CONDITIONS OF TRADE IN THE
EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN:
AN APPRAISAL OF EIGHTEENTH-
CENTURY OTTOMAN DOCUMENTS
FROM ALEPPO

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What is new and what is traditional in a particular epoch of
Ottoman history? This question preoccupies the thoughts of all prac-
titioners of the craft. This paper examines what is reported by
eighteenth-century European diplomats and merchants on the subject
of their nations’ trade with the Ottomans and later interpreted by
modern historians, and compares the image presented in these works
with what can be gleaned from local records emanating from
Ottoman provinces. The purposes of such an exercise is not to expose
the subjectivity or selectivity of any of the sources on which our pres-
ent understanding of the Near Eastern trading phenomenon has cone
to be based, but to try to provide a clearer framework for our assess-
ment of the commercial characteristics of the age by revealing some
of its lesser known aspects. As a starting point must be emphasized
that at no time prior to the Napoleonic age must we seek the com-
pliancy in trading matters that naturally emerged among the
Ottomans after military alliances such as that forged with the British
commander Sir Sidney Smith in 1799 aimed at removing Napoleon’s
forces from Egypt, or the triple alliance against Russia in the Crimea
in 1855. World conditions in the nineteenth century necessitated
greater reliance on international diplomacy and transformed the
Ottomans’ relationship with the major European powers.
If we acknowledge the exceptional character of the nineteenth century and disregard it as an appropriate framework for comparisons, what then can be said to have been significantly different about the conditions of trade with the Ottoman empire in the eighteenth century as compared with earlier periods? The existing literature on the subject in western languages\(^1\) repeatedly emphasizes that the century was characterized by a general trend of decentralizing of authority and loss of bureaucratic efficiency, which left the government incapable of protecting merchants from harassment by local magnates and officials. If government efficiency in the realm of control over commercial affairs is taken as a valid measure of central authority, then a look at earlier periods should reveal a comparatively greater success in enforcement of customs regulations and official trade and taxation policies.

A single document from the beginning of the previous century serves as proof that an active contraband trade, rampant evasion of customs, and other signs of "weak" central government were strikingly in evidence in earlier periods, even those associated with firm central authority. From the above-mentioned document, a report submitted by the sultan’s customs commissioner at the port of Volos

\(^1\) The long list of "adventurer traders" (as distinguished from soldiers of fortune, diplomats, missionaries, and pilgrims) whose accounts are primarily concerned with developing or exploring the commercial potential of the Middle East commences in the late sixteenth century with two Englishmen, William Harborne and John Sanderson. See S.A. Skilliter, *William Harborne and the trade with Turkey 1578-1582: a documentary study of the first Anglo-Ottoman relations* (Oxford, 1977), and W. Foster (ed.), *The Travels of John Sanderson in the Levant 1584-1602* (London, 1931) [Hakluyt Society, Second Series No. 67]. Sanderson’s account has a particularly lugubrious air about it, but his insistence on the insalubrious conditions prevalent in the Syrian ports in those years probably accurately reflects true conditions. The most frequently cited synthetic studies about trading conditions in the Ottoman empire during the eighteenth century are: P. Masson, *Histoire de commerce français dans le Levant au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1911), F. Charles Roux, *Les échelles de Syrie et de Palestine au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1928), and A.C. Wood, *A History of the Levant Company* (Oxford, 1953). See also the list of works singled out by Owen in his review of the issue of 'decline' in the historiography on the Middle East, R. Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy 1800-1914* (London, 1981), pp. 1-23 and esp. n.2 on p. 294.