

The Ottomans in Syria

*A History of Justice
and Oppression*



DICK DOUWES

I.B.TAURIS

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
Introduction	1
1 Inland Syria; the fringes of cultivation	14
2 The office-households of the province	44
3 Local participation in the administration	63
4 Provincial alliances and factions	85
5 Local politics and violence	104
6 The fiscal regime	125
7 The logic of injustice; fiscal and financial policies	152
8 The Egyptian experience	188
Conclusions	211
Glossary	218
Annexes	222
Bibliography	231
Index	241

Preface

My interest in Syria dates from the late 1970s when I first visited the country as a student. My PhD research in the Centre for Historical Documentation in Damascus was conducted in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the generous support of the Netherlands' Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) and resulted in a PhD thesis which I defended in 1994. This PhD thesis formed the basis of this book that, due to changes in career and research interests took longer to mature than expected. However, this delay allowed for additional research on inland Syria and for a better reflection of earlier research results and its interpretation.

Acknowledgements

In the long process many people assisted and inspired me, contributing in one way or the other to this work. Mahmud Amin from Tell Dara introduced me to the history of the repopulating of each individual village in the area to the east of Hama. He and his family offered me hospitality and entertainment for several months. Norman Lewis contributed much to my understanding of the relationships between nomads and settlers introduced me to various sources, in particular travel accounts. I treasure the days I spent with him, and with Rosemary, in Croydon. Abdul-Karim Rafeq was always willing to share his expertise with me. Moreover, he commented in detail on my PhD thesis thus saving me from the repetition of some mistakes and making a number of valuable suggestions. All remaining errors and mistakes are to be blamed on me. I offer them my sincere gratitude.

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Note on Transliteration

Because this study is mainly based on Arabic documentary and literary sources the large majority of names and technical terms are transliterated according to the convention for Arabic used in the International Journal of Middle East Studies. Turkish administrative terms that are derived from Arabic have also been given this transliteration. For other Turkish terms the modern standard Turkish spelling has been employed, except that the tendency to change the final consonants d and b into t and p has not been followed. Place names are given in their more familiar English form, albeit that smaller, less well-known places appear in transliteration.

Introduction

‘And they imposed a reign of injustice which was beyond description; even the rains stopped because of the injustice done.’

Muhammad al-Makkī, *Tārīkh Hims*

The forces of order in traditional society harboured the antipodes of justice and benevolence: injustice and oppression. Both rulers and subjects were generally well aware of this contradiction that ruled society.¹ This awareness is manifest in the literary and documentary sources. Chroniclers complain about a wide range of unjust measures imposed by the agents of the state; superiors warn their inferiors to refrain from such acts; court historians concede that inequitable measures had become part of the system, and even had to become part of it because their inclusion was considered an undesirable, but inevitable stage in the life-cycle of empires.²

The Ottoman state

The main contradiction ruling traditional states like the Ottoman Empire concerns the recurrent disparity between the needs of the state and the inadequacy of resources of the territories over which it ruled. Notwithstanding the achievements of the Ottomans in organizing a complex administration, which encompassed vast and diverse territories, the capabilities of a pre-industrial state like the Ottoman were limited.³ In these states coercion constituted a vital policy instrument, since other methods of persuasion often failed. Although coercion was

¹ Chaudhuri, *Asia*, pp. 71–72

² Ibn Khaldūn’s (*Muqaddima*) concept of the ages of the state, which holds that the once high standards of rule are bound to be abandoned in the fourth stage, strongly influenced Ottoman court historians. Mustafa Naima, for instance, believed that the Ottoman empire had entered this stage at the time of the second failure to capture Vienna (1683). See Thomas, *Naima*, pp. 77–80

³ Much has been written on the pre-industrial or pre-modern state. I have drawn in particular on Chaudhuri, *Asia*; Gellner, *Nations and Plough*; Tilly, *Coercion*; Crone, *Pre-industrial*; Eisenstadt, *Systems*; and Wittfogel, *Despotism*.

not by definition unjust, it could easily be regarded as such by the subjects of the state, in particular when they suffered from violent acts causing damage, loss and grief. The mere threat of harmful action, or symbolic punitive exercises, sufficed to keep the awareness of the potential damage alive.⁴ The preservation of the state depended to a considerable extent on the application of force. It was an indispensable tool to impose the material claims of the state on the population. However, the exploitation of the resources of its territories could not be pursued with success when the state lost its legitimacy. The Ottoman court historian Mustafa Naima considered it the ideal that the subjects felt both dread of and affection for the sultan.⁵ Evidently, coercion was deemed to be complementary to legitimacy, and not necessarily inconsistent with legitimate power, as long as it was the privilege of the state.

