

The Rise and Fall of Acre : population and economy between 1700 and 1850

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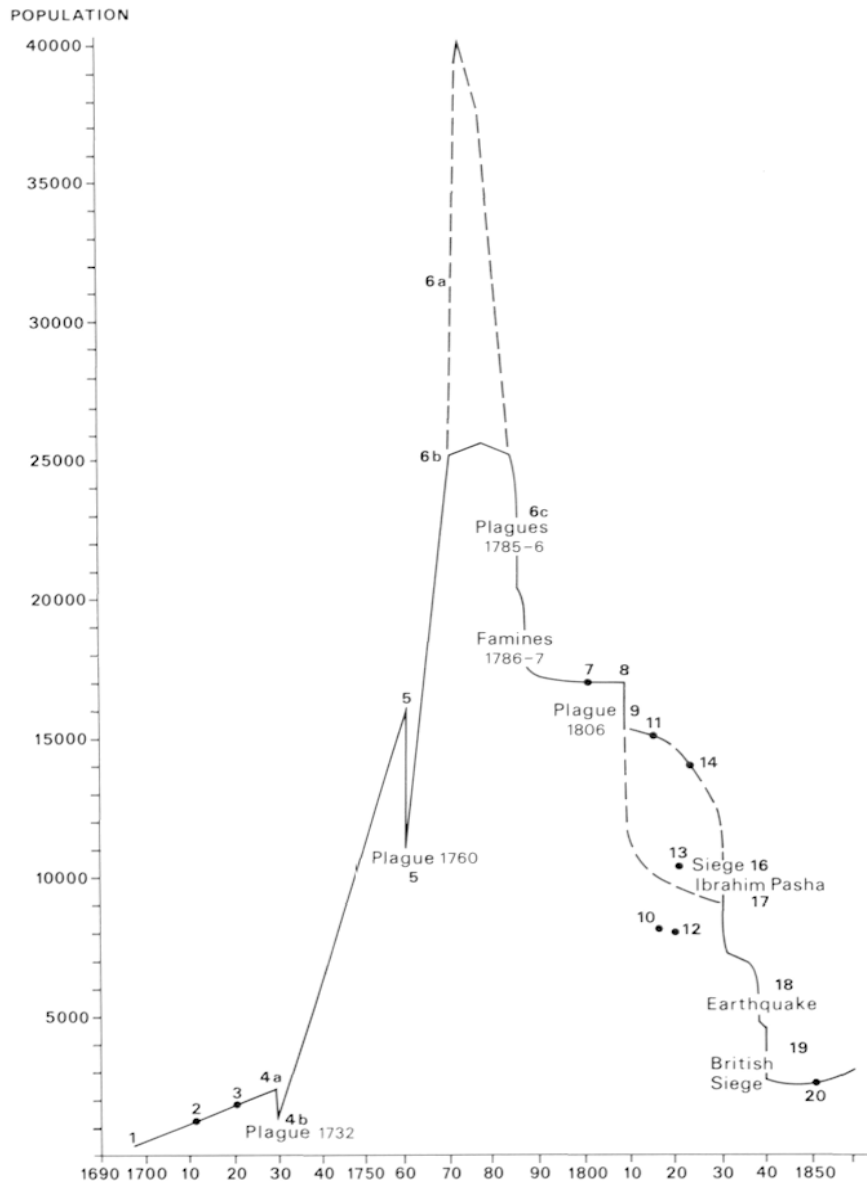
THE RISE AND FALL OF ACRE

Population and economy between 1700 and 1850

During the 18th century Acre was the only city in the Arab Middle East which experienced a dramatic boom turning it from a small fishing village into the most important port on the Syrian coast, well fortified by new walls and towers. The population grew from some 400 to probably 25.000 at its height. The boom was followed by a bust which reduced Acre again to little more than a village by 1840. We shall first look at three aspects of this boom and bust cycle : trends of population growth; economic development; and building activities. In the second part we shall establish the relations between these three aspects and attempt to explain the causes for the overall development.

A. DEVELOPMENT AND COMPOSITION OF THE POPULATION

Even the most cursory look at the population curve of the city of Acre lets us recognize a most dramatic growth and decline within a century and a half. But before commenting on it a word of warning is necessary as always when we talk population figures during this time. Census were not conducted. Local historians were not interested in numbers¹. Most of the numbers, therefore, come from outside observers who provide more or less precise estimates, who copied estimates from others, relied on hearsay, but rarely tell us how they reached their conclusions. Therefore it remains often difficult to say anything about the reliability of the sources.



Annotations to the Population graph of Acre :

1. Maundrell, 428 mentions in 1687 « a large Khan, a mosque and a few poor cottages » in a footnote 300-400 inhabitants are indicated.

2. Eneman, 278 gives in 1711 100 Greek families, 10 Jewish and 200-300 Turkish households. This would imply a total of some 1200 to 1600 people and seems high. His count may include incidentally stationed troops. He also writes « Maronita Nagra fa' kopter och Armener inga ». Pere Lorenco Cozza, Gardien de la Terre Sainte writes in 1715 to the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith the following about Acre : « Il y a deux missionnaires et curés, un pour les Latins qui sont au nombre 26 et l'autre pour les Orientaux qui sont 21. Parmi les Grecs nouvellement revenus à la foi également grâce à Mgr. Eutimios, archevêque grec de Tyr et de Sydon, il y a 35 familles dont quelques-unes comptent des ecclésiastiques... ».²

3. De Saint Maure, 370 declares in 1721 « S. Jean d'Acre est aujourd'hui assez peuplé par le grand nombre de Chrétiens de Nazareth qui sont venus pour fuir la persécution des Arabes ». We don't know what « assez peuplé » means, but it seems that the Christians were a majority. This would concur with the impression from a corrected estimate in n° 2.

