BOOK REVIEWS


Ottoman Lebanon was an unusual case within Bilād al-Shām and the Arab East. At the political and socio-economic levels, Mount Lebanon had set for itself, since the beginning of the Ottoman conquest in 1516, a pattern different from the rest of the Empire: (i) Its ruling families were not the traditional ashrāf families that ruled from within the cities of the Empire—a system that the Ottomans had inherited from the Arabs and adapted to their own needs; the notables of Mount Lebanon were neither descendants of the Prophet nor, necessarily, Sunni Ḥanafis, dominant in the urban parts of the Empire among its “leading families”; in addition, some of Mount Lebanon’s “rulers,” such as the Druze Fakhr al-Din al-Ma‘nī II and Bashir II the Great, whose family had converted from the Sunni to the Maronite faith, enjoyed considerable political and economic “autonomy,” something that, in four centuries of Ottoman rule in Bilād al-Shām, only Dāhir al-‘Umar had dared to assert in Palestine, and only for a very limited period of time; (ii) Because of the relative “autonomy” of its rulers, the complexity of its confessional “minority” system, and the limitations imposed by the nature of the land, the timār/sipāhī taxation system (whereby the élite Ottoman cavalrmen [sipāhīs] were granted parcels of land [timārs] for tax collection) never developed in Mount Lebanon and the iltizām system (a tax-farming system whereby parcels of land were granted by auction on a one- to three-year basis, usually to an a’yān family) was adopted right from the beginning (it took the entire seventeenth century for the iltizām system to be reinforced elsewhere in the Empire); (iii) The Maronite church, which was linked to Rome in the mid-sixteenth century, went through a process of “rationalization” and, since the early eighteenth century, provided Mount Lebanon with the ideological superstructure it needed; (iv) Finally, the nobility was not separated from its peasantry on an urban-rural basis as was the case in many parts of the Empire; instead, the physical proximity of the nobility and their peasants, and the role of the Maronite church in providing support for the poorer peasant classes (among whom a large number of the clergy were recruited), provided the peasantry with a “political consciousness” unusual in the Arab East: the Lebanese peasants organized “revolts” against their muqāta‘īs on several occasions in the nineteenth century.

One would expect such a rich historical setting to have attracted many researchers, students of the Ottoman Empire and the Mashriq in particular. Surprisingly, not much has been done since the 1960s when Chevallier and

© E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1997

Islamic Law and Society 4,1
Hariq produced the first serious works of synthesis on Mount Lebanon. It is only recently, probably due to the technical “end” of the civil war and the pax Syriaca in the region, that historiographical activity has been renewed. Unfortunately, the current work lacks the vitality and intelligence of the old masters.

‘Abdullah Ibrahim Sa‘id sets for himself the difficult task of exploring the different types of property in Mount Lebanon and the Biqa‘ valley and their evolution from 1861 until 1914. He observes that the Ottomans followed the same principle in acquiring state lands as did the Arab-Muslim conquerors in the seventh century and thereafter: once a land was acquired by conquest, it became state owned (arādī amiriyya or simply mirī in Ottoman terminology); “private” land (mulk) was either subject to the ushr, if owned by Muslims, or to the kharāj, if owned by non-Muslims; other categories of land included mawāt (uncultivated lands that did not produce any revenues and were therefore regarded as “dead” by the state), and waqf. The early Arab conquerors who had established their authority over Syria, Iraq and Egypt and who were entrenched in garrison cities (amṣār) exploited their state-owned lands through the iqṭā‘ system. In practice, this required giving large parcels of lands (muqāta‘āt) for exploitation mainly to individuals from the conquering armies, thereby contributing to the establishment of a land-owning military bureaucracy, a feature that characterized all subsequent Islamic empires.

The Ottomans obviously were very much attracted to a system of land tenure and taxation that kept the majority of cultivable lands state owned and that eliminated the need to spend large sums of cash on their army—the bulk of their cavalrmen were granted timārs in lieu of salaries. By the late seventeenth century, the timār system was gradually and successfully replaced by the ilṭizām, a more “modern” system of taxation and rent that separated once and for all the military functions from those of tax and rent collection.

Sa‘id’s discussion of the period before the middle of the nineteenth century takes up roughly the first half of his book; he devotes the rest of it to an examination of forms of property—most of the old forms (such as iqṭā‘, kharāj, mawāt, etc.) have survived albeit with modified connotations reflecting changing socio-economic conditions—from the establishment of the Mutāṣṣarrifiyya regime in Mount Lebanon in 1861 until the breakup of the First World War. The Mutāṣṣarrifiyya regime was created after the failure of the two qa‘immaqāms system which was implemented right after the Egyptian withdrawal in 1840. This system divided the territory of Mount Lebanon into two separate administrative units—a Maronite one in the North and a Druze one in the South—each known as a qa‘immaqāmiyya. It came to an end during the 1860 civil war. Sa‘id’s decision to begin his exposé in 1861 no doubt was prompted less by an interest in the Mutāṣṣarrifiyya’s political successes or failures than by a desire to understand the economic and social implications of the Land Code of 1858, which “transformed land into a commodity that is bought and sold on the real estate market” (p. 138).

Toward the end of the Mutāṣṣarrifiyya regime in Mount Lebanon (Sa‘id does not specify a date here but he seems to be referring to the turn of this century), 32.6% of the total land surface was privately owned (mulk); 6.3%