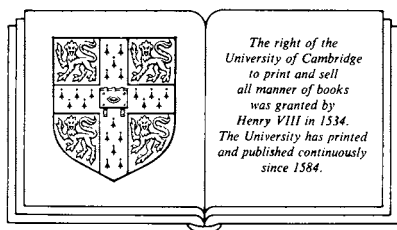


Economic Life in Ottoman Jerusalem

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Introduction

Every town is and wants to be a world apart [. . .] all or nearly all of them between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries had ramparts.

Where there is a town, there will be a division of labour.

(F. Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism 15th–18th Century*
(New York, 1979), Vol. 1, *The Structures of Everyday Life*, pp. 491, 479.)

Jerusalem became part of the Ottoman empire, as did most of the Arabic-speaking provinces, during the last months of 1516. These major political developments came in the wake of a military campaign that put an end to three centuries of Mamluk rule in Syria, Palestine and Egypt. Covering an area that had never been regarded as militarily threatening or economically attractive, neither Damascus nor Cairo were originally considered by the Ottomans as important objectives. Jerusalem, much smaller in size and of minimal administrative consequence, was even less significant – its religious history notwithstanding.

Once these cities were incorporated into the Ottoman body politic, the rulers' initial lack of interest became irrelevant. They were the masters and acted accordingly. The first years of rule in the newly acquired territories must have been uneasy for both governor and subjects. The death of Sultan Selim and the succession of his son, Suleiman, in 1520, did not alleviate the situation. The governor of Syria, a former Mamluk officer who had crossed the lines and joined the Ottoman camp at the crucial stage of their takeover, took advantage of what seemed to him, prematurely, to be the demise of the new rulers. He rebelled against the state and its newly established sultan in the hope that this time too, he was betting on the right horse. To his surprise, the central government overcame him easily, but from the administration's perspective the episode must have complicated matters even further; it would now take longer to impose Ottoman rule definitively. The first Ottoman land and population census (*tahrîr*) was not carried out until 1525–6, and it took the Jerusalem kadi another five years to establish a functioning court system. The earliest court records (*sijill*), still messy in form,

but increasingly important and from the outset very reliable are dated 1530/1.

The administrative structures devised in the second decade of Ottoman rule, became fully operative in the course of the 1530s. The second census held in Jerusalem in 1538–9 proved to be more comprehensive and reliable. There was an increase of private building activity in the various neighborhoods, and the government initiated preparations for a major construction project. For many years the walls surrounding the city were too dilapidated to provide any significant protection, but the Mamluk authorities did nothing to repair them. The Ottoman administration knew that providing elementary safety to life and property would have an immediate effect on the flagging economy and dwindling demography of Jerusalem and would also enhance the new rulers' prestige within the Muslim community. They therefore undertook the renovation of the walls. Istanbul and Damascus initiated the plans for the project, allocated part of the budget and sent technical and administrative experts. The local population of Jerusalem, as well as that of all other districts of Palestine, contributed their share of taxes to defray the cost of building materials and skilled labor. The commemorative inscriptions over the main gates of "the walls of Suleiman" specify that the actual building took place between the years 1538–41, but one may safely surmise that a project of such magnitude took longer; the preparatory work started earlier and the final touches were added later than is stated on the formal inscription.

The district governor whose official seat was in Jerusalem was entrusted with the keys to all the newly installed gates although they were actually deposited with his deputy, the *subaşı*. Keeping these keys was not just a symbolic act; the *subaşı* had to ascertain that the gates to Jerusalem were locked from sunset to daybreak in order to prevent unwarranted intrusion from the outside. Nevertheless, attempts were made to surmount the hurdle these walls presented. Less than three years after the official completion of the ramparts project, while conducting a search in a cave in the Eastern village of Buqay^c al-Da'n, the district governor found an authentic replica of a key to the gate closest to the Temple Mount area. Members of the blacksmiths' guild were summoned to court in a futile attempt to find the accomplice. Other steps must have been taken to prevent the recurrence of such an episode as the *sijill* archives make no further references to events of this kind. Other techniques, however, were tried: ten years later, a woman living in one of the larger neighborhoods (Bâb Hıttâ) was kidnapped late at night, without anyone noticing it, and was smuggled out of town by means of ropes thrown over the walls. Apparently the walls did not seal the town off completely from the surrounding world, but even the afore-mentioned attempts indicate a new reality: the importance of security in Jerusalem, day and night, was recognized.¹