4. a : AE B¹ 978 20/VII/1731 and 16/III/32 describe plague in Acre and coast.
 b : Thompson, in 1732 remarked that «apart from the French Khan and the mosque no building is standing», i.e., the population must have been fairly small.
5. a : Mariti, I, 295 recorded in 1760 that the population had reached 16.000 but that in the same year some 5.000 died of the plague.
 b : AE B¹ 87 March 1760 report from Aleppo described major plague in coastal cities.
 c : Ya'ari, 1977, 450, the 1759 earthquake in Tsfat sent many Jews to Acre, where most perished in the plague of 1760.
6. a : Lusignan, 180, estimated in 1770 the population at 40.000. This seems wildly exaggerated (His estimate of 250 people for Haifa at the same time seems to be reasonable, *ibid.*, 182; see also A. Carmel, 34);
 b : correlating the above with the next number we have, for 1797, by Browne, 366, of between 15.000-20.000 Lusignan's estimate does not seem quite that outrageous, if
 c : we consider that in 1785/86 there was a devastating plague which according to French sources resulted in the death of several French and half the population, (AE B¹ 979 12/VII/1785; 15/II/1786; 10/VII/86.) Though this is certainly an exaggeration, the death of 1/3 of the population in one epidemic seems in traditional settings quite possible (Dols, 215-218). The loss of population was compounded in the following winter by starvation. According to the French sources (AE B¹ 979 10/XII/1786) starvation was so severe that people ate the cadavers of the dead. Some 4557 people are said to have perishing during the famine (Charles Roux, p. 137 quoting a letter from Consul Renaudot 18/IV/1787. Unfortunately, Renaudot does not tell us how he obtained this exact number).
 Extrapolating from Browne's figure and the heavy losses of population 10 years earlier even a moderate estimate would suggest 25.000 to 30.000 inhabitants in the late years of Zāhir al-'Umar's rule, because for the decade 1775-1785 we have no hint in the records, nor reason to assume an influx of population into the city. (See Jacoby, *Studii Medievalii* XX 1979 part 1 for estimates on crusader populations. He claims that even at optimal times 40.000 inhabitants were a physical impossibility. In the walled city of today roughly 9.000 people are living).
7. Browne, 366 in 1797 estimated 15.000-20.000 inhabitants.
8. Seetzen, 77, in 1806 stated «die Stadtmauer hält den Ort klein aber stark bevölkert».
9. Al-'Aura, 186-198, in 1806 reported a sever plague which killed 1/4 to 1/2 of all the Muslims, up to 120 a day - but not Christians.
10. Turner, III, in 1815 indicated a total of 9.000 inhabitants of which 2.500 were Muslims, the Maronite, Jewish and Latin communities counted 500 each, 2.000 Greek Catholics, 2.000 Greek Orthodox.
11. Richter 68, in 1816 : «Die Stadt soll 15.000 Einwohner zählen unter welchen viele Armenier und Griechen sich befinden». He does not seem to be sure. Certainly «viele Armenier» seems surprising.
12. Forbin, 128, saw in 1817/18 some 8.000-10.000 inhabitants.
13. Wilson, 48. in 1819 «upward of ten thousand inhabitants» all in a miserable state.
14. Scholz, 244, in 1820/21 «Acri hat 12-15.000 Einwohner, davon 800 Griechisch-Orthodoxe, 80 Lateiner, 800 Griechisch-Katholische, 80 Maroniten, 800 Juden.»
15. Bet Hillel indicates 1200 Jews for 1823.
16. Prokesch, 136 estimated for 1829 10.000 inhabitants of which 1.500 were Catholic, 500 other Christians.
17. Lamartine, 328 «Le siège d'Acre par l'armée d'Ibrahim Pacha avait récemment réduit la ville à un monceau de ruines sous lesquelles dix à douze mille morts étaient ensevelis avec des milliers de chameaux». Even if many of the dead were soldiers, the number of civilians that perished must have been great.
 Blondel, 250 comments in 1839 that the siege by Ibrahim and the recent earthquake have made Acre «un vaste chaos de décombres...la population peu considérable» with less than 100 Christians. *Narrative*, 314 indicates for same time 60 Jews in Acre.
19. Fisk, 252 in 1842 describes the total ruin of the city after British bombardment.
20. *Journal* part I, 265 indicates in 1849 2.000 people of which 1.000 Christians and 120 Jews.
21. Bunel, 275 indicates in 1853 1.200 Catholics, mainly Maronites (which is doubtful).
22. Porter, 362 gives for 1870 about 5.000.
23. Schumacher, 171 in 1887 : 790 Greek Catholics, 1775 Greek Orthodox, 165 Latins, 80 Maronites, 140 Jews, 6.850 Muslims. Total 9.800 inhabitants.

For the religious composition of the population of Acre we have very few data. In a general manner we know that during the 18th century Christians migrated toward the coast; especially Greek Catholics from Damascus and Aleppo, but also Greek Orthodox from Nazareth for instance; in addition some Greeks came from the Greek Islands and were quickly arabized. We can also conclude that during the time of Ibrāhīm Sabāgh many Greek Catholics were attracted to Acre just as later the Jews during the time of Haim Farḥī. Zāhir al-‘Umar pursued a policy of stimulating immigration to his realm, but with different results for different communities.

Any attempt to determine trends of particular sectarian populations has to take two difficulties into consideration : (a) numbers are even less reliable than usual. Not only are sources scarce but one has to treat them with suspicion : frequently there exists a definite interest in over-estimating the size of the one community at the cost of others. (b) It appears that diseases and especially the plague hit the Muslim population much harder than Christians. A report on the plague of 1806 claims that while 25-50% of the Muslim population perished not one of the Christians died³. The Christians were quarantined and took other precautionary measures, believing as they did, in the communicability of the disease. Their Muslim neighbours, denying this to be the case, took by and large no precautions. Mortality due to the epidemics depended not only on religious beliefs and resulting attitudes toward protective measures. Mortality also depended on wealth, i.e. the means to leave town, or to store enough supplies and available living space to lock oneself up for any length of time.

