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**Journeymen Textile Weavers in Nineteenth-Century Damascus: A Collective Biography**

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It is not easy to reconstruct the lives of ordinary nineteenth-century Middle Eastern men and women. Not only are the sources cruelly lacking, for the most part we do not even know the names of ordinary people. This is, of course, especially true of rural society, where peasants and tribespeople, deeply suspicious of the state and its agents, kept largely to themselves. But even in the cities, where our sources are relatively more complete, it is rare that we know even the names of individual workers and artisans (though the elite of merchants and ulama are better known).

Given the state of the field, Sherry Vatter’s portrait of journemen weavers in Damascus in the middle of the nineteenth century is a considerable feat of the historical imagination. Because of the absence of sources, Vatter’s collective biography (or prosopography, as it is sometimes called) is focused not on a single individual but on the social category of journemen weavers as a whole. While the weavers remain anonymous, from her account we learn a great deal about the specific conditions under which they labored. We also gain a heightened appreciation of the possibilities and limitations of artisan life in Damascus, including insight into the impact of the Ottoman reform program and of changing economic conditions. Because of the importance of the textile sector in the urban economy of Damascus (it was the major employer and paid a big share of wages and taxes), the life of journemen weavers is of general significance for understanding the impact of change upon society as a whole.

Beginning in the 1840s, the importation of growing quantities of European finished textile goods (especially cheap Manchester cottons) drastically undercut local production throughout the region. This was especially true in Syria and Lebanon, traditional centers of textile production. As Vatter’s contribution shows, the impact of these changes depended a lot on the sector of the market for which one produced. Thus producers of expensive luxury cloth managed to retain their markets reasonably well, while producers of inexpensive cloth suffered intensely. Although the overall Syrian (and Ottoman)
the adjoining courtyard. Three young men huddled around it, giving vent to their indignation.

"Look at us. Sharing a room, and barely managing to survive at that."
"What kind of future do we have?"
"An unbearable one!"
"They should be ashamed."

In a neighborhood coffee shop, a cluster of men passed the evening around a table, sharing a nargila (water pipe) and sipping tea. In subdued tones they earnestly addressed the topic of the day.

"Shall we be martyrs to their greed?"
"Will we let them profit at our expense?"
"What shall we do?"

Conversations similar to these certainly were heard in Damascus in early January 1879, just before some three thousand journeymen weavers went on strike in protest of a wage cut against the master weavers who employed them. They brought all activity in the city's weaving workshops to a standstill. It remained so for four weeks. Militants ensured that all weavers honored the work stoppage by intimidating potential strikebreakers with threats and by cutting threads mounted on looms. The strikers won a resounding victory. Masters reinstated the old pay rates, and journeymen returned to work.

The journeymen weavers in this provincial Ottoman capital had engaged in a recognizably modern form of labor struggle. Their militant, collective, and disciplined confrontation of employers was characteristic of actions by industrial wagemakers against employers where capitalist relations prevailed. This style of industrial politics was new to Damascus. Up to the 1870s journeymen appear to have addressed grievances as individuals, one or two confronting the master who employed them. Conflicts were not resolved in a militant or collective manner, but quickly, quietly, and out of public view.

How did a group of Middle Eastern workers come to engage in a form of struggle associated with capitalist Europe and America? Were they imitating foreigners, or did their behavior have indigenous roots? If the latter, did they find models of action already available, or did they need to invent them? These questions are best addressed from the perspective of the individual journeymen who conceived of striking and participated in strike actions.

Unfortunately we are not yet in a position to write life histories of specific journeymen weavers. Even individuals at the forefront of change, those who first articulated a new vision of the journeyman's relationship with masters and strike leaders, remain unidentified. However, a reconstruction of the conditions under which the average

Ahmad paused just inside the door of the dimly lit workshop. His friend Ali sat with his back to the door, interlacing the burgundy and blue silk mounted on the loom in front of him with a strand of red cotton thread.

Ahmed watched the shuttle make a full circuit, from the right side of the loom, behind Ali's body, to the left, and to the right once again, before announcing himself.

"Peace be upon you, Ali. Well done."
"God keep you. Welcome," responded Ali as he secured the shuttle and turned toward his visitor.

"Have you heard the news?" Ahmed queried.
"What news?"
"Wages have been cut."
"What? Not possible!"
"But yes. The masters will pay thirteen piasters per piece instead of sixteen."
"Where did you hear this?"
"In the market. Everyone is talking about it."

In the center of a small ground-floor room charcoal burned in a brazier, taking the chill out of the damp February air that intruded from
Damascene journeyman weaver lived and worked between 1820 and 1880, a collective biography if you will, promises to shed light on how thousands of individual journeymen came to engage in new forms of struggle.

Damascus had long been famed as a textile-manufacturing center. At the turn of the nineteenth century, this reputation rested upon luxury fabrics—silks, wools, and, above all, silk-cotton combinations made by interweaving silk and cotton thread, the most important of which was known as alaja. These fabrics were characterized by irregular tie-dyed stripes running through a solid background. The silk thread mounted on the loom, the warp, was tie-dyed one of a dozen or more two-toned patterns—red and yellow, blue and white, among others. The tinted cotton thread interwoven with it, the weft, was allowed to show through, contributing to the final effect.