Once security had been achieved for the local population the Ottomans

addressed themselves to satisfying another basic requirement: water supply. Throughout its recorded history, from biblical times onward, Jerusalem has suffered from lack of an adequate supply of water. Various systems have been devised to overcome this lack (see below, pp. 72–4), one of which was the construction of an aqueduct to bring water to Jerusalem from the springs of Irtas (some ten miles to the south). This extensive structure which dates back to Roman times (and unfortunately is overlooked by Braudel in the list of “few aqueducts” he drew)² was considerably damaged in the course of the centuries and was hardly improved by the Mamluks. The Ottomans had the run-down sections repaired and the entire system became operative once more, but in addition very special attention was given to its final outlets in the city. Jerusalem’s various conduits and water-pipes were repaired, and new ones were installed where necessary. A comprehensive system of fountains was constructed (probably incorporating some that had existed before) to enable the public to enjoy the fresh water.

One impressive fountainhead was built just outside the walls, at the lower section of “the pool of the Sultan Suleiman”, a large, open-air pool dug at the south-western corner of town. Situated outside the city walls, it was intended to provide water for caravans of pilgrims and visitors coming to the city and also served as a reservoir enabling a steady supply of water to the entire system within the walls. Most of the fountains, however, were built within the walls for the convenience of the local population: five were dispersed around the Temple Mount (two to its north, three to its west), three were within its precincts; two additional outlets were located at the most important public baths (one to its north, another to its west).³ The construction of this water system was carried out by the same high official who had been entrusted with the repair of the walls. By the middle of 1541 he could report to a meeting on the Temple Mount attended by top state officials (as well as the kadis of the various religious schools of Jerusalem) that the main stage of the project had just been completed and a steady supply of water was already reaching all outlets. The report goes on to point out that both the initiative and the funding of the project were provided by the Sultan Suleiman.

Although the driving force behind this project was the desire to satisfy the urban-secular needs of the population, the context as well as the vocabulary used to describe it are basically religious: the sultan is referred to as “the greatest *’imām*” and the entire scheme was declared a religious endowment bearing the sultan’s name. A number of modifications and improvements undoubtedly had to be added later in the century, but as of this relatively early date the system could be formally declared operative. The supply of running water to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem was proclaimed a major service with which the Ottoman authorities undertook to unremittingly provide the local population “night and day, forever and ever.”⁴

The two major projects described so far were carried out almost con-

currently and both were motivated by the desire to ensure the material well-being of Jerusalem's population. The new rulers, however, were also concerned about the spiritual dimension and emphasized the religious importance of Jerusalem, the need to preserve it and provide its Muslim majority with improved conditions for religious observance. The walls were rebuilt not only to promote the image of the Ottoman sultan as an omnipotent ruler and a religious leader (*'imām*), but also as a precaution against threats to Jerusalem from the Christian powers. Venice was at war with the Ottomans on the European front, and the building of the walls was actually linked to reports of movements of Venetian naval units in the Eastern Mediterranean. Not knowing the precise aims of the alleged maneuvers, the Ottoman authorities feared that they might be directed toward the seizure of Jaffa, to be followed by an attack on Jerusalem. The distance between Jaffa and Jerusalem made such a plan politically astute and militarily feasible on the part of the Venetian army. The Crusaders, whose rule was still remembered in the Holy Land, had in fact, realized both of these political and military objectives. Surrounding Jerusalem with strong walls was also a means to defend the Muslims and their Holy Shrines from the covetous eyes of the Christians. The case of Jerusalem, thus supports Braudel's argument that "the Osmanli Empire [. . .] had ramparted towns only on its threatened frontiers – In Hungary facing Europe, in Armenia facing Persia";⁵ Jerusalem's ramparts faced Venice on the maritime frontier.