Though there remain some unresolved contradictions, I believe, the general trend and size of population development in Acre can be established. More problematic is it to reconstruct a reliable picture of the sectarian distribution of the population.

The major underlying factor for the shape of the curve is the tremendous economic boom during the middle of the 18th century. The detailed contours of the general trend are formed by such events as plague, famine, war, and earthquake. Clearly, these factors contributed to the rate of growth and decline, but in themselves were not decisive for the direction of the development. The plague in 1760 reduced the population by roughly 1/3 but the population continued to increase rapidly in the 1760's while after 1785 every disaster accelerated the general downward trend of the population size.

The Christian Population :

Eneman, 278 indicated for 1711 some 100 Christian families. De Saint Maure seems to imply a Christian majority of the population for 1721. Judging from the building activities for churches and from the general policy of Ibrāhīm Sabbāgh⁴ Acre must have exerted a great attraction on Christians during the 1760's and 1770's. Pleschtschjeew, 24, states that in 1773 the Greek Catholics constituted the largest single community in Acre, which would lead one to believe, that Christians altogether constituted the majority in the city. Turner II, 111, counts in 1815 still 2.000 Greek Catholics, 2.000 Greek Orthodox, 500 Jews and only 2.500 Muslims, to which, however some 2.000 to 2.500 troops have to be added. If one is to believe Scholz, 244, a drastic drop occurred in the relative and absolute size of

the Christian population within the next five years : 800 Greek Catholics, 800 Greek Orthodox, 80 Maronites, 80 Latins, 800 Jews and 11.000 Muslims. But his numbers do not seem so totally unacceptable when compared to the next figures we have : Prokesch, 141 in 1829 gives 2.000 Christians, 8.000 others. After occupation, siege, earthquake etc. the Christian population is estimated at barely a hundred in 1839⁵. A certain amount of remigration seems to have occurred : 1849 between 1.000 of 2.000 inhabitants are supposedly Christian, 1853 1.200 Christians and by 1887 between 2.200 to 2.800 or 30% of the population were Christians.

It seems that throughout the 18th century the Christians constituted the majority of the population, with the Greek Catholics and the Greek Orthodox being by far the strongest groups. With the decay of the city and the disappearance of trade the absolute number and the relative size of the Christian population of Acre dwindled. In Acre we can observe for the 18th century the link between a growing Christian population and foreign trade which becomes so typical in the 19th century for cities like Alexandria, Beirut, Izmir. Carmel is mistaken when he contrasts Acre to Haifa saying : «Das benachbarte Akko (verharrte) in seinem rein muslimischen Character». Rather, Acre turned slowly into a more Muslim city after having been a predominantly Christian city in the 18th century⁶.

The Jewish Population :

Numbers for the Jewish population are even less precise. By 1702 there seem to be no resident Jews in Acre⁷. The Swedish pastor Eneman indicates ten Jewish families for 1711⁸. In 1741 we hear of more than a 100 Jewish house holds, which seems unreasonably high⁹. The French consular correspondence speaks of a certain «Cacam Mosse Malky, Juif, dragoman barataire de France, résident à Acre»¹⁰. After the earthquake of Tsfat in 1759 a maximum of 50 Jews came to Acre, most of whom died in the following year during the plague¹¹. In 1775 we hear of 36 households, or 120 to 150 Jews, most of whom made their living as jewelers or silk spinners¹². In the first two decades of the 19th century the Jewish population grew rapidly : Turner, II, 111, indicates 400 for 1815, and Scholz, 244,800 Jews for 1820. Bet Hillel indicates only 100 Jews three years later. This number does not seem to have greatly changed during the rest of the century.

The Igrot and Sholhei Aretz Israel literature of the time indicates clearly Jerusalem and Tsfat to be the centers of Jewish immigration. Acre is only mentioned as a port of entry. The motivation for Jewish immigration to Palestine during this time had nothing to do with the economic boom generated through cotton exports. The steep increase of Jewish population in Acre coincided exactly with the years during which Haim Farhī, the Jewish wesir to Aḥmad Pasha al-Jazzār and Sulaimān Pasha, could serve as a powerful patron¹³. Also the rapid exodus from the city after 1820 is understandable in light of the murder of Farhī, and the loss of protection for the Jews.

The following observations may summarize the population trends and developments.

1. During the 18th century Acre experienced an in the Arab lands unparalleled population increase : from a fishing village of 300-400 people it became a city of

25.000-30.000 inhabitants. Only in the 19th century do we find examples of similar rapid growth : Beirut, Haifa, Alexandria.

2. Since the end of the 18th century we can observe a continued decline of the population of Acre until it was reduced by middle of the 19th century to 2.000. The increase in population in the second half of the 19th century seems to be parallel to the general population increase in Palestina during that period.

3. While the city was predominantly a Christian city in the 18th century it became a mainly Muslim city in the 19th century.

4. Throughout the period Jews remained few in numbers. Only in the early 1800's did the community flourish considerably under the protecting hand of Haim Farhī.

5. Plague, famine, war, and earthquake were important factors shaping the patterns of the demographic trends, but underlying and most decisive for the direction of these trends was the economic development of the city and its surroundings.

B. THE ECONOMY OF ACRE

During the 18th century the economy of Syria underwent a profound transformation : At the beginning of the century commerce was centered in Damascus and Aleppo and consisted mainly of international transit trade, in which especially the English but also the French, Dutch, and Italians participated. By midcentury the center of trade had shifted to the coastal towns of South-West Syria and commerce consisted now of locally grown cash crops. The French merchants played a dominant, in fact, exclusive role in the new export trade. The most important item of trade became raw cotton. Acre became the port for all cotton shipment from the area and benefitted enormously from these shifting trade patterns.