The Ottoman concept of the state, *devlet* (Arabic *dawla*) was not an impersonal abstraction. It denoted the dynastic rule of each individual head of the House of Osman, the sultan, and, by extension, the institutions created to protect his rule and to administer the territories under his rule, the dynastic patrimony. The army constituted the main supportive institution; troops often were referred to as *dawla* in local texts.⁶ Those who protected the rule of the sultan and administered the territories enjoyed a number of privileges, but they were considered the sultan's slaves. The ruling class, then, constituted a servile elite. This ruling class was referred to as *askeri*, the military, but included the

⁴ Charles Tilly (*Coercion*) includes Ottoman rule, in my view correctly, in the category of the coercive-intensive mode. Tilly does not relate coercion to the question of legitimacy. Ernest Gellner (*Plough*, pp. 146–47) equates coercion with power. He argues that coercion and legitimacy (and conviction) are complementary elements of the mechanism which imposes structure on society (p. 18). Tilly defines coercion as '... all concerted application, threatened or actual, of action that commonly causes loss and damage' (*Coercion*, p. 19). His definition roughly equals Gellner's concept of primary coercion; the physical threat (*Plough*, p. 146). Obviously, neither Tilly nor Gellner follow Max Weber's definition of coercion, i.e. the antithesis of authority; power which is regarded illegitimate by those over whom it is exerted (Tischler, et al, *Introduction*, p. 455).

⁵ Thomas, *Naima*, p. 88

⁶ The inhabitants of Damascus referred to the two main military formations of Damascus, the imperial and local janissaries, as *dawlat al-qaḥa* (The Troops of the Citadel) and *dawlat Dimashq* (The Troops of Damascus) respectively, see Barbir, *Ottoman*, p. 90

bureaucrats as well. They were the Ottomans. The subject classes, the *reaya* or flocks, were free, but entrusted by God to the care of the sultan, as was most of the land they worked.⁷

The authority of the sultan was absolute. No formal limitations on his power existed, but the inclusion of the divine law, the *shari'*, in Ottoman ideology did put some restraints on the sultan's power. The association of the sultanic authority with religious law was derived from the pre-Islamic traditions, in which royal authority and religious order had been made mutually dependent. In the Ottoman concept of government the Islamic law constituted the foundation of the state, but this law could not be upheld without sultanic support. Well into the nineteenth century two complementary principles of government dominated Ottoman political thinking: the Circle of Justice and the Bounds. Apart from the association of royal authority with religious law, the first doctrine maintains that the survival of the state depends on the prosperity of the subjects, in particular the peasantry. They pay the taxes which enable the sultan to maintain the military and the bureaucratic apparatus. The prosperity of the subjects depends on justice and it is the function of the sultan to render justice. In the view of Ernest Gellner this 'simple and elegant political theory . . . sums up, lucidly and adequately, the general condition of agrarian society'.⁸ The second doctrine holds that the separation between the *askeri* and the *reaya* is fundamental for the proper functioning of the state, basically because the *askeri* class did not pay taxes.⁹ Moreover, the idea of the bounds reflected the conservative approach of the Ottomans toward the sources of revenue; the protection of the productive units of the peasant communities and artisanal groups, not only following fiscal considerations, but also in view of the provisioning of the armies and the cities.

⁷ See on the Ottoman concept of the state, Findley, *Bureaucratic*; Gerber, *State*; Göçek, *Rise*, pp.20-26; Inalcik, *Ottoman*, pp. 65-75; Itzkowitz, *Men*; Keyder, *State*, pp. 7-23; pp. 5-19; Shaw, *History*, vol. 1, pp. 164-65

⁸ Gellner, *Plough*, p. 156. The full circle was as follows: There can be no sultanic authority without the *askeri*; there can be no *askeri* without wealth, the *reaya* produce wealth; the sultan keeps the *reaya* prosperous by making justice reign; justices requires harmony in the world; the world is a garden; its walls are the state; the foundation of the state is the religious law; there is no support for the religious law without sultanic authority. See Itzkowitz, *Men*, pp. 23-24 and Thomas, *Naima*, p. 78

⁹ This is the principle of the *hudud* (Arabic *ḥudūd*) which was not restricted to the functioning of the state, but considered valid for society at large.