Similarly, the supply of water also had a religious aspect. Ablution prior to each of the five daily prayers is an integral part of the ritual, hence all water conduits converged within or just outside of the main entrances to the Temple Mount. The religious inferences mentioned above aptly pertain to the specific context of water-supply. These were only preliminary steps: plans to improve the condition as well as the shape of the Temple Mount were of much wider scope. The impressive domes of its mosques were stripped of their old coating and during the second half of the century were covered with new lead tiles. Regulations were issued forbidding Jews and Christians to enter the site and those violating the prohibition were prosecuted and punished. The combination of intensive construction activities and a growing number of believers attending services on the Temple Mount led to reports that hygienic conditions there were rapidly deteriorating. Thereupon, in the early 1550s explicit orders were issued to clear the entire esplanade of weeds, building materials and other debris that had accumulated there. To avoid similar neglect in the future, as well as to forestall immoral behavior resulting from the mingling of men and women "on Fridays, religious feast-days and other noble [holy] days," special arrangements were made. Istanbul appointed an officer with a daily salary to be permanently stationed on the Temple Mount to enforce law and order.⁶

Reliable security arrangements, regular water supply and facilities for

conducting religious rituals in an appropriate atmosphere and setting – all of these were important Ottoman contributions towards the improvement of life in Jerusalem. Another aspect of daily life the authorities had to come to grips with was of no less importance: the local economy. Jerusalem was quite far from the traditional trade route between Cairo and Damascus, the *via maris*. Nor could it play an important role in the activities of the annual *hajj* caravans – whether they were religious or commercial – since it was equally distant from the Egyptian route to Mecca and the Syrian one. The popu-



1. Three views of the Temple Mount area.

lation of Jerusalem was relatively too small to attract either the commercial traffic following the Mediterranean shores or the pilgrimage caravans to deviate from their regular routes. If we add the poor state of the commercial facilities in the town after the long years of Mamluk neglect to the drawbacks enumerated above, the overall picture that emerges is an underdeveloped, sluggish economy that has little in common with urban life as we conceive it.

Improvement of this state of affairs could be achieved in two ways: industry and commerce. The Ottomans did not indulge in entrepreneurial industrial initiative, although industrial developments took place under their rule, as will be described in these pages. Their main concern was with the creation of commercial opportunities that might compensate the town for its lack of natural resources. Administrative regulations stipulated that spices brought to Jerusalem should be sold in the spice-dealers' market, and they were exempt from all taxes. This general provision, that in the first half of the century was already an integral part of the *kanunname* of Jerusalem, was applied not only to spices imported from the Far East, but also to many other items brought from provinces closer by. Onions and garlic, for example, usually imported from Egypt, or raisins (*zabīb*) "brought from Syria" were not liable to any tax although a small fee was paid for raisins "because their arrival in Jerusalem was very rare."⁷ Such across-the-board exemption was very unusual for the Ottoman authorities and can only be explained as an attempt to encourage trade either with the town itself or with Jerusalem as a station on the way to more remote places. The local functionaries, the *muhtasibs*, were not at all pleased with these exemptions as their income suffered because of them. The Jerusalem court proceedings report numerous cases of attempts by officials to circumvent the regulations and impose unauthorized taxes on these commodities. Time and again between 1538 and 1563 the kadi intervened in order to stop such violations and redress the damages thus caused to the trade in spices and related import items.⁸

Indicative as the above description may be of the guidelines of economic policy, it teaches us little about the actual execution of this policy, and even less about its results. We can glean these from an analysis of the changes that took place in the spice-dealers' market (*sūq al-attārīn*) itself. In January 1565 it was undergoing massive renovations involving repairs of the old shops as well as the construction of so many new ones that they justified special reference. The new section merited a name of its own, and even at this stage, when it was simply an appendage of the old market it was called "the new spice-dealers' market"; in other words, it was regarded as distinctly separate from the old one.⁹ From the sources at our disposal today, it is hard to determine whether this initiative was inspired by governmental authorities or was prompted by private local entrepreneurs. Whatever the case may be, the development that took place in the spice market clearly indicates significant acceleration of the economic activity conducted there.