Table 1
Average annual exports in 1000 Livres (Source : Paris 393, 403)

Years	Syria-Palestine	Southwest Syria
1671-1675	1.947	965
1686-1700	1.971	1.235
1711-1715	3.502	2.278
1717-1721	4.435	3.256
1724-1728	3.806	2.224
1736-1740	5.039	3.373
1750-1754	5.780	3.702
1765-1769	5.716	3.138
1773-1777	4.258	1.905
1785-1789	5.327	1.810

French trade with Syria/Palestine flourished during the 18th century. However if inflation would be calculated into these figures it would appear the increase was less than it seemed. What is evident from the two columns of numbers is that the exports from Southwest Syria peaked already in midcentury. The difference of trade being made up by increased exports to France from Aleppo.

But Keeping in mind that for Acre the magic word was cotton, that it had almost

a monopoly on the export of raw cotton, and that it also participated in the export of cotton thread — though the center for this was Sidon, as Beirut was the center for silk exports — we should take a closer look at specific trade items.

Table 2
Major items bought and sold in SW Syria in 1000 Livres, annual averages
(source : Paris 407)

	1700-1702	1750-1754	1786-1789
<i>Items bought :</i>			
Cotton thread	745	1.305	421
raw cotton	95	1.245	69
silk	437	1.012	578
cloth	-	40	73
Galles	33	43	47
Other			
Total	1.446	3.702	1.399
<i>Items sold :</i>			
Cloth	-	567	353
other textiles	-	7	105
colorants	-	120	88
sugar	-	68	105
other			
Total	-	841	842

Of all listed items raw cotton was clearly the one exposed to the greatest variations in volume, a circumstance which was of great consequence to the welfare of the city of Acre.

By calculating inflation into these numbers and transforming them into actual volume of cotton exported our picture becomes even more accentuated.

Table 3
Cotton exports in Quintaux : (1 quintal = 250 kg) Paris, 350-353)

	1700-1702	1750-1754	1786-1789
cotton thread	9.675	9.464	1.584
raw cotton	1.826	14.971	678
total	11.501	25.435	2.260

Total volume of cotton exported more than doubled between 1700 and 1750 but was reduced in 1789 to only 20% of what it had been at the beginning of the century.

The increase in cotton volume came exclusively from raw cotton exports, which increased by a factor of 8,5 until midcentury, only to be reduced to 4% of this volume by the end of the century.

For later periods we have no precise data available but a detailed report of 1806 tells us that all the cotton was a monopoly of the Pasha, and that it was sold to Hasbeya and Rasheya to the Druze and the Metualis, and that no export to Europe existed¹⁴.

By 1836 any trade from the harbor of Acre had ceased. Haifa and Beirut were already taking over¹⁵.

The export data describing the phenomenal boom and bust cycle of cotton production and export are confirmed by the impressions travelers reported about the state of agriculture in the surroundings of Acre. In 1750 the plain between Acre and Nazareth is described as covered with fields of cotton and barley and an abundance of beehives¹⁶. A generation later Volney explains that the increase in the urban population in Syria is generally caused by the desertion of rural populations in flight from oppression in the countryside¹⁷. At the same time we hear that still some 25.000 quintaux of cotton were grown in the plains of Palestine of which 2/3 went to France¹⁸. In 1797 the plains around Acre are deserted marsh¹⁹. Turner declared in 1807 «not half of the land of the Pashalik is cultivated»²⁰. The impression is confirmed a dozen years later by a report claiming that Acre is surrounded by fertile but uncultivated plain²¹.

C. RECONSTRUCTION OF ACRE

Though the results of the reconstruction of Acre during the 18th and early 19th century are quite visible, information about the history of these reconstructions is scant. There is, for instance, not a word in the records about the construction of private houses and apartments. And while the construction of public buildings is usually mentioned by local historians and travelers, we have only little information about the costs, the sources of financing the labor force, its organization etc. If we nevertheless try to talk here about the reconstruction it can only be in order to indicate in a very crude manner some of the general trends along which construction activities developed.

We know that in the early 18th century Acre was mainly a pile of rubble and ruins. If, in spite of the fact that the harbor was useless and that in nearby Haifa a much better protected bay was to be found, Zāhir al-'Umar nevertheless decided to make Acre the center of his realm, it was precisely because of Acre's ruins : They provided cheap precut building materials on location.

For convenience sake we can group the construction activity other than private housing according to the functions it fulfilled : religious, economic, military-political and public services.

1. *Religious buildings* : Around 1700 one mosque, al-Senan mosque, existed in Acre - later rebuilt as al-Baḥr mosque by Sulaiman Pasha. Soon a further mosque was added, al-Ramal mosque. By midcentury al-Mu'allaq mosque — built 1748 by Shaikh Suhail — and al-Zaitūna mosque — built 1754 by Ḥājj Muḥammad al-Ṣadiq — were erected. As far as we know, in all cases, the initiative and the money came from private sources. To these four mosques only one more, but by far the largest and most remarkable one, was added in 1778 by Aḥmad Pasha al-Jazzār, built with forced labor and financed by his treasury.

All the five churches in Acre, The Franciscan Church, the Greek Orthodox St. George, the Maronite church, and the two Greek Catholic churches, St. Andrew and St. John, were built or extensively enlarged and renovated between 1730 and 1770. Naturally they were not financed by the government.

