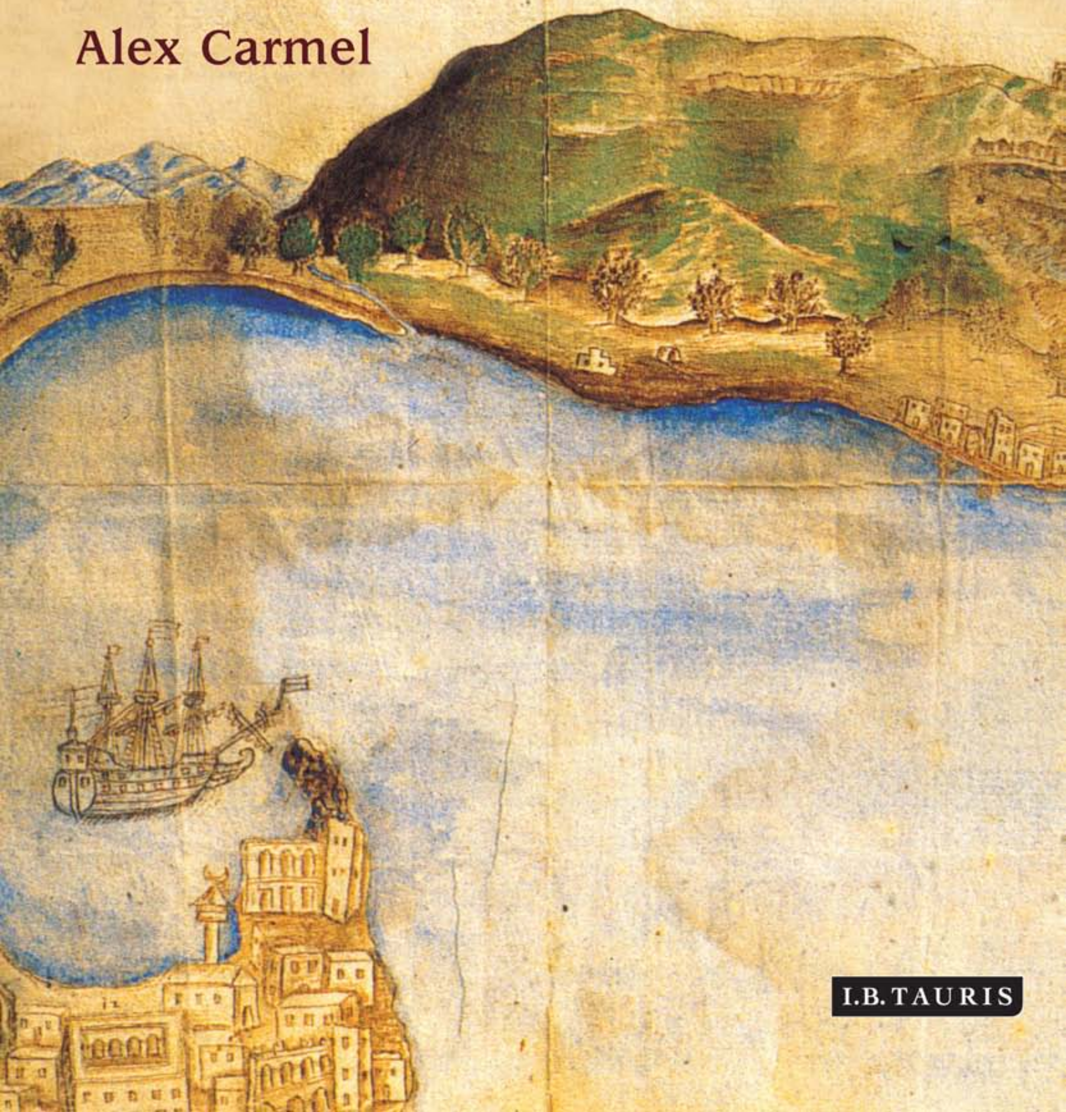
Ottoman Haifa

A History of Four Centuries under Turkish Rule

Alex Carmel



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Alex Carmel (1931–2002) was an historian of the Middle East, specialising in nineteenth-century Palestine. He joined the faculty of the University of Haifa in 1968 and was a visiting professor at the universities of Basle, Bern, Fribourg and the Free University of Berlin.