The rule of justice

In the political context justice meant the protection of the subject classes against abuse of the power which was delegated by the sultan to his servants, the *askeri*. Above all, the subject classes had to be protected against their illegal financial demands.¹⁰ This notion was certainly linked to the consideration that the subjects should be left with sufficient means to continue their economic activities, but more importantly, it was aimed at the maintenance of the personal and absolute power of the sultan and his inalienable right to the (entire) revenue.

These basic political principles were not Islamic in the sense that they predated Islam by centuries; moreover, they found little support in Islamic legal writing. But in earlier Muslim political writing – as early as the eighth century when Ibn al-Muqaffa^c even advised the caliph to subordinate the *shar'* to his royal authority¹¹ – the association of political authority and divine patronage was a common feature of the political ritual and discourse.

The concept of justice (°*adl* or °*adâla*), too, predates Islamic times, but this ancient concept had found wide use in Islamic legal writing. In the Islamic tradition, justice normally signified upholding and obeying the (religious) rules and laws; subsequently, a just ruler abides the law.¹² In this broad meaning the concept expressed the great stress in the Islamic tradition placed on having good morals, of the prevalence of good over evil. In the same long tradition, the antonyms of justice were tyranny and (moral) corruption, often referred to as *zulm* and *fasâd* in the documents and chronicles of Syria.¹³ Acts of *zulm*, *mazâlim*, comprised in particular abuses of power. The traditional institution to hear and redress complaints of such acts was likewise called *mazâlim*; the practice of petitioning in the Ottoman empire was predicated on this time-honoured custom, which is often seen as the rendering of 'secular' justice, in the sense that the cases were not – or only to a limited extent

¹⁰ Darling, *Revenue-raising*, pp. 282–83; Findley, *Bureaucratic*, p. 18; Inalcik, *Ottoman Empire*, p. 66

¹¹ EI2, p. 884

¹² A more technical meaning of °*adl* concerns the prescribed qualities of a witness, a subject on which extensive legal writing exists.

¹³ Other frequently used (near) equivalents are *jawr* and *tâ'addî*, often in combination with *zulm*. The common antonym of °*adl* of the (classical) legal texts, *fişq*, hardly occurs in these text, but is used in contemporary legal writing.

– considered in the light of the precepts of the Islamic law, albeit that the qâdî was often involved in the handling of a case.¹⁴

The Ottomans were careful not to separate sultanic from divine rule. While most specialists of the divine law, the ulema, acquiesced to the sultan's prerogatives to legislate, others expressed some criticism, but it was extremely rare for a member of the learned class to draw the conclusion that the Ottoman sultanate was, in fact, a corrupt form of political authority.¹⁵ The persistence of a – much milder – critical trend demonstrated that no consensus came about among the ulema over the ultimate legitimacy of the sultan's prerogatives. Nevertheless, by the eighteenth century it had become normal practice that legislation in the fields of public order and revenue extraction evolved by and large within the domain of the sultan.

The province

Another restraint on the absolute claims of the sultan was the delegation of power; it constituted a major dilemma in an autocratic state like the Ottoman empire. Considerable powers had to be delegated to those who served in the provinces. The ability to control the office-holders in the provinces was limited, in particular because local power groups had been increasingly engaged in provincial administration in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In other words, local elements had gained access to the *askeri* class. As a result, the separation between the *askeri* and *reaya* classes had not only become blurred, but the enlargement of the *askeri* class posed a danger to the functioning of the state to the well-being of the *reaya*, or rather to their productive qualities, because the material claims on the subjects increased. Moreover, the danger existed that the agents of the state were able to acquire an independent power base in the province. Locally recruited nominees already had a power base and were liable to strengthen their position. Non-local nominees regularly succeeded in creating a power base in the province. The outcome was the fragmentation of power.