With the exception of the great mosque al-Jazzār which was clearly built for

reasons of representations and ostentation, all the other religious buildings were built before the al-Jazzār period, in fact, some of them even before Zāhir al-'Umar had made Acre the seat of his government. I believe, it is reasonable to assume that their construction responded directly to the rapidly increasing population, both Christian and Muslim, during this period.

2. *Economic Structures.* During the first half of the 18th century the Khan al-Faranj had remained the only real center of economic activity. But when Zāhir al-'Umar moved into the city he was well aware of the importance of cotton exports and other economic activities. Zāhir decided to build a new port in the southern part of Haifa Bay, while at the old port of Acre he had in 1761 only some wave breakers added to protect boats and light vessels. In Acre he had two new Khans built — Khan Shūna in 1765, the eastern part of Khan Shawārada, and a large bazaar, where today as-Sūq al-Abyaḍ stands. Al-Jazzār attributed at least as much importance to the economy as Zāhir al-'Umar did. He had the Khan al-Shawārada doubled in size, he built the brand new Khan al-'Umdān and the Sūq al-Jazzār plus some minor structures. During the reign of Sulaiman Pasha very few structures were added : a donkey Khan for small traders with daily merchandise was erected in 1810. Seven years later Zāhir al-'Umar's bazaar burned down and Sulaiman Pasha had as-Sūq al-Abyaḍ built in its stead. But, significantly, where once 110 shops had existed, the reconstruction housed only 64 shops.

3. *Political-military structures.* Almost immediately after entering the town Zāhir al-'Umar commenced with a major construction project : the fortification of the city by a seven meter high and one meter wide wall. A wall that was to protect again bedouin bands, sea pirates, and eventually also against the French army. Zāhir al-'Umar rehabilitated the crusader fortress and made it his palace. He added to it a fortified tower. Both, Aḥmad al-Jazzār and Sulaiman Pasha added structures of their own. Zāhir al-'Umar also built the Busta, or Serai, where he ran the daily business of government. The importance of city walls was driven home to al-Jazzār during the French siege. After the French retreat, al-Jazzār had the old wall of Zāhir al-'Umar repaired and set out to have a brand new and enormous additional defense structure added. This included a much larger wall, a moat and towers. Sulaiman Pasha and 'Abdallāh added a few buildings for their palaces.

4. *Public Utilities.* Here the bath houses have to be mentioned. Zāhir al-'Umar as well as Aḥmad Pasha al-Jazzār, both, had each a big public bath erected. Al-Jazzār undertook another major enterprise, namely bringing fresh water by way of an aqueduct which was destroyed during the French siege and reconstructed only in 1815 by Sulaiman Pasha.

This is in no way an exhaustive list of all the constructions that occurred during this time. But, I believe, a few valid observations can be made.

1. Most of the religious buildings were built during the early period and reflect the increasing population of Acre.

2. Both Zāhir al-'Umar and Aḥmad al-Jazzār spent a great deal on fortifying the city and enhancing the economic facilities. In fact it seems that al-Jazzār's efforts surpass those of Zāhir al-'Umar by much. This stands in clear contrast to the trends of the growth and decline of the population and the economy. A point to which we shall return.

3. Finally we should add that the bombardement by Ibrāhīm Pasha, the subsequent earthquake and the final bombardment by the British in 1840 reduced the city to what it had been 150 years earlier : a pile of rubble.

D. THE CAUSES FOR THE RISE AND FALL OF ACRE

We have looked at three trends of development in Acre : Population growth, economy — especially cotton exports —, and building activities. Our observations can be summarized briefly : During the first three quarters of the 18th century but especially during the second and third, we observe rapid growth in all three trends. In the last quarter of the century a down turn occurs in the size of the population and economy, while — for some time — building activities continue on the same or even accelerated level. The downward trends continue with more or less acceleration during the first half of the 19th century. By the middle of the 19th century Acre's importance as a port is less than it was at the end of the 17th century and its population is only slightly larger than then.

The two periods of rise and downturn of the fortunes of Acre seem to be closely associated with its two rulers during the 18th century, Zāhir al-'Umar az-Zaidānī and Aḥmad Pasha al-Jazzār. It seems that with the arrival of al-Jazzār things turned sour. We find indeed a considerable number of descriptions contrasting the two rulers. Zāhir al-'Umar was considered a wise and benign ruler, who had the interest of the local population in mind and who established security and prosperity in the plains surrounding Acre. Aḥmad al-Jazzār appears to have been the very opposite : cruel, indeed vicious, with a strong streak of sadism and paranoia in his character, erratic in his behaviour, oppressive and extortionist to the point that peasants fled the land and cultivation ceased.

The causes for the changing fortunes of Acre are indeed often explained in terms of the different talents and character of the two rulers. Just as the wise leadership of Zāhir al-'Umar let the city and its commerce flourish, so did al-Jazzār's greed and tyranny destroy it.

No doubt, the specific measures the two rulers took, helped or hindered the growth of the city. Neither all Zāhir's steps were beneficial nor were all of al-Jazzār's detrimental. But there were factors beyond their control which in the end decided the fate of the city. For a better appreciation of these factors we have to return once more to the economic developments and investigate especially the export of raw cotton during the 18th century. Analyzing the interplay between this outside factor and the positions taken by the ruler will lead to a better understanding of the real causes for the rise and decline of Acre.

Already at the end of the 17th century the raw cotton from Acre was known and in demand. It is not accidental that at the turn of the century Acre is described as a vast spacious ruin with a few cottages, in which only a mosque and a large Khan stood out. The Khan was the center of business activities and already then a number of French merchants used it as their headquarters and warehouse²².

But matters were unsettled. The villages surrounding Acre were deserted because of Beduin incursions²³. Haifa across the bay was known as «little Malta» not only because corsairs occasionally replenished their supplies there but also because all sorts of evildoers and outlaws found a haven there securely beyond the reach of the feeble local authorities²⁴.