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Ottoman Haifa

A History of Four Centuries under Turkish Rule

By Alex Carmel

Translated into English
by Elias Friedman

Preface by Jakob Eisler

I.B. TAURIS
LONDON · NEW YORK

This book is dedicated,
as wished for by its late author Alex Carmel,
to the memory of the beloved Cornelius Beilharz (1976–2002),
descendant of the Haifa Templers.

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Preface

This book – the first work of the historian and researcher Alex Carmel (1931–2002), who worked on the history of Palestine during the Ottoman Empire for over forty years – has come to be also his last published work, now in English.

In 1963, the Berlin-born Alex Carmel decided to write his Masters thesis on the history of Haifa, the city that had been his new home from 1939.[1] Up to then, information about Haifa could only be found in reference works by Zeev Vilnay and Haim Aharonowitz.[2] In the latter, Haifa was adjudged to be 'a wretched, dirty fishing village, whose population amounted to no more than a few hundred'.[3] Professor Uriel Heyd, Carmel's teacher at the time, advised him not to go ahead with the thesis because there were hardly any historical sources and because he thought the topic was rather unimportant. Nevertheless, Carmel set out to work on the 'History of Haifa in the Turkish Era, 1516–1918'. His sources for the history of the city – at least for the first two centuries of Ottoman rule – consisted mainly of travel literature, from which he carefully selected the more meaningful and historically accurate descriptions. Here, two fundamental qualities of Carmel the historian came to the fore, namely not only a desire to find all the relevant historical sources, but also an ability to evaluate them precisely. In his thesis he was able to

reconstruct the city's history and show that it experienced its first significant boom as early as 1761 under Dahar al-Umar (Zahir al-Umar).[4] After the establishment of the Württemberg Templer colony in Haifa in 1868, the city began to flourish.[5] Carmel's 'modest opus' about Haifa – as he always called it – became the benchmark for the historiography of Israel's third largest city, now with more than a quarter of a million inhabitants.[6] Even though this book had its origin years ago, it is, to this day, the reference book on the history of Haifa during the Ottoman Empire.

For me, the book is a good deal more than just the history of the city of Haifa: this book connects me with Alex Carmel – the author and the man.

My first encounter with Professor Alex Carmel at Haifa University took place in 1988 when I was a young student. I was reading the present book on Haifa and was looking for the memoirs (cited in the book) of the German vice consul Friedrich Keller 'Wie ich auf den Carmel kam' ('How I Came to Mount Carmel'), but could not find them anywhere. I mentioned this to Professor Carmel in his office on the twenty-seventh floor of Haifa University. Without further ado, Carmel opened one of the drawers of his desk and handed me Keller's manuscript with the words: 'Here are the memoirs of Friedrich Keller for your perusal. But if you are not back here in my office this time next week (with the originals), I will consider myself forced to have you hanged from Haifa's tallest palm tree . . .' Never before had I had such an encounter! I was especially intrigued by the phrase 'the tallest palm tree', because the groves of tall palms lining the Kison River had long since disappeared due to the industrialization of

Haifa after the end of Ottoman rule and in the time of the British Mandate.

I did return the pages a week later and was subsequently privileged to study and work as Carmel's assistant for a long period, starting from a year after this episode until his death in 2002.

I am happy that his wish to publish *Die Geschichte Haifas in der Türkischen Zeit* in English has now been fulfilled with the publication of this book.

I especially want to thank Professor Reinhold Würth of Künzelsau and Mr Jürgen Prockl of Stuttgart, whose support made it possible to publish this book. I am also indebted to Abigail Fielding-Smith and Joanna Godfrey for getting the book into print at I.B.Tauris.

Dr Jakob Eisler
Stuttgart

(Preface translated by Peter G. Hornung)

Introduction

Haifa is located at the southern point of the largest bay on the coast of Israel. The coastal plain, on the edge of which ancient Haifa spread out, is about 860 metres in length, facing Ras al-Kurum – today it is the area including Rambam Hospital, Quiet Beach and a portion of Bat-Galim. The width of the coastal strip on which the new town was established in the middle of the eighteenth century – nowadays part of Lower Haifa – was no more than 220 metres. The Haifa region served as an outlet to the sea for the Valley of Jezreel, the only one that cuts across the mountains of western Israel. The plain descends by easy stages to the valley of the Jordan and so offers a convenient connection through to the Lebanese Beq'a, the region of Damascus, Hauran and beyond. Haifa lies on the coastal road and serves as the junction for a network of roads running north, east and south. In addition to its advantage as a convenient outlet for an extensive hinterland, it is protected by Mount Carmel from the frequent southerly and south-westerly winds. The nearby seabed is smooth and devoid of natural obstacles that might be dangerous to shipping. In the light of these facts, it is surprising that for thousands of years it was Acre, at the northern edge of the bay, that predominated. It would appear that this was due, first and foremost, to reasons of security. The