The collection of revenue and the protection of production formed

¹⁴ See, on the development of the institution in the pre-Ottoman period, Nielsen, *Secular*. See, for petitioning in relation to taxation in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Darling, *Revenue-raising*, 246–80; see also Gerber, *State*, pp. 66–78

¹⁵ See, for instance the outspoken criticism of 'Alî al-'Umarî of eighteenth century Mosul, Khoury, *State*, pp. 173–78

the main responsibilities of the provincial office-holders. Given the recurrent inadequacy of the provincial resources, competition for revenue was intense, not only amongst the local power groups, but also between these and the central authority. The central state had adopted a position towards the extraction of revenue which posed a moral dilemma. It did not necessarily object to unjust measures in the process of collecting revenue, provided that its own material demands were fulfilled. After all, '... most governments preferred material to moral satisfaction.'¹⁶ In this respect the government can be defined as 'an institution which prevents injustice other than such as it commits itself.'¹⁷ The ideal, or myth, of a just and benevolent sultan facilitated the disciplining of the office-holders. In order to preserve its moral hold on the population the central authority imposed, or more often threatened to impose, sanctions on those who perpetrated acts of injustice. This latter policy served as an important instrument to contain power groups in the province and to impose the central state's financial claims on them. This was not the only method to safeguard the interests of the central state. Various instruments were employed in order to contain the power of provincial office-holders, like the rotation of the senior offices and the separation of authority. Each of these instruments had its limitation and their efficiency depended on circumstance.

Some of the dilemmas facing the central authority were embedded in the provincial administration as well. The senior provincial office-holders depended on the services of the body of officials, officers and tax farmers to whom power had to be delegated. Within the confines of provincial rule the mechanisms of control were often inadequate. The containment policies of the central state could produce or stimulate political fragmentation in the province, in particular when senior office-holders were interchangeably recruited from competing local power groups. The limitations imposed by the central authority on the office-holders in the province could seriously restrict their abilities and force them, more often than not, to use more informal methods, including some which were not sanctioned by law, to strengthen their control of local affairs. The extent to which strictly coercive means were applied varied, but for the population at large the degree of coercion greatly influenced the perception of rule as being just or oppressive.

¹⁶ Wittfogel, *Despotism*, p. 72

¹⁷ Gellner, *Plough*, p. 239. The quotation is Gellner's interpretation of Ibn Khaldūn's definition of government.

The Syrian interior

Inland Syria was divided over two large provinces; the north was administrated from Aleppo and the central and southern areas from Damascus. In this monograph the emphasis is on the latter province, in particular on the district of Hama, a principle cereal producing area which enjoyed a special relation with the governorship of Damascus. It concerns the history of a long stretch of land, along the Sultanic Road, which connected Anatolia with Aleppo, Damascus and the holy land of the Hijaz, a zone in which sedentary and nomadic modes coexisted. The eighteenth century, in particular the latter part, witnessed several changes and shifts which had an impact upon the social and economic order: overland trade decreased in importance and changed in direction; trade with Europe, after a strong upsurge, declined rapidly toward the closing of the century; the migration patterns of several large Arabian beduin tribes shifted to the north and came to include all of inland Syria and the political point of gravity shifted from Damascus to the coastal town of Acre, the centre of the province of Sidon, a change which was part of a larger regional transformation which eventually resulted in the coming of dominance of Egypt.

Due to repeated heavy defeats at the hands of European powers and to the changing military needs which put a strain on the empire's resources, social and political order became increasingly tested, leading to a long chain of revolts in many parts of the Ottoman domains.¹⁸ In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries invasions and revolts combined with an intense competition between local factions located in inland and coastal Syria generated strongly coercive responses to problems of maintaining order. In the 1810s this provincial factionalism acquired a more narrow and petty local nature and by the 1830s, local factionalism was by and large suppressed. This latter development was not the logical outcome of an internal evolution; in 1831 the reformist governor of Egypt, Muḥammad ʿAlī Pasha, rebelled against the sultan and by July of 1832 his armies had occupied all of Syria and much of Anatolia. For nearly a decade Syria witnessed an unprecedented degree of direct, but highly coercive rule. Muḥammad ʿAlī Pasha is regularly regarded as the first, at least would-be, modern ruler in the Eastern Mediterranean; the first to formulate new answers to old problems, among them being the predicament of the delegation of power and the deficiency of the resources. For Syria his policies failed to accomplish

¹⁸ Khoury, *State*, pp. 5–6

these goals and its resources were over-exploited. With the evacuation of the Egyptian troops, inland Syria returned to older habits.

