers issued an order to have a through investigation of all the cemeteries of Cairo and “measures that should be taken in them to protect public hygiene”. In response, a committee was composed of a delegate (*mandūb*) from the Public Works Ministry (*al-ashghāl*), a delegate from the Department of Health Inspection of Cairo (*taftīsh sihhat Misr*) and a delegate from the Public Hygiene Establishment (*majlis al-sihha al-‘umūmiyya*) and wrote a detailed report dated 26 January 1884 about the state of Cairo cemeteries specifying which ones should be closed down and which should continue functioning. The details were as follows:

- The Latin Catholics cemetery in Fumm al-Khalīg was found suitable for burial to continue functioning
- The English Protestant cemetery in Fumm al-Khalīg was to continue functioning
- The Armenian and Coptic Orthodox cemeteries in Deir Mar Mīnā close to Fumm al-Khalīg was to continue functioning
- The American Protestant cemetery to the north of Deir Abū al-Seifein was to continue functioning as it was good and surrounded by a fence.
- The Armenian Catholic cemetery in Old Cairo was to continue functioning

⁴² Kuhnke, *Lives at Risk*, p. 106.

- The Greek Orthodox cemetery in Old Cairo within the area known as Mar Guirguis was to continue functioning
 - However, the report added, according to an order from the Ministry of Interior dated 27 September 1883, burial was forbidden both in Mar Guirguis and Abu Seifien. The commission recommended, therefore, that alternative areas in the desert be given to the communities who used to bury their dead in these two areas.
- The Coptic catholic cemetery in Old Cairo was found unsuitable and the order preventing burial in it was to be upheld. “In addition, the [earlier] order preventing burial in all residential areas (*masākin*) which have private cemeteries (*madāfīn khusūsiyya*) in the two monasteries of Mar Guirguis and Abū al-Seifein is to be upheld.”
- The graves (*turab*) in the Muslima area (جهة مسلمة) in Old Cairo in the middle of the desert (*fī wasat al-khalā*) are suitable for burial.
- The desert-cemetery (*sahra*, صحرة) of Nakhkhāl in Old Cairo that is close to the Mosque of Amr is suitable for burial.
- The Maronite *gabbāna* known as Deir al-Baharī in Old Cairo is suitable for burial.
- Burial within the desert-cemetery of ‘Alī Zein al-‘Abidīn (صحرة سيدي زين العابدين) should continue to be prevented.
- The desert-cemetery of Sayyida Nafīsa (صحرة السيدة نفيسة) is suitable for burial.
- The desert-cemetery of al-Imāmein (صحرة الإمامين) is suitable for burial.
- The qarāfa of Bāb al-Nasr is suitable for burial.

- The qarāfas of Bāb al-Wazīr, al-Mugāwrīn, and Sahrat al-Ghurayyib (صحرة الغريب) are all suitable for burial.
- The cemeteries (*turab*) of al-Waylī al-Sughrā, Qubbat al-Ghūrī, al-Dimirdāsh, Deir Ambrose, close to al-Dimirdāsh are suitable for burial.
- Gabbānat Mīnyat al-Sirg is to be closed down and no burial is to be allowed in it as its landed is depressed and lower than the close by canal that passes in its western side.
- Gabbānat Shubrā is to be allowed but only if it is raised to the level of the canal's dyke.⁴³ (Fig. 27)

Apparently based on this and other fact finding missions, the Director of the Public Hygiene Establishment (*mudīr masālih al-sihha al-'umūmiyya*) presented a short but inclusive report to the Minister of Interior who, in turn, presented it to the Cabinet in its meeting on 24 April 1884. In that report the Director mentioned four areas pertaining to public hygiene that required immediate attention: stagnant ponds and lakes (*al-hufar wa'l-birak wa mustanqa 'āt al-miyāh al-rākida*), the sewers and latrines of mosques (*magārī wa marāhīd al-gawāmi'*), cemeteries (*al-gabbānāt*) and hospitals (*al-isbītāliyyāt*).⁴⁴

The section on cemeteries starts by stating categorically that their condition is not a good one and that not enough attention had been given to organizing them.⁴⁵ The report mentions the following specific problems with cemeteries in Egypt:

⁴³ ENA, Majlis al-Wuzarā', carton no. 10, Code: 0075-000436-17, on end of Rabī' I 1301 / 26 January 1884.

