
8 Aspects of Economy and Society in the Syrian Provinces: Aleppo in Transition, 1880–1925

Peter Sluglett

In the last few decades of the Ottoman Empire, particularly after the 1860s, the economy of the eastern Mediterranean underwent a series of momentous changes that resulted in transformations probably more complex and convulsive than had been seen over any comparable period of Ottoman rule. Economic historians¹ have shown how these changes were related to much wider trends, demonstrating the region's increasingly accelerating integration into the international market. Coastal towns boomed; harbors, roads, and railways were built to facilitate the import and export of goods more efficiently from the coast to the interior and vice versa, and an increasingly unfavorable balance of trade with Europe (and with the Far East for yarn, thread, and textiles) mounted year by year. Many traditional artisan activities declined, and there was a wave of migration, both from the rural parts of the region to the cities, and from the region to other parts of the Middle East—especially Egypt—and to the Americas.²

This much is undeniable. What is less clear is how what used to be represented as a rather doom-laden and negative scenario³ functioned at the local level of city or province. In recent years a number of historians have shown that, rather than being swamped by the pressures of the European metropolises or being forced to be entirely subservient to them, the economy of the eastern Mediterranean generally exhibited a remarkable degree of adaptation and resistance, especially at the turn of the century, between the 1880s and World War I. To give some random examples, more than three times the number of looms in Aleppo were active in 1909 than had been