Introduction

During the past decade, the thesis of a general and catastrophic decline in the economic vitality and political efficacy of the Ottoman empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, has been called into question. Critics have charged that the idea is lacking in theoretical sophistication—since it rests upon a biological analogy wherein civilizations are supposed to experience a life-cycle, while overlooking (in the case of the Ottoman state) the complex and regionally differentiated processes by which power is concentrated, wielded, sustained, and diffused. Even more important, the idea of a universal economic decline is certainly not warranted by the evidence at hand. Recent research concerning Ottoman ports indicates that a very substantial trade was carried on with India and Iran; and statistical reports of eighteenth-century maritime trade in the Mediterranean prove that a vast domestic (i.e., intra-imperial) commerce was complemented by increasingly substantial, though subsidiary, exchanges with Europe.

In both the internal and international circuits of Ottoman Mediterranean trade, the port of Alexandria was pivotal. Daniel Panzac has identified the
Istanbul-Izmir-Alexandria route as the principal axis of internal seaborne trade in the eighteenth century.3) It is all the more surprising, therefore, that the city of Alexandria in the Ottoman period exhibits unmistakable marks of a prolonged decline, as seen in its depressed population, want of amenities, vulnerability to attack, and isolation from its hinterland. The purpose of this article is to explore this paradox, wherein Alexandria functioned as a hub of Ottoman trade, but remained itself a veritable backwater town. The paradox can be resolved by examining the microcosm—causes and features of the cyclical contraction of Alexandria in the Ottoman era—and by considering the effect which changing political conditions in Egypt had upon the city. Specifically, it will be argued that environmental factors, especially the recurrence of epidemics and water shortages, restricted the growth of the city, despite the presence of considerable liquid wealth in the local economy. In addition, the weakness of provincial administration prevented the establishment of effective communications between Alexandria and Cairo, which reinforced the former city's marginality.

Ultimately, the progressive political disaggregation of Ottoman Egypt allowed the city of Alexandria to establish its autonomy by the latter half of the eighteenth century. Other factors, such as the ethnic composition of the population, its cosmopolitan mercantile ethos, and a marked sense of Ottoman loyalism, gave impetus to a drive for independence from the regime in Cairo, which was, however, contested by the Mamluk Beys, and temporarily quashed by French forces when they arrived in 1798. The history of Alexandria and its relationship to Cairo thus illustrates the intensity of a destructive tension seen in other parts of the Ottoman empire in the eighteenth century. It is the struggle of a regional primate city, now practically unrestrained by the central government in Istanbul, seeking to extend its control over provincial offices and revenues, against autonomous localities for whom the Ottoman connection, however tenuous, might serve as a bulwark against subordination to a more efficient, quasi-indigenous despotism.

At present, the sources available for an investigation of this kind make it impossible to furnish a diachronic account of developments in Ottoman Alexandria. The most commonly used sources—upon which the present study also depends, such as al-Jabarti's chronicles and the Description de l'Egypte—must be treated with some caution, especially since they describe conditions in the latter half of the eighteenth century, which cannot be