headland, which projected from that end of the bay and on which Acre was built, offered excellent opportunities for defence. Its port was excellent, though not as good as Haifa's, and met the needs of maritime traffic in ancient times. In the absence of trains and motorized transport, the ease of access to the hinterland was not a decisive factor. The fundamental reason for the rise of Haifa was its transfer to a new site, where it could be defended. This occurred at the beginning of the second half of the eighteenth century. The far-reaching changes in maritime transport, such as the use of steamships, and inland transport, with the introduction of railroads, gave a decisive advantage to the southern part of the bay. Haifa, which had already begun to show signs of awakening, now rapidly overtook Acre.[1]

The origins of Haifa, even the meaning of the name, are still shrouded in obscurity.[2] Some are of the opinion that a settlement by that name already existed in the Persian period.[3] Others consider that it was founded four to five hundred years later. From the second century of the present era onwards, Haifa is mentioned in Talmudic sources and in the writings of the fathers of the Church. It was a small town by the seaside, stretching between Bat-Galim and the present-day German Colony.[4] The Jewish community of Haifa, perhaps the majority of the population, enjoyed a period of relative prosperity in the third and fourth centuries CE. The settlement's inhabitants were engaged in fishing, in the search for murex shells used in the dyeing industry and in the manufacture of glassware. Some of its sages are recalled in the Talmud, where it is stated that men from Haifa should not be called upon for public readings in the synagogue because

they do not pronounce the letters correctly, for instance: 'They read the *alef* as *'ain* and the *'ain* as *alef*.'[5] The network of roads in the north of the country, laid down by the Romans in previous centuries and the oracle of the god Carmel – situated, it appears, in the Cave of Elijah – brought a certain animation to nearby Haifa, albeit not for long. There are reasons to believe that, following uprisings against the Jews in the days of Justinian, or perhaps for some other reason, Haifa was destroyed and abandoned in the sixth century.[6] Scholars have not encountered the name of Haifa in historical sources from the first four hundred years after the Muslim conquest. Only in the eleventh century do we hear again of the existence of a settlement in the same place and, in particular, about its Jewish inhabitants. One Persian traveller in 1047 tells of large ships being built in Haifa.[7] At the beginning of the First Crusade, it was a well-fortified town, surrounded by a wall and towers.

> This town is situated on a plain, on the coast, at the foot of Mount Carmel; it interfered more than other towns with the plan of God, and since the proud confidence of the pagans was based in part on the siting of the town and the strength of its fortifications, in part on the excessive importance of its citizens, the Crusaders decided to conquer the town prior to others [along the coast], for, once conquered, the other feebler ones could be taken with greater ease.[8]

Such are the motives advanced by a monk of the time for the decision of the Crusader commanders to press on with the assault on Haifa. Using the testimony of eyewitnesses, Albert of Aix describes in great detail how the Crusaders

laid siege to the town. Towards the end of July 1100, Haifa was sealed off from the sea by the Venetian fleet. Tancred, one of the ablest commanders of the First Crusade, stood at the head of the army that besieged it from the land. For almost a month, the Jewish inhabitants of Haifa and the Egyptian garrison in the town fought desperately to hold off the attackers. In the end, the Crusaders captured the town by employing heavy war machines, and put the inhabitants to the sword,[9] thus bringing to an end another short period of prosperity in Haifa. It seems that Jews did not return to settle in the town for the rest of the Crusader period. Haifa now became a small fortified Crusader position, one of many on the coast and in the interior of the country. It was of minor importance, comparable with that of Acre to the north and the more important one of Caesarea to the south.[10]

In 1187, during the war of Saladin, in which he dealt a decisive blow against the Crusaders, the fortress of Haifa was destroyed too.[11] The Third Crusade gave back to the Franks a part of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, including Haifa, but only for a while. In 1250, the military commander, Ibakh, became the first Mamluk sultan of Egypt. At the same time, Louis IX of France, undertook to fortify some of the coastal towns of Syria and Palestine again, including Haifa,[12] but the fortifications were unable to withstand the attacks of Baybars I, the Mamluk sultan, who initiated the final expulsion of the Crusaders from Palestine. His armies captured Haifa in March 1265. During the destruction of the coastal cities by the Mamluks to prevent their recapture by the Franks, Haifa suffered a blow from which it was not to recover for the next two hundred and fifty years of Mamluk rule over the country.