⁴⁴ ENA, Majlis al-Wuzarā', carton no. 10, Code 0075-028784, session of 24 April 1884.

⁴⁵ It should be added apropos that this was typical of British discourse in various aspects of the administration. In order to justify, financially and morally, British presence, it was in the interest of British officials to depict the situation before their advent as fundamentally faulty.

1. they are built on low ground;
2. they are not fenced off;
3. some of them have open graves with exposed corpses that are prey to stray animals and wild dogs; and
4. they are located close to residential areas and are sometimes intermixed with them.

The Director of the Public Hygiene Establishment then proposed that the following measures be taken to ameliorate this deplorable situation:

1. relocating cemeteries to an area that is at least 200 meters away from residential areas, and to the south of them;
2. they should be build on high ground;
3. in the countryside if it proves impossible to find an area with these specifications for each village, then it is possible to have two or three villages have a common cemetery that met these health specifications.
4. a brick fence should be built around each cemetery;
5. the cemetery (*gabbāna*) should be divided if it extends over a large area “as is the case in Mecca”;
6. burial should be done according to health regulations and graves should be air- and water-tight (*muhkamat al-ighlāq*).⁴⁶ (Fig. 28)

The degree to which the anticontagionist ideas inform these measures is obvious. The concern about building a brick, rather than, e.g. a wooden fence is clearly a sign of a worry about the spread of deadly miasmas. So is the obsession with finding an elevated spot that would be at a big enough distance from residential areas.

⁴⁶ ENA, Majlis al-Wuzarā’, Code: 0075-028784, session on 24 April 1884

Another response to the 26 August 1883 order of the Council of Ministers to investigate the health status of all cemeteries of Cairo was a report dated 6 July 1884 that was written jointly by the chief doctor (*hakīmbāshī*) of the Sayyida Zeinab quarter and the Director of the Department of Health Inspection of Cairo (*mufattish sihhat Misr*). That report investigated the Zein al-‘Abidīn cemetery to the south of Cairo and was careful to measure the distance that separated it from the closest residential areas. It recommended closing down the cemetery but suggested that it could continue to function only if three measures were immediately taken. These were : 1. building a fence all around it, 2. to have a distance of at least 200 meters to separate the actual graves within it from the closest houses outside it, and, 3. to inform the Awqāf, the Ashghāl and the Muhāfāza not to allow construction next to it.⁴⁷ (Fig. 29) This report was endorsed and forwarded to the Council of Ministers by the Director of the Public Hygiene Establishment (*mudīr masālih al-sihha al-‘umūmiyya*).⁴⁸ (Fig. 30)

However, when this report was received by the Council of Ministers, the Ministry of Interior wrote saying that the National Council of Public Health should clarify who is to incur the cost of building these fences, and also wondered why the Council reported only on one cemetery alone in Cairo. They requested a through report on the status of all cemeteries in Cairo stating specifically the distance that separated them from the closest residential area.⁴⁹ (Fig. 31)

⁴⁷ ENA, Majlis al-Wuzarā’, carton no. 10, Code: 0075-00436-11, on 12 Ramadān 1301 / 6 July 1884.

⁴⁸ ENA, Majlis al-Wuzarā’, carton no. 10, Code: 0075-00436-10, on 14 Ramadān 1301 / 8 July 1884.

⁴⁹ ENA, Majlis al-Wuzarā’, carton no. 10, Code: 0075-00436-07, on 5 Shawwāl 1301 / 28 July 1884.

