FRENCH SHIPS AND THEIR CARGOES
SAILING BETWEEN DAMIETTE AND OTTOMAN PORTS
1777-1781

BY

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Introduction

Found among the pages of the thick registers of the sharicah court of Damiette between the years 1760-1798 is a small number of folios recording the movement of French ships in the port of Damiette. These pages are obviously not part of the original registers in which they are preserved, for they are not of the same color or handwriting as the rest of the pages of the registers and are frequently not bound to the spine of the sijill. This suggests that these pages on shipping came from some other register or registers devoted entirely to the movement of ships in the port of Damiette. We have, in fact, found such a unique register for the port of Alexandria.

Each page of the Damiette manifests contains several entries. Each entry cites the last name of the ship's captain and the type of ship he sailed. The entry states that the captain has authority from the Ottoman state to carry cargo between Damiette and other Ottoman ports, then lists the port or ports to which he is carrying his present cargo. The name of the yaziji (see

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2) The sijills of the Damiette religious court are among the richest and most numerous of the series of religious court registers preserved in Egypt. The majority of Damiette registers can now be consulted in the Dar al-Watha‘iq al-Qawmiyyah in Cairo, while a minority of 16 registers remain available in the Dar al-Mahfuza‘ in Cairo’s citadel area.

3) The Dar al-Mahfuza‘ in the citadel area preserve a small series of religious court registers from Alexandria. Among this series is one register (Sijill # 10) which contains a large number of firman letters, copies of letters, and about 90 pages of ship manifests. This section, written in Turkish like the majority of the materials in this register, contains information similar to that which we found recorded in Arabic in the registers of Damiette. We hope in the future to analyze these ship movements from Alexandria. Daniel Panzac, “International and Domestic Maritime Trade in the Ottoman Empire during the 18th Century,” International Journal of Middle East Studies 24 (1992), 205-206, cites the location where Swedish, Austrian, English, Ragusan, Venetian and French shipping contracts are now preserved.

4) In the 1770s, as a result of the growing autonomy of Egypt from the Ottoman Empire and the determination of the ruling mamluk beys to encourage more foreign shipping
below) and a complete manifest of the cargo are given. Sometimes the freight charge is stated. Finally, the date of the loading is recorded.

While the style of recording the name of the captain, the type of ship, the name of the yaziji, the destination and the date is unchanged in the registers, the manner in which the cargo is recorded does vary. In the earlier examples cited in Appendix II it appears that the captains carried small quantities of goods and merchandise for a large number of traders. In these cases the names of the owners of the goods are recorded along with the names of the correspondents in the port of destination who were to receive the cargoes. In most cases the quantities are small; in some instances a merchant sends only one ardabb of rice or wheat to a partner in another port. In the later examples the names of individual merchants are missing as the manifests record only the total quantity of the merchandise loaded. It is not clear if this indicates that one merchant or a partnership chartered the entire ship or if it just became inconvenient for the scribe to prepare a tedious list of individual traders, in which case only the total weights were recorded.

A set of data preserved in the French archives can be added to this Damiette documentation to give a fuller picture of French ship movements and trade in general in the port of Damiette. The French material cites the full name of the captain, the type, carrying capacity and name of the captain's ship, the size of his crew, the number of cannons and swivel guns the ship carried, the port the captain came from and his date of arrival in Damiette. The number of French ships arriving at Damiette was rising. So great had this trade become, and so numerous were the problems these French captains created in the port that the šaykh al-balad Muhammad Bey Abu al-Dhahab ordered the French to send a vice-consul to Damiette to control this trade. See Daniel Crecelius, The Roots of Modern Egypt: A Study of the Regimes of 'Ali Bey al-Kabir and Muhammad Bey Abu al-Dhahab, 1760-1775 (Minneapolis and Chicago, 1981), p. 98. In March, 1773 Muhammad Bey issued a firman against French captains trading at Damiette because supplies were reaching his enemy in Palestine. He ordered the arrest of a French captain known to have taken rice to Acre. See Archives Nationales (Paris), B1, 335 (Le Caire), April 1, 1773.

5) The weight of an ardabb varied according to locale and type of grain being measured. It was divided into 6 waybahs and weighed approximately 140 kilograms in Cairo during the Ottoman period. See "Makayil" in Encyclopaedia of Islam (new edition).

6) The authors wish to thank Daniel Panzac for sending them the documentation from the French archives which lists the activities of French captains in the port of Damiette for the last quarter of 1777 and the first quarter of 1778. Unfortunately, these records do not extend to the period just a few years later covered by the materials found in the Damiette sijills. The reference for this documentation is Archives du Ministère des Affaires étrangères (Paris), Correspondance consulaire et commerciale, Damiette. The authors also wish to express their appreciation to Dr. Panzac for providing them with off-prints of his numerous articles on Mediterranean shipping in the eighteenth century, for commenting on an earlier draft of this article, and for providing answers to several technical aspects relating to ports, ships, and products.