DAMIETTE AND SYRIAN-EGYPTIAN TRADE IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY*

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The conditions of trade in the eastern Mediterranean/Ottoman region, particularly in the maritime Arab provinces, changed noticeably during the course of the eighteenth century. At the beginning of the century the Ottoman central government still had tentative control over the major ports through which domestic trade and commerce with the European states passed in both directions. The administration could still manipulate the economies of the Arab provinces to its benefit, could still shield those provinces from European incursions, whether economic or political, and could still hold back the momentum of the locally based political forces that challenged its rule. It could also still provide general security to the inhabitants of its most important Arab provinces, namely Egypt and Syria. By the end of the eighteenth century the Ottoman government could provide none of the benefits of strong, centralised rule. As a result, conditions of trade in the eastern Mediterranean changed to a significant degree, noticeably affecting the ports engaged in the exchange of goods between Egypt and Syria.

In Egypt, the rise of the Qazdağlı mamluk faction, which was marked by ‘Ali Bey’s ‘rebellion’ against the central government (1768–72) and the autonomy of the duumvirs Ibrahim Bey and Murad Bey (1775–98, with interruptions) who followed their own foreign policy towards the European states, and in Syria, the rise and fall of Dhahir al-‘Umar in Galilee, Jazzar Pasha in Acre, and the ‘Azm governors in Damascus, had enormous repercussions on the politics of those two provinces, on the conditions of trade between Egypt and Syria, and between those two provinces and Europe.¹

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Egypt is joined by land to Syria/Palestine, and clearly travellers, armies, and merchants passed with caravans between the two provinces, yet the overland route is the least researched and least understood. André Raymond has remarked that, in contrast to the great pilgrim caravans departing Cairo and Damascus, the North African caravan, or even the caravans moving merchandise from the Sudan to Cairo, goods moved over the Egyptian-Syrian route in a number of smaller caravans, perhaps of a mere one hundred camels each. In the absence of relevant sources that can provide statistical data on overland exchanges between these two provinces, Raymond could find little other information on this trade in his excellent survey of Egyptian trade routes in the eighteenth century. In contrast, a wide range of European, Ottoman and local archival sources permit us to understand much more about the seaborne trade between these two Arab provinces. This trade, and its consequences for the provinces’ Mediterranean ports, will be the focus of this paper.

The rise of the Melkite community

Much of the history of trade in the Syrian and Egyptian provinces in the eighteenth century centres on the migration of an adept and aggressive minority of Christian merchants to the coastal ports of the region. Given impetus by a religious conflict within the Greek Orthodox community of northern Syria, the diasporas of the so-called Melkite or Greek Catholic Christians to the Mediterranean seaports of Egypt and the Levant was one of the most important developments affecting trade between Egypt and Syria and between these two provinces and Europe. This small community, driven from inland Syria by the strenuous opposition of the Greek Orthodox clergy, and particularly of the Greek patriarch in Istanbul, quickly established itself in most of the ports along the Syrian-Palestinian coast and in Egypt, where it

2 Dick Douwes, *The Ottomans in Syria: A History of Justice and Oppression*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2000, 55, n. 30, asserts that ‘There are no reliable figures at hand for the regional trade conducted in Damascus prior to the 1830s…’

3 George Baldwin, the British vice-consul in Alexandria, estimated the value of this caravan trade with Syria at £50,000 (about 20,000,000 paras). See Baldwin, *Political Recollections Relative to Egypt*, London, H. Baldwin and Son, 1802, 231. Raymond cites Baldwin’s estimate in his discussion of the overland trade with Syria; see *Artisans et commerçants au Caire au XVIIIe siècle*, Damas, Institut français de Damas, 1973, Vol. I, 171–73.