The French merchants traded directly with village shaikhs and peasants. But their control on the export trade was not fully assured. Occasionally other foreigners, like the Dutchman Mashook who functioned as English vice consul of Acre, tried

to gain control of the trade²⁵. The French merchants also felt handicapped by the French «nation» in Sidon of which the French of Acre were legally only an extension. Already in 1697 it was claimed that Acre was more important for the French trade than Sidon and the demand was made for independence for the French «nation» in Acre from that of Sidon; a subject upon which much energy was to be spent throughout the century²⁶.

More significant for our context is the complaint of the lack of cooperation and discipline of the French merchants among themselves and with the French captains. In spite of their own and voluntary agreements to buy in a cooperative fashion, the merchants competed with each other, trying to make separate deals with the local producers which were only «au profit des gens du pays». The French captains circumvented the French merchants often altogether. They sent their own agents with cash into the countryside and tried to buy directly from the locals «à tout prix», which again lead to an increase in the price of cotton²⁷. The French consular correspondence describes the reasons for such behaviour in personal terms, «jalousie, querelles, le peu de lois». Frequent but unsuccessful attempts were made by the consuls to regulate the situation by law; i.e., to establish a price control by coordinating all buying from the local population through one agency at one price. These attempts at price fixing remained unsuccessful because the demand for cotton in France was overwhelming and ever increasing. Rather than accepting a limited share at lower prices via the cooperative buying of cotton individual merchants and captains perceived a possibility for much larger profits by acquiring control over larger parts of the cotton crop. Even if it meant to pay to the local producer somewhat higher prices, the profits that could be made in Marseille were huge.

To assure access for themselves to the cotton crop individual merchants entered local politics and financial affairs. The short lived power of the Dutch merchant Mashook had been based on his access to the villages around Tsfat and his contacts with the shaikh of Shfa'amr and neighboring villages. He could even cause these villages not to sell to the French at all²⁸. Personal contacts, financial commitments, and dealings with the village shaikhs rather than the prime producer himself became important for ensuring a maximum part of the cotton crop to the individual merchant. Local unrest was an eternal danger and necessitated collaboration with local leaders. This collaboration was gained by advancing for instance money for tax payments or by buying the crop «auf dem Halm».

The case of Shaikh Sa'd az-Zaidānī of Tsfat in 1730 is instructive. The Pasha of Sidon had attacked in April of that year the city and imprisoned, among others, Shaikh Sa'd. He was then set free after some French merchants had put up bail for him at the tune of 20.000 piasters. For this sum, he was reinstated by the Pasha as a taxfarmer of the area. To the French merchants who had put up the bail for him, he mortgaged the crop of several villages under his jurisdiction. Other French merchants complained bitterly because they felt they had lost equal access to the cotton supply. The French government also disapproved of this interference into local politics. In fact it was not even desirable for the French merchant to deal with local merchants. Ideally the French merchants should buy as a cooperative directly from the prime producer at a price fixed by the merchants. But other French merchants pointed out that only the reliance upon local leaders guaranteed steady supplies of cotton during these days full of unrest²⁹. Besides, the profits cotton

was bringing in Marseille were about 150% and for that kind of profit it was certainly worthwhile to advance loan and cash to local shaikhs in individual deals³⁰.

New efforts were made to force the French merchants by legislation to establish a collective monopoly on the cotton trade, thereby to avoid individual competition and outbidding and to buy the cotton «à un plus juste prix» i.e. cheaper. But the potential profits of cotton and the seemingly unlimited need of Marseille for cotton prevented any such price fixing and monopolization of the trade. On the contrary in 1731 the local Pasha and the custom officials of Sidon and Acre, i.e. the government authorities tried for the first time their own hand in the trade and some shaikhs even tried to sell directly to Europe on their own account for «exaggerated» — so the French consul — prices³¹. When the French really tried to adhere to their own agreements and to offer only low prices for cotton in Acre we find that, for instance in 1742, there were English and Dutch merchants who were willing to snatch away the cotton at higher prices.

In this highly competitive climate of the cotton trade, Zāhir al-'Umar became increasingly the decisive factor. The French had made his acquaintance first in 1731 when he tried to negotiate the debts of this brother Sa'd with them³². The French consular reports reflect the increasing involvement of Zāhir al-'Umar with the trade of Acre. Since the 1730's he had brought most of the hinterland of Acre under his control and by the summer of 1746 he was «gouverneur d'Acre»³³. In September 1746 he had a French merchant arrested who was set free only after paying 1100 piaster. The reason for the arrest is interesting : The merchant was accused of nothing more than having been in the house of a local merchant. Zāhir tried to prevent all direct contact between the French and the local population, and making himself the only agent with whom the French were allowed to deal. Zāhir still resided at that time in Deir al-Hannah, not in Acre, and the French had to travel to him to negotiate. Jouvenal, the head of the French merchants in Acre, accused Joseph Blanc of collaboration with Zāhir. The latter used to stay at Joseph Blanc's house whenever he came to Acre. In Jouvenal's opinion J. Blanc had advanced so much money to Zāhir al-'Umar that he now tried to get reimbursed by suggesting avanias on his French compatriots³⁴. The complaints about Zāhir increased : «cet homme si redoutable à tous ceux qui ont le malheur de vivre sous sa domination...»³⁵. During 1748 several events occurred or perhaps were provoked by Zāhir which raised the tension³⁶. The general sentiment was that the whole trade may be lost because Zāhir al-'Umar dealt in bad faith, and the peasants in the countryside had no money to repay their loans to the French. The French demanded that this tyrant and rebel be removed by the Ottoman government³⁷. In the spring of 1750 the French merchants believed «que le commerce de cette Echelle est totalement désolé» if the High Port would not force Zāhir to pay his debts to the French³⁸. But a year later it seems that the French had made their peace with Zāhir. The situation was described as tranquil : «Daher profite du haut prix auquel on achète ses marchandises» and some French were still willing to advance him money because they expected a high demand for cotton in Europe³⁹.