This study deals with a set of related questions concerning the capabilities of the various actors on the provincial level and the limitations put upon them arising from their mutual relations and their dependence on central authority. The composition, recruitment and career patterns of local office-holders, in particular the military, will be traced, also, to illustrate that they had to perform their tasks under – more often than not – difficult conditions. The methods of exploitation of the resources, of revenue extraction, are central to their functioning as well as to societal order at large, but are of particular relevance in the rural setting, in the lives of the most important group of producers, the peasantry. Access to and control of the agricultural production and its distribution underpinned the local order.¹⁹

Sources

The narratives contained in this study are primarily based on local sources, in particular on local chronicles and on the records of the court of Hama. In addition to the local material, use has been made of contemporary observations of some Europeans, mostly travellers, but sometimes commercial and political agents.²⁰ The chronicles encompass writings from the interior, in particular Damascus, and from coastal Syria, especially the Lebanon.

Four chronicles deserve a short introduction here:

Lubnân fî 'ahd al-umarâ' al-Shihâbiyyîn by Ḥaydar Aḥmad Shihâb (1761–1835), edited by A. Rustum and F. al-Bustânî. The edited text comprises the last to parts of the voluminous manuscript of this Lebanese emir. The original title of the manuscript appears to have been *Ghurar al-ḥisân fî dhikr abnâ' al-zamân*.²¹ The history of the Shihâb family and of Mount Lebanon forms the centrepiece of this manuscript, but it contains much information on developments in inland Syria.

¹⁹ Doumani, *Rediscovering*, pp. 2–4

²⁰ Many of the literary sources, see below and the bibliography, with the most important exception of one important Damascene chronicle, *Tārikh Ḥasan Aghâ al-'Abd*, formed the basis of the unpublished PhD thesis of Koury, *The Province of Damascus, 1785–1831*

²¹ Rafeq, *Province*, pp. 325–27

Tārīkh ḥawādith al-Shām wa-Lubnân, also known as *Tārīkh Mikhâ'il al-Dimashqî*, first edited by L. Ma'lûf and published in *al-Mashriq* in 1912. In 1982 an edition by A. Gh. Sabânû was published in Damascus. The author of the manuscript is referred to by its copyist as *Mikhâ'il al-Dimashqî*, but this might well have been a pseudonym. The manuscript is made up of three parts and was completed in 1843.

Tārīkh Ḥasan Aghâ al-ʿAbd, edited by Y. J. Nu'aysa and published in 1979. The manuscript and its edition have received little attention so far. The original manuscript was part of the vast collection of the Zâhiriyya library in Damascus, but only a xerox copy has survived. The Damascene Ḥasan Aghâ is the author of the untitled and incomplete manuscript. The little we know about him is derived from the manuscript itself and from a few scattered references in some other chronicles. Ḥasan Aghâ was an official who was involved in the repair of fortresses along the caravan road to the Hijaz. In the early 1820s he acted as governor of the Biqa district. The edited text covers events in the province of Damascus from 1772–1826.

Tārīkh Hims, by the religious sheikh Muḥammad ibn Makkî ibn Khânqâh, a native of Homs, the twin town of Hama. The untitled manuscript is kept in the library of the American University of Beirut. It was edited by ʿUmar N. al-ʿUmar and published in Damascus in 1987. The work is of interest because it is one of the very few chronicles which have survived from places other than Damascus, Aleppo, and Lebanon. The chronicle sheds some new light on the circumstances in which the Homs and Hama area at the time of the emergence of the famed ʿAzîm family, which played a prominent role in eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Syria.

The records of the Hama court (*maḥkama sharʿiyya*) contain four broad categories of documents; firstly, copies of judicial deeds issued by the court in which a summary of a law suit and sentence is given (*ḥujja*); secondly, copies of notarized deeds concerning a variety of transactions, but in particular sale contracts and inheritances, as well as documents related to the administration and lease of religious and family foundations (*waqf*); thirdly, copies of edicts emanating from the provincial

governor, his council, or from the imperial council in Istanbul (*buyuruldu*); and fourthly, tax tabulations and surveys, as well as auditor reports of the finances of individual office-holders.²²

²² See, on the use of court records as a source for local (social and economic) histories, p. 125–126 and Doumani, *Palestinian*; Glasman, *Documents*; Layish, *Sijill*; Mandaville, *Ottoman*; Manna^c, *Sijill*; Marcus; Middle East, pp. 6–11; Rafeq, *Registres* and *Law-court*; Reilly, *Sharī^ca*.