Ancient Haifa presented the aspect of a destroyed town, with walls overthrown, buildings ruined and fortifications dismantled, right until the beginning of Turkish rule.[13]

For one thousand five hundred, or even two thousand years, Haifa was, except for rare intervals, no more than a small village of no importance. For a long time it was not even inhabited. In its short periods of prosperity it remained overshadowed by its powerful neighbour, Acre, which one must see as the centre of gravity of the bay of Haifa until the late nineteenth century. It was only in the last generation of the Ottoman rule in Palestine that Haifa succeeded in wresting the primacy from Acre and transferring it to the southern end of the bay.

1

Ancient Haifa After the Ottoman Conquest

In December 1516, Haifa, a destroyed and abandoned village, fell to the army of the Ottoman sultan, Selim I, in the course of his campaign against his rivals, the Mamluks. During the campaign, the Ottomans, who were at the height of their power, conquered Syria, Palestine and Egypt. Four hundred years later, in September 1918, Haifa was once again captured; but the British army, which overran Palestine and Syria and dealt the decisive blow to the tottering Ottoman Empire, found that Haifa, far from being a miserable village, had become in the meantime a thriving port, a railway terminus and a busy prosperous commercial centre. The object of the present book is to describe the circumstances that led to its development during those four centuries.

It would have been logical to open this chapter with a description of the Turkish capture of the town, but the few sources at our disposal make no mention of the taking of Haifa, just as they fail to mention the capture of even more important places in Palestine. The 'Diary of the Campaign

to Egypt', apparently written by a participant, describes the expedition of Selim I from Istanbul to Cairo, capital of the Mamluk state, but offers us little information about the conquest of Palestine. It recounts that on 1 December 1516, the sultan, who was camping with his army in Damascus, ordered the grand vizier, Sinan Pasha, to lead a part of the Ottoman army to Gaza. On 28 December, as he was on his way to Jerusalem, the sultan heard from a runner who came from the battlefield that Sinan Pasha had defeated the Mamluk army at Khan Yunis in the south of Palestine. Palestine had therefore fallen to the Ottomans in a short space of time and, for the most part, without offering resistance.[1]

In spite of the absence of adequate information, it is almost certain that Haifa played no role in the short battle for the conquest of the country, if we recall that even the inhabitants of neighbouring Acre surrendered their city to the conquerors without a battle.[2] What is more, it is doubtful whether Haifa at the time was inhabited at all; one German visitor from that period described it as a desolate place without a single house and with fallen walls.[3] In the second phase of Mamluk rule security conditions worsened in the country. Haifa, with its ruined houses scattered over a wide open plain on the coast, in the absence of defensive walls, was exposed to the attacks of pirates from the sea and bandits from the land. Maritime traffic, always a possible source of income to the inhabitants of the town, was limited in those days, though the anchorage was a good one – the port of nearby Acre was sufficient to meet those needs, such as they were. Under these conditions and in view of the fact that Haifa apparently is not mentioned at all by travellers and pilgrims to Palestine

for more than two hundred years – that is, until the last quarter of the sixteenth century – it may be assumed that the resettlement of the town began only during the first generation following the Ottoman conquest.

General Description

The Village

The first and characteristic testimony to the resettlement of Haifa is found in the book of a German doctor and scientific investigator, Rauwolf. A storm forced his ship to seek shelter in Haifa. No sooner had the inhabitants caught sight of the ship than they set out in boats to attack it and only with difficulty did the captain succeed in evading them. In his description of the attack, Rauwolf mentions that the Haifa of 1575 still covered a large area, but that only half its houses were fit for habitation. The traveller adds that its walls were in a state of ruin and that even the Ottoman governor, whose house he saw from a distance, did not live in the town itself but opposite Cape Carmel, south of the mountain.[4] Few of the later visitors who came to ancient Haifa have anything to add to Rauwolf's description until the rule of Dahar al-Umar in the middle of the eighteenth century. This handful of travellers repeat Rauwolf's observations about an old city in ruins, destroyed during the Crusades, the decayed buildings which lay scattered over a large area 'a quarter of an hour's distance by foot'. The inhabitants appear to have taken up their winter quarters in the ruins, for

until the 1730s we hear of no new houses being built. In summertime, they preferred living outside, in shacks roofed with branches, rather than in the old dilapidated houses.[5] Neither, during this long period, were its walls rebuilt, so that – in spite of a slow, gradual growth in importance and in the number of its inhabitants – ancient Haifa for the first two hundred years of Turkish rule remained a field strewn with ruins, or a 'miserable village' as most travellers tended to describe it.[6]

