

CHAPTER 5

SOCIETY AND ITS STRUCTURE IN ACRE

It remains for us to have a look at the sort of urban society that evolved in Acre. Because of the dearth of relevant sources more questions will be raised than can be answered. Acre as a city and as a urban society distinguished itself by several unique features, which make it difficult to fit it into the typology of Ottoman provincial cities, though it also shared some features with such cities.¹

In terms of time, Acre could look back, of course, on a long and distinguished history from antiquity to the Crusades. But the Acre of the eighteenth century developed quite literally *ex nihilo*. As one traveler described it in about 1700: "Besides a large Khan in which the French factors have taken up their quarters and a mosque, and a few poor cottages, you see nothing here but a vast and spacious ruin."²

In terms of space, the new Acre was built on well-preserved urban ruins. This was not accidental, since the ruins functioned as an ideal source for building material: hewn stones in abundance were already on the construction site. The preexisting structures and street plan also prescribed to a large degree the shape and form of the new structures and their location. This had occurred in other cities in Syria, too, but it had been a gradual process over centuries, and ancient structures were much less easily recognized than in Acre. The first building activity by Zāhir al-'Umar had been the construction of a city wall, more or less along the medieval outline of the city. With that the space for urban development was defined and it remained *intra muros* at a time when other cities in Syria had gone beyond their original circumference and expanded *extra muros*.

In terms of functions, Acre was, like other cities, the residency of a local