PROPERTIES AROUND DAMASCUS IN THE
NINETEENTH CENTURY

BY

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THE city of Damascus is surrounded by a perennially irrigated
region known as the Gūţa, watered by the Baradā river and its
branches. Historically the Gūţa has been well known for the abun-
dance and variety of its fruits and vegetables, contributing to
Damascus’s reputation as a verdant paradise. The Gūţa’s bounda-
ries are well defined to the north, west and south by hills and moun-
tains, but no natural barrier separates it from the Syrian desert to
the east. Between the Gūţa and the desert is a transitional region
called the Marţ («pasture land»), irrigated by the Baradā only part
of the year, and known principally for its grain.

Over the centuries the Gūţa and Marţ have been integral parts
of Damascus’s economy. Although the city’s periods of greatest
prosperity have been linked to its role in international and regional
trade, the existence of the Gūţa explains Damascus’s historical con-
tinuity. This irrigated hinterland has been a guarantor of
Damascus’s survival even when trade became depressed or trade
routes shifted away from it. The Gūţa provided Damascus with a
variety of foodstuffs, as well as raw materials for the city’s artisanal
production, for which Gūţa villagers were a major market. At the
very least, the raw and processed products of the Gūţa ensured that
Damascus would be an important market for its own central Syrian
hinterland, and that Damascus would have a regional trade even
when major international trade routes bypassed it.

Therefore, the Gūţa and adjoining regions (including the Marţ,
the Baradā river valley and some smaller river valleys) have been
significant in the economic history of Damascus. The rural

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hinterland assumed greater relative importance in periods when other parts of the city’s economy, including its artisanal and trading sectors, were depressed or disrupted. One such period occurred in the nineteenth century. In the 1840s and 1850s, textile weaving (the largest branch of the artisanate) was severely depressed due to stiff competition from machine-made English imports; and in the 1870s, the newly opened Suez Canal diverted from Damascus much of the regional and transit trade which its merchants had previously carried on with Mecca, Baghdad and points further east.

Damascus’s šarî‘a law-court archives are a valuable primary source for studying the economy of the nineteenth-century rural hinterland. Until the last quarter of the century, the šarî‘a law courts were the principal institutions for registering sales, rentals and other transactions pertaining to property in and around Damascus. This article describes nineteenth-century agricultural and rural properties in the Damascus region, derived from a sample of the šarî‘a law-court registers. The sample reveals the types of rural/agricultural properties that interested Damascene investors, since city people formed the majority of buyers and lessees. The properties are divided into three categories: landed, residential, and commercial.

**Landed Properties**

Landed properties ranged in size from small market-gardens (hākūras) to large estates (hānūts) and entire villages. Except for mulk (freehold) land, the land itself was not bought, although the right to use it could be transferred or leased. Properties on mulk and mîrî (state-owned) land were commonly bought and sold.

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2 A total of 437 cases dated between 1828 and 1900 were surveyed at ten-year intervals.