The best preserved building in Haifa at that time was the 'fort', which had been a Crusader church that had fallen into ruin and been repaired to serve various purposes. On his visit to Haifa in 1628, the Spaniard Castillo said he spent the night in a ruined and abandoned church.[7] The young Laurent d'Arvieux described the church, which had by then been restored, as the only building left standing in Haifa. D'Arvieux, who had been brought up in the house of a relative, the French consul at Sidon, frequently visited Haifa and Mount Carmel and is an important and reliable source of information about the place for the late 1650s and the early 1660s. He writes that among the things worthy of note are the remains of a fort, two churches and a third church, the heavy high walls of which were still standing. The rooms of this church were being used as depots, stables and lodgings for travellers and pilgrims. In addition, the agent for Haifa, appointed by the Emir Turabay, had his apartment there. The Carmelites had taken over one of the rooms, which they used as a store room: 'And they call it a fort', sums up d'Arvieux, 'in the most unsuitable way possible, for it has nothing to justify the title.'[8] It appears that this building was the 'Fort of Haifa' that was destroyed in 1623 or 1624 by the Emir

Turabay, the enemy of Fakhr ad-Din II, Emir of the Druzes of Lebanon.[9] In any case, we have no indication of any other fort being built previously in Haifa, except for the one mentioned above, erected by Louis IX in the thirteenth century and destroyed some time earlier. It is therefore likely that the 'ruined church' seen by Castillo in 1628 was restored after the damage it suffered in 1623–4 and became, in the course of time, the 'fort' described by d'Arvieux. The Dutch painter, de Bruyn, saw the fort on the coast in 1682.[10]

However, Paul Lucas, who travelled in the east on a mission on behalf of Louis XIV of France, wrote that the inhabitants of Haifa could not expect to defend themselves against pirates or prevent their ships entering the anchorage, unless they built a fort, as it appears they were preparing to do.[11] In the end, even this fort, it seems, was destroyed or fell into ruin, for in 1737 the Englishman Richard Pococke recounts that two new forts had been built for defence against pirates.[12] Some years later, the Carmelite Leandro of St Cecilia described them as built one on each side of the town, similar to one another and both equipped with heavy cannons for coastal defence.[13] He claims that the main purpose of the Ottomans in building these two forts was to prevent the ships of the Maltese pirates from spending the winter in the Haifa anchorage, or from finding protection there in stormy weather. Leandro had left Rome in 1730 on his way to join the monastery of Mount Carmel, where he stayed for many years. He saw the building of the forts as the precondition for the prosperity of Haifa, which indeed followed afterwards. His book was written, it appears, on the eve of the capture of the village by Dahar al-Umar; in it he observes, that, once measures had been taken to ensure the

defence of the place against pirates, houses and stores began to be built, so that 'At present there is a settlement of some size and some real commercial activity.' The Carmelites also built a storehouse in Haifa and even proposed to build a church there for Christians, whose numbers were increasing with the general increase of population.[14]

The Anchorage

Throughout the first century of Ottoman rule, the sources at our disposal only mention one ship that tried to anchor off Haifa, that of Rauwolf, and even that, as we have seen, was only there out of necessity. The anchorage, though the best along the coast, offered no protection from attacks launched from the land. Neither had Haifa, lowly as it was, anything to attract maritime traffic to its shore, for it was no more than a ruined, almost desolate, village. Without commerce and without attraction for Christian pilgrims from Europe, it offered no incentive for ships to visit. Moreover, Acre provided an adequate outlet for Safed and Tiberias. In the 1580s, two ships carrying pilgrims from Europe preferred to put in at Athlit.[15] In 1611, we witness two ships bearing Christians from Europe being subjected to harassment at the anchorage of Haifa; in that year, the authorities in Istanbul ordered the Qadi of Lajjun (Megido), under whose jurisdiction which the Haifa *sanjak* (administrative district) fell, to stop the governor of the region and his men from interfering with merchant ships from Europe that wanted to put in at Haifa. It would appear from the wording of the order that French merchants had begun