Map 1 Eastern Mediterranean

Map 2 Inland Syria

Map 3 The Hama area

1. Inland Syria; the fringes of cultivation

A frontier village of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

In 1866 Shâhûd, son of Sulaymân, from the village of Murayj ad-Durr had his two cousins ʿAlî and Muḥaymid summoned to court in the nearby town of Hama. Shâhûd claimed his share of the flock of the family. His grandfather Muḥammad had passed away some 28 years ago, when Shâhûd was three years old. By then, his father Sulaymân had already died. His father had two brothers; one had left the village long ago, never to return; the other, ʿÎsâ, had taken care of the livestock of Shâhûd's grandfather. Later, the two sons of ʿÎsâ inherited all, refusing Shâhûd his legal share. The cousins denied the claim; their entire flock had been built through their own efforts. At the time of their grandfather's death, the governor of Hama, Faraj Aghâ, came to the village and extorted half of his sheep. Soon after, ʿAnaza beduin robbed what had remained, including all of his cows. Because Shâhûd had not contributed to the upkeep of the new flock, they argued, he had not acquired any rights. The village headman, and those of two neighbouring villages, corroborated the account of the cousins. Subsequently, the judge dismissed Shâhûd's charge.¹

Murayj al-Durr – Little Pearl Valley – was one of the few villages situated on the east bank of the ʿÂṣî river. This village of farmers and herdsmen marked the transition from a sedentary to a nomadic lifestyle. From the perspective of the peasants the village was situated on the fringes of the precious cultivated land of inner Syria; from the viewpoint of the nomads, it was located in the highly valued periphery of the Syrian Desert. Murayj al-Durr and its twin village Íghûr on the opposite side of the river, were inhabited – at least in part – by Turcomans of the Jaliqliyya tribe, descendants of nomadic tribesmen who had

¹ SMH 60, p. 284, 7 Rajab 1283

been forced to settle some 140 years earlier. Over a dozen villages south of Hama had been populated by Turcomans at the time, presumably villages which had been deserted in the wake of rural and tribal unrest. On the southern fringes of their former migration cycles – which connected winter grazing on Syrian steppes to summer grazing on Anatolian highlands – the migrant herdsmen were turned into frontier peasants. In return for military services and because of the risk of nomadic attack, they paid fewer taxes than the other peasants in the region, whom they were to protect against nomads and their herds. Resistance to sedentarization lasted for some time, but at a certain point the Turcoman tribesmen started to appreciate settled life and even occupied a number of other prosperous, non-frontier villages, expelling their original inhabitants.

In the days of Shâhûd's grandfather the military value of the sedentary Turcomans had declined. Murayj al-Durr now depended for trade and protection on the town of Hama and on beduin tribes. As frontier peasants, the villagers continued to receive favourable fiscal treatment, by now, perhaps, in reward for their endurance only. In years of dearth local authorities also provided the village with sowing-seed and draught animals in order to keep it productive.² The authorities, however, were not merely benevolent; the sowing-seed was added to the impending levies in kind and the value of the cows or oxen was added to the tax arrears. Governors who were in need of cash or kind and in need of an excuse, easily found one: the levying of tax-arrears. The proficient Faraj Aghâ, the governor of Hama whose alleged rapacity appears to have contributed to the miserable fate of Shâhûd, indeed, had a reputation of being more demanding than others were.

Beduin formed another receiving party. Most villages, but in particular frontier villages, paid protection money to one or more tribes. At the time of Shâhûd's birth various tribal sections of the 'Anaza beduin had only recently extended their range of migration towards the area of Hama. They clashed with each other, and with other tribes and villagers. In the process of – regularly violent – bargaining over water and grazing rights, legal ownership of herd and flock was uncertain. Villagers left their homes, some temporarily others for good. Normally, frontier villages survived or revived after a period of what was officially called 'inactivity'. Murayj al-Durr impoverished, but no records exist indicating that it was ever entirely

² SMH 43, p. 354, 20 Rabî' I 1238

deserted after Turcomans had repopulated it. In times of relative prosperity new settlers came to village, not all of them Turcoman. Due to an influx of migrants, the village was about to lose its Turcoman identity at the time of Shâhûd's appeal to the judge. New settlers were arriving from the coastal mountains, many of them Alawites, then called Nuṣayrîs. A decade later Circassian refugees from the Caucasus settled near the village. By then Murayj al-Durr was no longer located on the edge of sedentary Syria; new frontier villages had been established further to the east.

