



An Ottoman Century

The District
of Jerusalem
in the 1600s

Dror Ze'evi

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To Amira, David, Lior and Omer

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Note on Transliteration

People in the region of Jerusalem at the time of this study spoke two languages. The governing elite spoke Turkish, while the rest of the population were mostly Arabic speakers. Scribes at the *shari'a* court in the city, which provided much of the source material for this study, moved at ease between Turkish and Arabic. Frequently one may find a Turkish expression or verb in a mainly Arabic document, or vice versa. Furthermore, there is almost no way of knowing what the pronunciation of many terms of Turkish or Arabic origin was. Were they pronounced as they are today in modern Turkish usage, or did they sound closer to Arabic speech? Sometimes it is even difficult to discern what language was spoken in court. Since the presiding judges usually came from Anatolia, and graduated from the State's colleges in Istanbul, most of them probably spoke Turkish better than they did Arabic. It would be reasonable to assume that few of them could have understood the colloquial speech of villagers, or even that of city dwellers. Translators played a very important part in this bilingual atmosphere. The records in court were probably first translated into Turkish for the qadi's sake, and then back into Arabic for the record.

For all these reasons it was difficult to decide what system of transliteration to use. Translating terms into Arabic would sometimes sound awkward, especially when some of the terms include Turkish or Persian syntax or morphology, as in their terms *bad-i hava*, or *beylerbeylik*. It would be no less awkward to render words spoken by an Arab *fallah* in Turkish transliteration. I have decided, therefore, to use both systems of transliteration simultaneously. Terms used mainly by Turkish speakers; political, economic or military terminology prevalent in the imperial center; and direct translations from documents in Ottoman Turkish, were rendered in modern Turkish transliteration. All the rest, including terms originating in Turkish but commonly used by Arabic speakers, such as *sanjaq* (*sancak*, in Turkish) were rendered in Arabic. At times the decision had to be arbitrary.

In several cases, including place names like Hebron, Jaffa or Bethlehem, and familiar terms such as *sheikh* or *ulema*, the common form of the term was used.

Arabic transliteration follows the system of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*.

Preface

Research for this book was done in several locations. The archives in Istanbul, Paris, Marseilles and London yielded important material. So did libraries at London, Jerusalem, Paris and Princeton.

The most important source for this work, however, was the *shari'a* court in Jerusalem. Working there was a unique experience. Crammed into one small room we sat together—our guide and mentor, Sheikh As'ad al-husayni, three scribes, and two or three historians working on their research. We worked there for months, often holding the heavy volumes on our knees and doing our best to copy records into notebooks perched on the edge of a clerk's desk. At times we would all break into heated discussions of the political situation, or joke about the awkward conditions. Sheikh As'ad, a fountain of knowledge on questions of language, history and Islamic law, would lend a hand in decoding some of the more difficult texts.

But the most peculiar feature of working at the *shari'a* court, was the fact that it was not an archive. We were working inside a functioning court of law. As we lifted our eyes from the ancient volumes, we could sometimes see similar cases unfolding before us. Couples came in to sign a marriage contract, a house owner would request a document of ownership, and sometimes a small delegation would come to solve a dispute. Though it belongs in another era, and I am aware of the differences, this experience has taught me more about my research than much of the material meticulously gathered there. I would like to thank all the qadis and officials at the Jerusalem *shari'a* court who helped us so much, and above all Sheikh As'ad al-Imam al-husayni, and the director, Mr. Zayn al-Din al-'Alami.

My principal debt of gratitude is to Ehud Toledano, my advisor for the dissertation, who read the manuscript and provided a great deal of insight. His help and guidance were invaluable. I would also like to thank Amnon Cohen, who introduced me to the world of the *sijill* and helped me break the code; Halil Bey Inalcik, who discussed many subjects with me, read parts of the manuscript, and showed me where I got it wrong; and Michael Cook, who read several chapters and made me look at things more closely.

It is a pity that I cannot convey my thanks to Albert Hourani, a special person who devoted his time to guide and encourage me throughout my research. Albert also read the manuscript and offered many of his shrewd and observant insights.

Many friends contributed of their thoughts and knowledge. For their helpful remarks thanks are due to Iris Agmon, a constant intellectual stimulus; to Amy Singer and Itzik Reiter, my brothers-in-pen at court; to Nimrod Hurvitz, who had many sharp observations; and to Israel Gershoni and Haggay Erlich who saw me through the darker moments.

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The production staff of SUNY Press at Albany has invested much time and effort into publishing this book. I would like to thank them all for their wonderful work, and especially Christine Worden and Cathleen Collins, for their assistance and persistence in guiding me through the various stages of production.

I owe a debt of love and gratitude to my wife, Amira, and to my family, forced to follow me to London and Princeton, and to suffer my tribulations and long periods of absence visiting faraway archives. I am especially indebted to my son, David, who grew up to be my computer adviser, and saved me in those hours of panic, when the text suddenly disappeared somewhere in the bowels of the machine.