The spice market was by no means an exceptional case. One of the most important commercial centers of Jerusalem was the cotton-weavers' market (*khān*, sometimes *sūq al-qaṭṭānīn*). This was an impressive partly-roofed structure more than two stories high with depots on the ground floor and a variety of shops on the upper level. Unlike most other markets of Jerusalem on the same premises it had a large courtyard where merchants could tether their pack-animals and even leave them overnight. Dating back to Mamluk rule in Palestine and constituting part of the Dome of the Rock endowment, during the fifteenth century the entire complex was neglected by both temporal and religious authorities. The Ottoman occupation found parts of it very run-down, neglected and virtually deserted. As early as 1544, that is just after the major projects of the walls and water supply were completed, public interest began to focus on this market and probably on others as well. Its shops were first cleared of the refuse that had accumulated through the years and new doors and gates were installed. With the carpenters came the painters, and finally the locksmiths. Further repairs and improvements in the cotton-weavers' *khān* were introduced in later years, and maintenance activities were reported in and around the complex. Between 1564 and 1566, for example, the number of shops attached to both sides of the entrance to the market grew from 28 to 32,¹⁰ which is an indication that the increased volume of trade one would have expected to result from the large-scale development projects indeed materialized. More conclusive proof is provided by the very substantial (fourfold) increase in rent paid annually by merchants who traded there. Moreover, the superintendents of the Dome of the Rock endowment, fully aware of the financial benefits that might accrue from this source, approached Istanbul with a request to raise their share of income from the low level at which it had been fixed many years before. Their request was granted because "the shops of the [above]-mentioned *khān* acquired fame after the [Ottoman] occupation."¹¹

The vegetable market (*sūq al-khuḍar*) was not as important for international trade as the spice-dealers' market, nor was it involved in local industry as were the cotton-weavers. It catered primarily, perhaps exclusively, to the needs of the local population but nevertheless underwent a development process similar to that of the other two. In this case the source of the initiative is very clear: a group of local merchants belonging to all three religious denominations, approached the Jerusalem kadi. All they wanted was a permit to clean and rebuild the dilapidated market and they explicitly undertook to finance the project. Once permission was granted they refurbished the market so completely that it was later referred to as "the new market." It is not surprising that its forty shops were then rented for 9 consecutive years instead of 2 or 3 as had been customary: both lessor and lessee knew that they could expect a high enough income from the shops to cover the long-term undertaking and still leave a sufficient margin of profit.¹²

Developments in these markets, different as they were in details, share at least one common denominator: they are a clear indication of an upsurge of economic activity in Jerusalem under the Ottomans. This pattern of repairs and reconstruction, culminating in the addition of a totally new section was not limited to only these three markets. The jewelers, for example, had always leased space in other markets (e.g. the wickerwork market, *sūq al-qushshāsh*) but in the late fifties were asked by the authorities to bring their leases to an end, and concentrate all their professional activity in one place: the newly established jewelers' market.¹³ At the end of 1548 it was announced that "goods imported to the town of Jerusalem will be sold only in the Sultan's market (*sūq al-sultān*)." Although this formulation might have implied an almost unlimited variety of items, later references indicated that in effect it only applied to foodstuffs. A decree issued 35 years later used more precise phraseology: "honey, onions, cheese, cooking butter etc." were specifically itemized. Complaints were lodged with the authorities to the effect that this regulation was not being observed, whereupon strict orders were issued, including warnings to potential offenders.¹⁴ As part of the overall economic development, Jerusalem's markets became increasingly specialized during the second half of the sixteenth century. This was when the Ottoman economic policies introduced around 1550 – after the security, water and religious needs of the population had been attended to – began to bear fruit.

The various aspects described so far add up to a multi-faceted policy that the newly established Ottoman administration made concerted efforts to implement. Considerations of international as well as domestic prestige were highly important to the new rulers, but they were also aware of the practical advantage to be gained from improving conditions in these recently acquired territories. This should not be construed as an attempt to belittle another dimension that inspired many of these reforms: the government was indeed interested in the welfare of the local population.

In retrospect, the residents of Jerusalem stood to gain more than anyone else from the various projects undertaken. The demographic growth of the town is an important additional indication of the success of many of these enterprises: it is most unlikely that the population would have expanded had the authorities not evinced a vital interest in the well-being of their subjects. Official orders sent to Jerusalem occasionally referred to such an interest, but one might tend to dismiss these statements as routine lip-service paid by the rulers to their underlings.