Attempts to fix prices were of no use : French merchants were willing to pay 110 piaster per quintal because of «les besoins qu'ils avoient d'une prodigieuse quantité de balles». Those who offered only the official price of 100 piaster found nothing to buy⁴⁰. The demand for cotton seemed unlimited and the price went up to 140 piaster per quintal. At the same time Zāhir al-'Umar was deeply involved

in the reconstruction and fortification of the city and needed all the revenues he could get. He had succeeded in making himself the exclusive agent of all cotton trade. The peasants could only sell to him, the French could only buy from him. Any direct contact between producer and merchant was strictly forbidden. Zāhir al-'Umar even tried to sell on his own account to Malta and Naples and the French felt forced to come to an arrangement with him, if they did not want to be cut out of the trade altogether⁴¹.

The point of these developments is that the French, though they complained bitterly about Zāhir al-'Umar, were willing to pay his price because the profits to be made in Marseille were even higher. Any additional production could easily be absorbed by the intense cotton famine in France.

But even with a high demand for cotton in France, Zāhir al-'Umar could maintain his monopoly on cotton and force the French to collaborate only as long as he was able to deliver, i.e. as long as he had full political control over the area and could ensure the physical safety of the primary producer and the product. By the early 1770's Zāhir ceased to be able to fulfill these conditions. Military struggles with his sons who challenged him for the rulership and his involvement with 'Alī Bey al-Kabīr from Egypt were costly and destructive. The French began to complain about the lack of available crop. Exports from Acre dwindled even though prices in Marseille remained high⁴².

When al-Jazzār assumed power in 1775 he clearly expected the lucrative trade to resume. For several years, it seemed, his expectations were justified. The French found trade profitable and the only complaints concern again their internal rivalries, their advancement of cash to individual shaikhs, and the risk of not receiving the high quality cotton they want.

In 1782 the French merchants in Acre tried again to buy cotton as a cooperative at a fixed price. But Aḥmad al-Jazzār heard of it (probably from a French merchant who hoped for a special allocation of cotton from the government); he prohibited the people to sell to the French and slapped a 6 piaster per quintal tax on cotton exported from Acre. Renaudot, the French consul in Acre refused to comply. But the French merchants were not able to carry through the boycott. French captains are willing to buy up the cotton and even French merchants from Cairo, Aleppo, Cyprus were willing to buy cotton from the Acre area. Cotton thus acquired was shipped to Livorno from where it could safely be sent to Marseille. These dealers were willing to pay 168 piaster per quintal or 15 piaster more than the price offered by the French merchants in Acre⁴³.

Business in Acre flourished. The French merchants had to come to an arrangement with Aḥmad al-Jazzār. Cotton remained in high demand. It certainly was not unreasonable in view of the flourishing economy, that al-Jazzār had a whole new Khan, Khan al-'Umdān, built in Acre, rivalling that of the French. At the same time Renaudot tried to get a loan from the French government for 30.000 piaster to rebuilt the French Khan and put it again wholly under French control⁴⁴.

The export crisis, however, came soon. The French and al-Jazzār entered into an acrimonious dispute. Their relationship became hostile and ended in the exodus of the French merchants from Acre in 1790. Were one to believe the explanations of the French consul Renaudot, the cause for the deterioration of the relationship was to be found solely in the vicious and unpredictable character of Aḥmad al-Jazzār⁴⁵.

But occasionally we get a glimpse of other factors, which must have played a role, and probably a decisive one. In May 1784 Renaudot reported that the price for cotton in Marseille had fallen by 30% and the French had recently not bought from al-Jazzār⁴⁶. Since about the same time incidents of al-Jazzār's «petitesse» against the French increase. Renaudot, who had prided himself in being a good friend of al-Jazzār began to complain : «le caractère de ce Pasha devient de plus en plus inégal, inquiet, soupçonneux...»⁴⁷.

At the end of 1784 Acre had an abundant cotton crop and it looked like the government was not going to discuss the price which had been lowered by some 30%⁴⁸. Two disastrous years of draught and disease followed which lead to serious diminishing of the population and the disappearance of the cotton crop. The cotton crop of 1789 and 1790 were again huge. But in spite of al-Jazzār's obvious need for cash after some years of disaster we hear that in the summer of 1790 still half of the crop of the preceding year is in the warehouses of al-Jazzār⁴⁹. Aḥmad al-Jazzār had established a monopoly over the cotton trade, buying at prices fixed by him from the primary producer. It appears that he was holding out on the French for a price they were not willing to pay. For the first time there was no competition between the French to buy «à tous prix». This inflexibility of the French led to the crisis and exodus from Acre.

Aḥmad al-Jazzār's decision to exile the French was certainly also influenced by the recent rebellion of his own Mamluk Selim against him. According to al-Jazzār the French had a hand in this rebellion. But probably more important was the realization that he could not deal with the French anymore on his own terms. What he did not understand was that the times had changed. The demand for cotton had finally led to overproduction and falling prices. More than that : withholding the Acre cotton from the market did not lead to rising prices, because by the end of the century the cotton from Acre constituted only a fraction of all French cotton imports.