This work would not have been possible without the generous financial help of several institutions. I would like to thank my parents and my parents-in-law, the Rothschild foundation, the Yigal Alon fund, Tel-Aviv University, and Ben-Gurion University, for their help in various stages of this research. My sincere thanks to the staff of the department for Near East Studies at Princeton University for their assistance during my year of postdoctorate studies there.

BEER-SHEVA
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DORO ZE'EVİ

Introduction

In 1512 a young new sultan arrived at the throne in Istanbul. Selim I, otherwise known as Selim *the grim*, reoriented the Ottoman empire to its eastern front, and challenged his two formidable rivals, the Safavid shah Isma'il, and the Mamluk sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri. Immediately following his accession to the throne Selim began to plan his campaign against the Safavids, and two years later, in early 1514, he left Istanbul at the head of his army, on his way to the eastern front. In August of that year the two armies met in the valley of Chaldiran (Çaldıran), north of Tabriz, the Safavid capital. The battle was won by Selim's army, but the approaching winter and the pressures of the janissaries forced the sultan to order a withdrawal to winter quarters in Anatolia.

Confrontation with the Safavids brought the Ottomans closer to the Mamluks. A defence treaty was signed between the Safavids and the Mamluks, and now it was only a question of time before Ottomans and Mamluks, contenders for leadership in Sunni Islam, would meet on the battlefield. Two years later, in 1516, Selim made preparations for yet another campaign in the East. It is not clear whether his initial plan was to return to his unfinished business with the Safavids, or to surprise the unsuspecting Mamluks, but as his army approached Syria, the Mamluk sultan, Qansuh, hastily arranged his army and marched north. Information about the advancing Mamluk army reached Selim, and a series of failed diplomatic contacts and half-hearted overtures turned down by both sides escalated the conflict until war was declared. On 24 August 1516, the Ottomans and the Mamluks faced each other on the plain of Marj Dabiq near Aleppo.

The Mamluks fought valiantly, but their old fashioned bows and arrows were no match for state-of-the-art Ottoman firearms. Waves of Mamluk cavalry attacks crashed against efficient Ottoman fire and at a critical moment an entire Mamluk flank, headed by the governor of Aleppo, Kha'ir (Hayir) Bey, crossed over to the Ottoman side. The battle ended in a crushing defeat for the Mamluks. The sultan, Qansuh, was killed, and the remains of his army retreated south. As Selim entered Damascus,

delegations from all provinces of the sultanate came to pledge allegiance and to plead for amnesty and protection. ¹

The historian Ibn Tulfun, who recorded the events of the conquest, describes the Ottoman army's trip south to Egypt as short and uneventful, apart from short battles in the Jordan valley and at the village of Khan Yunus, near Gaza. Small-scale uprisings in Safad, Ramla and Gaza were quickly and efficiently crushed, and on January 1517 the Ottoman army crossed the Sinai desert and prepared for another confrontation with the Mamluks. The ensuing battle, which took place in the field of Raydaniyya near Cairo, was an overwhelming defeat for the Mamluks, and the remains of the Mamluk army dispersed. The Ottomans had completed their conquest of the sultanate, and could now declare themselves uncontested leaders of the Islamic world, and keepers of its holy sanctuaries in Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. Efficient bureaucrats set out to prepare the ground for establishing Ottoman order in the new territories.²

In the century following the Ottoman conquest, the district of Jerusalem still retained many characteristics of the vanquished Mamluk sultanate. Old social institutions, laws, cultural norms, and even surviving members of the ruling elite itself, were part of the new scene, and served as constant reminders of this slowly fading past. Not until the end of the sixteenth century did Ottoman rule emerge as a distinct type of Muslim government, leaving its special mark on culture and society.

In general terms the Ottomans accepted Mamluk administrative divisions, which saw Palestine as part of the Syrian province, but internally the partition of the area was changed. The province of Damascus (*eyalet* or *vilayet* in Turkish, *wilaya* in Arabic), was divided into new districts (*sancak* in Turkish, *sanjaq* or *liwa'* in Arabic) and subdistricts (*nahiye* in Turkish, *nahiya* in Arabic), but for several decades the new division retained Mamluk imprints such as the special status accorded to Safad and Gaza as the more important districts in the Palestinian provinces. Gaza was ruled by a governor with chances of promotion to the position of province governor (*vali*, *wali*). The district of Jerusalem retained its Mamluk subdivision into three *nahiyas* (Jerusalem, Hebron and Banu 'Amr) but in the course of the century the third subdistrict was abolished and only the first two remained.³

At the base of this new Ottoman administrative division stood the *timar* system. *Timars* were landed fiefs of different size and income, distributed by the sultan to soldiers and officials, most of them officers of the famous *sipahi* cavalry units. An officer who was entrusted to a *timar* would receive his income from part of the fief's tax revenues, and in return would be required to keep the peace in his *timar*, and to arm and train several retainers for war. A district governor would in most cases be the commanding