In response the Director of the Public Hygiene Establishment wrote a detailed report of all the cemeteries within Cairo that are too close to residential areas.⁵⁰ (Fig. 32)

These included “the cemeteries of

- Al-Dimirdāsh
- Deir Ambrose in Abbasiyya
- The western part of *gabbānat* Bāb al-Nasr
- The area of the Bāb al-Wazīr that is close to the residential areas.
- The cemetery that is south-east ‘Arab al-Yasār to the south of Citadel
- Minyat al-Sirg in Subrā (burial in it had been stopped since the cholera)
- Deir Mar Guirguis in Old Cairo (ditto)
- Deir Abu Seifein in Old Cairo (ditto)
- The Coptic catholic cemetery in Old Cairo (ditto)
- The Būsa cemetery in Būlāq (burial in it had been stopped a long time ago)
- Deir al-Amir Tādrus (ditto)
- Deir Babiliyūn (ditto)
- Deir al-Malāk (ditto)
- Deir al-Mawārna (ditto)
- An old deserted cemetery close to Sīdī mazlūm in Shubrā (ditto)
- Cemetery in the middle of Gazīret Badrān. (ditto)
- The northern part of the Siyyida Nafisa cemetery is close to residential areas but burial is still permitted in it.

⁵⁰ ENA, Majlis al-Wuzarā’, carton no. 10, Code: 0075-00436-05, on 11 Shawwāl 1301 / 4 August 1884.

- The cemetery of Shubrā is lower than the canal’s dyke and burial in it should be stopped.”⁵¹ (Fig. 33)

These serious public hygiene concerns and specifically this fear of miasmas and putrid air emanating from decomposing bodies culminated in a comprehensive law passed in 1892. Known in Arabic as *Qānūn al-Gabbānāt* and in French as *Règlement sur les Cimetières*, this law reiterated many of the public hygiene regulations we saw earlier. Thus, Article One stated that cemeteries should be built beyond the wind path that usually blows over a city or a village (*taht al-riyāh al-mutasalitta ‘ādatan ‘alā al-madina aw al-qarya*) and should be located at least 500 meters away from the city/village and at least 200 meters from a residential area (*mahall maskūn*). Article Two stipulated that cemeteries should be built on elevated ground and should be surrounded by a fence that should not prevent the circulation of air. Article Five stated that cemeteries should not be built close to any source of water. Article Nine repeated the much earlier order of forbidding any burial within the confines in the city, e.g. in parks, mosques, churches or synagogues. An exception may be made, however, to honor some great people. In this case the Public Hygiene Establishment should give its approval. Articles Ten and Eleven reiterated earlier orders about the necessity of having a death certificate issued by a doctor any body to be buried. Articles 12-24 put down specific regulations on how to open graves, exhume cadavers and transport bodies.⁵² (Figs. 34-37).

Conclusion:

⁵¹ ENA, Majlis al-Wuzarā’, carton no. 10, Code: 0075-00436-06, on 7 Shawwāl 1301 / 31 July 1884.

⁵² *Qānūn al-Gabbānāt* (Cairo: Būlāq, 1892). A copy of the law both in Arabic and French is in: ENA, Majlis al-Wuzara’, carton no. 9, Code: 0075-000408.

Two points can be drawn from the survey of government documents pertaining to the *qarāfa* housed in the Egyptian National Archives:

1. From the above survey it is apparent that public hygiene appears was the main source of government concern regarding the *qarāfa* area in Cairo and cemeteries in Egypt at large throughout the nineteenth century. As revealed by the surveyed documents the government did have other concerns, namely, preserving security within the *qarāfa*, supervising the *moulids* there, and monitoring and organizing undertakers and gravediggers. But none of these concerns approaches the concern about public hygiene if we take the number of documents or their specificity as indications of these official concerns.
2. The documents are also significant for what is missing from them. Specifically, with all the concern about health and public hygiene, we do not read about any attempts to empty the *qarāfa* of its living inhabitants. The only document that I found that is remotely connected to this matter is one dated 13 October 1871 issued by the Police of Cairo forbidding people from sleeping overnight in the *qarāfa* given that the winter months had arrived and “if the people sleep in the *qarāfa*, they will fall ill due to the cold and the dampness (*rutūba*) [of the winter].... Visitors should be allowed from morning till sunset, and whoever is found sleeping at night in the *qarāfa* will be arrested and sent to the Police station.⁵³ (Fig. 38) Nor do we find any reflection of aesthetic and/or preservation questions regarding the historic monuments of the *qarāfa*.

⁵³ ENA, Dhahbiyyat Misr, reg. no. 525, Code: 2003-001015, doc. 884, 28 Rajab 1288 / 13 October 1871.