Tabel 3
Average annual raw cotton exports from the ports of the Levant in 1000 livres
(source : Paris, 514)

	1700-1702	1750-1754	1786-1789
SW Syria	95	1.134	69
Aleppo	10	15	71
Cyprus	41	15	412
Smyrna	22	1.621	6.923
Saloniki	36	908	2.136
Istanbul	12	-	235
Archipel	15	24	-
Totals	225	3.710	9.853

At the beginning of the 18th century almost 40% of all the raw cotton from the Mediterranean came from Southwest Syria. By midcentury total exports had increased by a factor of 12 and Southwest Syria was still supplying some 30% of it. Exports almost tripled again by 1780 but the absolute as well as the relative amount supplied by Southwest Syria had fallen drastically and was less than 1%

of the total. Smyrna and Saloniki had emerged as the new decisive cotton exporters. To this we have to add that since 1749 the raw cotton imported from Brazil and the West Indies began to compete seriously with the cotton from the Levant⁵⁰. By 1789 imports from there had risen to roughly twice the volume of those from the Levant.

In the total picture of raw cotton exports to France Acre had shrunk to an infinitesimal small part. The ruler of Acre was unable to influence prices by withholding or releasing his cotton on the market of Marseille. More than that, at the first signs of local unrest and political upheaval the French could shift to other sources for cotton imports and could leave high risk areas - which is exactly what occurred in Acre in 1790.

Already in the last years of Zāhir al-'Umar's rule political instability and strife caused a drop in the cotton exports from the area. Paris argues that the events in Syria in the 1770's transformed the cotton exports : « Ils détruiraient le trafic de coton brut dans cette région à cause de l'insécurité des campagnes »⁵¹. But he is only partly right. Already before Zāhir al-'Umar's regime insecurity had often been bad for business, and even with him as ruler the French complained about great difficulties. However, the French came back every time because the profits that could be made were high. By the time which Paris is discussing the French were already developing import alternatives for cotton. Later bad crops and unrealistic price demands by Aḥmad al-Jazzār made trade from the area altogether unpromising for the French.

Venture de Paradis is, of course, on first sight right, when he blamed Jāzzār's wild building activities in Acre for the bankruptcy⁵². Al-Jazzār indeed carried through a considerable construction program. His assumption, based on experience, was that cotton exports would remain high and that prices could be dictated by assuring himself a monopoly in the buying and selling of the cotton of Acre. When this expectation did not materialize he did not cease his construction program. These costs and the payments to Istanbul had to be obtained from a decreasing economic basis. Oppressive taxation and extortion from the primary producer led to a vicious circle of accelerated desertion from the countryside, reduction of production and ever heavier extortions. In the end the economic basis of Acre, cotton, was vanishing because of outside factors. Al-Jazzār's incomprehension of the situation and insistence on high revenues for himself accelerated the destruction of the economic basis on which Acre had flourished throughout the 18th century.

Al-Jazzār had always been a highly unpleasant tyrant but the loss of control over cotton trade and prices made him into an oppressive and murderous one. This accelerated the process of decay which found its basic reason in the diminished role Acre could play in the cotton trade and the finally falling prices for cotton.

NOTES

1. E.g., al-'Aura's work, detailed as it is on social history, does not even give us a hint as to size of the population at his time.
2. Marmino Bugatti in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Jan. 12, 1969 : 7.
3. Al-Aura, 1936 : 196-198.
4. See T. Philipp, 1985 : 22, 27, 29.
5. E. Blondel, 1840 : 249.
6. A. Carmel, 1975 : 73.
7. A. Ya'ari, 1951 : 234.
8. M. Eneman, 1885 : 278.
9. A. Ya'ari, 1951 : 256.
10. AE B¹ 84 Aleppo 23/VIII 1745.
11. Y. Barna'i : 214; A. Ya'ari, 1937 : 450.
12. B. Yashar, 1953 : 26.
13. A. Ya'ari, 1951 : 338, letter of Haim Bar Tovia from Vilna who visits Acre in 1810 and receives promise from Haim Farhī to support the Hassidic immigrants in all respects.
14. U. J. Seetzen, 1854 : 130.
15. B. Qaral'a, 1937 : 53.
16. F. Hasselquist, 1766 : 153.
17. Volney : II, 209.
18. AE B¹ 979, 26 July 1783.
19. W. G. Browne, 1799 : 360.
20. W. Turner, 1920 : 126.
21. J. M. A. Scholz, 1822 : 243.
22. H. Maundrell, 1848 : 428.
23. AE B¹ 1017 t/IV/1699.
24. AE B¹ 1017 2/V/1704.
25. AE B¹ 1017 8/III/1703, 2/V/1704.
26. AE B¹ 1017 30/XI/1697; B¹ 978 28/I/1730', 16/II/1785, 1/VI/1742.
27. Mémoire sur le Commerce Dec. 1699, AE B¹ 1017.
28. AE B¹ Feb. 1704.
29. AE B¹ 798 24/VI/1730.
30. AE B¹ 978 23/X/1730.
31. «Mémoire Concernant le Commerce de la Nation Française à Acre» AE B¹ 20/VIII/31 : 199-212.
32. AE B¹ 978 30/VI/1731.
33. AE B¹ 978/ Nov. 1746.
34. AE B¹ 978 Nov. 1746.
35. AE B¹ 978 20/I/1748.
36. AE B¹ 978 3/XIII/1748.
37. AE B¹ 978 30/I/1749.
38. AE B¹ 978 April 1750.
39. AE B¹ 978 r/I/1751.
40. AE B¹ 978 20/I/1752.
41. AE B¹ 14/XII/1751.
42. See the consular report of 1772 from Acre, quoted in Charles Roux : 101.
43. AE B¹ 979 18/VI/1783.
44. AE B¹ 979 27/VI/1784.

45. See passim AE B¹ 979 years 1786-1790.
46. AE B¹ 979 30/V/84.
47. AE B¹ 979 14/IX/1784.
48. AE B¹ 979 16/XI/1785; 7/I/1785.
49. AE B¹ 981 19/VII/1790.
50. Paris : 512.
51. Paris : 515.
52. Venture de Paradis, *Mémoire sur la Syrie*, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms Français 6430.

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