However this does not seem to be borne out either by the general developments outlined above or by the picture of vital economic activity that emerges from the material discussed in this book. Moreover, the government also manifested concern for the lower strata of local society. In the traditional Muslim state such concern was always linked to the religious institutions of the *waqf* charitable endowments – which proliferated in

Jerusalem during the early years of Ottoman rule. The most famous of them – the endowment founded in 1552 by Roxelana, Sultan Suleiman’s beloved wife¹⁵ made exemplary arrangements for the establishment and maintenance of a free kitchen for poor people and students in Jerusalem. In the course of the century it became one of the major institutions of the town; it functioned regularly and provided many local families with two nourishing hot meals a day. The poor as well as the more fortunate Jerusalemites (“the many who fed on bread” and “the few who ate meat,” to use Braudel’s formulation)¹⁶ could rightly regard the Ottoman rule as auspicious.

To this point we have used broad generalized terms such as “population” and “local society” in our discussion of development projects introduced by the Ottomans. For a better understanding and more meaningful evaluation of the changes that took place under their rule, however, they must be viewed at much closer range and from more specific perspectives. Focusing (as we did above) on the ruling institution and its administrative endeavors – even on its achievements, important as they may have been – provides us with only one dimension, usually the organizational one, of the total picture. In a separate volume we have discussed an additional dimension, attempting to shed light on the numerically small but nonetheless important Jewish minority group in Jerusalem’s population. Some work has been done and more research is now in progress, on the way of life of the Christian minorities in Ottoman Jerusalem. But the most important and largest social element in the town was the Muslim community which represented more than four-fifths of the entire population and was a microcosm of similar – and much larger – towns throughout the Empire.

Therefore, to acquire a clearer and more authentic perspective on life in Jerusalem under Ottoman rule, we must turn to the *sijill* volumes in the archives of the Muslim court which kept daily records of all cases referred to it for adjudication. Such a court existed in Jerusalem, as it did in every other administrative center of the empire. The kadi, the Muslim judge, not only heard cases and passed judgment, but recorded and publicized decrees and orders emanating from Istanbul and in its capacity as notary public kept complete records of permits and licenses issued, as well as of appointments to various official posts. Each new *sijill* entry tempts the researcher to investigate a hitherto unexplored facet of daily life, to follow the fortunes or misfortunes of a person whose name seems familiar from some earlier innuendo, or whose family affairs we have learned about from previous entries. Obviously, however, it was necessary to select from this vast, minutely documented record of human activities, a limited number of fields of such vital importance to everyday life that the picture of how Muslims lived under Ottoman rule would begin to emerge.

We have chosen to concentrate on three major aspects of production and consumption that had important implications for Jerusalem’s industry and commerce in the sixteenth century. In deciding to discuss the activities

involved in the production and distribution of meat, olive oil (and soap), and bread, we deal with the town's most active economic sectors, those that produced commodities consumed by the overwhelming majority of the residents. We also address more general economic problems such as inflation, attempts at price control, professional specialization and guild interrelationships, the local population's patterns of supply and demand and how they affected economic life in general as well as the specific fields we chose for detailed analysis.

In some cases these and related questions could not be fully answered for lack of sufficient data. After the painstaking process of collecting, sorting, sifting, analyzing and then reconstructing the myriad minute details from the court annals, we have been able to reach some conclusions that help illuminate a hitherto obscure side of Ottoman life: its economic functioning. We have tried to apply Braudel's yardstick of "concrete observation" – for which the *sijill* archives are the best possible source material – to acquire as detailed and rich a picture as possible of what he has termed the "complexity and heterogeneity of rural life."¹⁷

True, we have dealt with only one town, Jerusalem. But the conclusions drawn and parameters outlined apply to other urban centers of the Arabic-speaking provinces as well as to the Ottoman empire as a whole. It is our hope that the following pages will contribute to a more profound acquaintance with the Ottoman society and economy. And we will feel amply rewarded if our readers will visualize the factual and descriptive material offered here as pertaining not only to "society" and "economy" but rather to "real people and how they lived."