This study treats various aspects of the economic history of Ottoman Damascus in the period 1121–1172 /1708–1758. The late seventeenth century had witnessed a breakdown in centralised authority and security in Ottoman Syria, one of whose most obvious symptoms was constant bedouin raids on the hajj caravans. The imperial authorities in Istanbul sought to address this problem in the early eighteenth century through an aggressive centralisation effort designed to bring the provinces more firmly under its direct control. Damascus benefitted from these efforts and enjoyed a period of economic recovery. This article uses local primary sources to examine both the reasons for and the effects of this growth in prosperity on the people of Damascus and its environs. It begins with an overview of the role that the hajj caravan played in the economic and demographic growth of the region. It then examines different social groups in and around Damascus, most notably the ‘ulama and the peasantry, and concludes with a description of the currency exchange reforms undertaken by the Ottomans at the end of the period under discussion.

The Economic Status of Damascus

The Ottoman Empire was not immune from the political and economic changes that affected world markets in the eighteenth century,¹ and Damascus was in an excellent position to profit from the Ottoman response to these changes. Not only was the city a traditional centre

for local trade, but it was also the starting point for the hajj caravan and the western terminus of the Silk Road.²

One of the oldest cities in the world, Damascus had always been influential in the trade and politics of southwest Asia, but its potential for growth was especially great in the early eighteenth century. First, improved security and agricultural innovation meant that local merchandise was reaching Damascus from its hinterland on a more regular basis.³ Second, the Ottoman-Safavid wars of the period effectively closed the east-west trade route between Isfahan and Aleppo and forced trade to shift south to Damascus. Damascus also benefited at Aleppo’s expense when Russia briefly occupied the silk-producing regions of northern Iran between 1119/1721 and 1121/1722. The result was that the axis of trade changed from Aleppo-Isfahan to Damascus-Mecca.⁴ Damascus also became a centre for trade with the Mediterranean, thereby improving its status as a regional trading capital.⁵

Abdul-Karim Rafeq and André Raymond have suggested that European influence played a great role in the economic growth of Damascus. To support this they point to Western cultural influences in the northeast and southwest suburbs of the city, which were located along the important road that ran from the northern Hawran, through Palestine, and into the Hijaz.⁶ However, a close look at maps and the legal and financial registers of the period shows that European influence cannot have been the single most important factor in Damascus’s prosperity.⁷ Granted, the south-western suburbs had ties to Europe via Mount Lebanon, but demographic development was tied to the increasing shortage of building space within the city walls and, more importantly, to the pilgrimage. These factors should not be ignored.

² EI², ‘Dimashk’.
³ Antoine Abdel Nour, Introduction à l’histoire urbaine de la Syrie ottomane (XVIᵉ–XVIIIᵉ siècle), Beirut, Université Libanaise, 1982, 338.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ EI², ‘Dimashk’.