The ancient inland plains

The inland plains of Syria are contained by mountains to the west and deserts to the east and south. In Ottoman times – and before – the area in between the Euphrates River and the Hijaz was usually called Bilâd al-Shâm, the Land of Sham. Until today Shâm is the popular name of the city of Damascus. Mountains separate the plains from the Mediterranean coast. These mountains consist of a coastal range and an adjoining range stretching from southern Anatolia to the Gulf of Aqaba. A succession of valleys divides the two mountain ranges, among them the Ghâb, Biqa and Jordan valleys. Because of gorges, ravines and ridges the mountains were not easily passable, in particular those closer to the coast in what is today Lebanon and coastal Syria, but a number of depressions and passes served as corridors, connecting the ports of Latakia, Tripoli, Beirut, and Acre with the inland cities of Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Damascus, and Nablus.³

The inland cities served as 'desert ports'; they 'gave access to the desert and [. . .] the lands beyond'.⁴ Caravans embarked from these cities to Mosul and Baghdad in the east, and to Medina and Mecca in the south. Nomads called at these ports in order to trade their products for wheat, coffee, weaponry, and other necessities of life. The Syrian Desert was – at the time – not a 'typical' desert. This northern extension of the great Arabian desert comprised extensive tracts of steppe and pasture. The eastern and northern fringes received a fair amount of rain, while in the dryer zones some locations were well watered by springs and wells, or even by permanent rivers, in particular the Euphrates. (At present, these fringes and locations have been brought into cultivation.) The local name of the Syrian Desert is Bâdiyat al-Shâm; the word *bâdiya*

³ Referred to as 'dry ports' by Doumani, *Rediscovering*, p. 23

⁴ Petran, *Syria*, pp. 19–20

denoted wasteland, not necessarily scarcely vegetated arid land. To the east and, in particular, the south, water and vegetation became scarce, but even the dryer part of the Syrian Desert, the Hamad, supported nomadic life during winter.

Squeezed between the mountains and the desert lay nearly treeless but fertile plains. Here the long summers are hot and dry, and the short winters cold and moist. Some patches of forest and brushwood survived on hilly elevations and plane trees sometimes marked the location of wells and streams. Natural vegetation was dominated by perennial shrubs, thistles and grasses. Wheat and barley were sown in winter and ripened in spring. By June, the summer heat scorched most vegetation. To the south of Homs, a range of wind-eroded mountains runs eastwards to the oasis of Palmyra. These barren mountains separate the wider northern plains from the Damascus oasis and the plains and hills of the Hawran and the Balqa. Already sparse in most northern areas, rainfall diminishes quickly towards the south.

Surface water is rare. The only permanent rivers of some substance are the ʿĀṣī and Barādā. The ʿĀṣī River owes its name, the Rebel, to its unique flow in the wider region; contrary to the other rivers it flows from south to north. The river meanders through the Homs and Hama area. In the Ghâb and ʿAmq valleys the water was soaked into long stretched marshlands, before it makes a sharp curve to water the coastal strip of Antioch. The Barādā River is much shorter, but not less important; it feeds the large oasis of Damascus. Most rivers and rivulets are fed by winter rains in the western mountains and many dry up, or nearly so, in summer, including the Golden River of Aleppo. The availability of surface water did only partly determine the distribution of population and the pattern of migration of pastoral nomads. Much of inland Syria was blessed with subterranean water feeding springs and wells. In some areas subterranean canals, *qanâwât*, were used to collect seepage-water from porous and soft rock. When no longer attended to, some old canals provide for sufficient water for some ponds and marshes, as for instance near the deserted town of Salamiyya (the Byzantine Salaminias) to the east of Hama.

The plains were dotted with the *khirbas*, the – often ancient – ruins of villages and towns. Salamiyya was one the larger ruins, some twenty kilometres to the east of Murayj al-Durr, in what was now steppeland. Together with two other ruined sites, Salamiyya had been a town of importance in the Byzantine period, when it was famous for its high quality of hard wheat. Nearby Andarîn (Androna) produced wines