Damascus's stature as a major textile-manufacturing center was not immediately apparent to the first-time visitor. Minarets rather than smokestacks defined the city's skyline. Its industry was not powered by steam but by people. At its heart were some five thousand handweavers working on prejaccard looms: Christians, Shi‘i and Sunni Muslims, some master craftsmen, but mostly journeymen. All were men. Though women participated in the formal textile sector in nineteenth-century Damascus, the commercial weaving of luxury fabrics was a male profession.

The typical Damascene weaver was a Sunni Muslim journeyman employed weaving alaja. He labored in a small, dingy second-story room, cramped together with three other weavers—two journeymen and a master craftsman—their looms, and two apprentices, who assisted the weavers and ran errands for them. This workshop, like hundreds of others in the city, was located in a small khan, a building given over to diverse commercial and industrial purposes. Very likely two saddlebag makers cut and sewed in a workshop across the landing, and a second group of weavers worked next door. Downstairs several donkeys were stabled, a Baghdad merchant warehoused Persian and Iraqi carpets, a felt merchant stored wool that his employees unloaded from the backs of donkeys and rebundled in the unkempt courtyard at the heart of the khan. A large wooden gate stood open, allowing easy access between the courtyard and the narrow, bustling commercial thoroughfare beyond.

When fully employed, the journeyman weaver worked a ten-hour day, six days a week. He would be in front of his loom plying the shuttle back and forth not long after sunrise and depart for home at sunset. On average he could expect to weave four to five pieces of alaja per week, complete a length of seventeen pieces every four weeks, and take a half-day break while the finished cloth was removed and the loom restung with silk for a new one.

The pace of work was not set by clocks or bells but by the weaver himself. Work would be interrupted for mid-morning prayers, occasional forays to the market, and visits with friends who stopped by. Some days the journeyman ate a lunch of bread and cheese and took a nap on a rug rolled out in one corner of the workshop before resuming work in mid-afternoon. On others he went home for a more elaborate meal and rest.

The weaver did not work a fixed number of hours or follow the same routine year-round. As the month of Shawwal and the departure of the annual pilgrimage caravan to Mecca drew near, he would expect to work into the night seven days a week. This heavy workload anticipated the tens of thousands of pilgrims who descended annually upon Damascus, eager to purchase its fabrics. The weaver's opportunities tended to dwindle after the pilgrimage; he might go several weeks between jobs before conditions improved and full employment returned. Exports to North Africa, eastern Europe, and within the Ottoman Empire ensured a modicum of employment year-round.

Levels of employment fluctuated from year to year depending upon export demand but above all upon how many people traveled with the Damascus pilgrimage caravan. In years when a member of the Ottoman royal family planned to make the pilgrimage, greater numbers than usual would be expected, and the weaver would find more work than usual. In others, when the trip through the desert between Damascus and the Arabian peninsula appeared hazardous, the weaver might be underemployed much of the year. Such was the case when the pilgrimage departed during the dry summer months or when bedouin raids along the caravan route had been frequent. Political conditions might adversely affect the size of the caravan, as they did for much of the 1810s, when the Wahhabis turned back or imposed heavy duties upon caravans reaching Mecca, and in the 1830s, when the Egyptian occupation of Syria made Ottoman pilgrims reluctant to undertake the hajj.

The journeyman was not self-employed. He was a waggeworker employed by a master craftsman. The latter engaged him on a piecework basis to weave a specified piece of cloth and paid him upon its completion. The journeyman depended upon the master for work space, materials ready for weaving (cotton and silk dyed appropriately and the silk mounted on the loom), and even the loom upon which he worked. If the journeyman roughly fits the profile of a modern wageworker, the master was not a typical capitalist employer.

The master was a workshop proprietor, but he worked alongside his employees. Moreover, his scale of operation was modest. Generally he managed a single workshop and employed two or three journeymen and one or two apprentices. Some masters owned workshops, but most rented theirs from a private landowner or wafq endowment on an indefinitely renewable basis. Renters were not propertyless. They owned
looms and other equipment as well as the right to weave in the workshop. This right was restricted to specified commercial spaces and was bought and sold independently of the building in which a workshop was housed. Its purchase was deemed a prerequisite for operating a weaving establishment. Though the master weaver owned property, he was not a textile producer.

The textile merchant controlled the overall production process. He determined what would be woven and how much, provided the raw materials, and covered the expenses of production. The merchant did not own a factory but subcontracted work to a series of artisanal specialists who worked at home or in workshops throughout the city. Each in turn received materials, oversaw one stage in the manufacturing process, and was paid for his or her contribution. Masters, journeymen, loom mounters, spinners, and other workers involved in making textiles all depended upon the merchant economically. Only masters dealt directly with merchants, however. They engaged and supervised journeymen and paid them from funds provided by the merchant.

Production involved an elaborate division of labor. Before reaching the master weaver as dyed silk and cotton thread, cotton had been spun into yarn and dyed, and silk cocoons had been graded and unwound, twisted into thread, measured into skeins, tied with fabric to establish a pattern, and dyed one or more times. Before the weaver could begin his work, the silk had first to be mounted on the loom. For this purpose the master engaged two loom mounters. After the journeyman wove the cloth, the master turned it over to another subcontractor, who starched and pounded it to bring out its color and luster.

The journeyman, at the bottom of this distribution pyramid, had good reason to feel dissatisfied with his lot. He had little control over pay rates and the distribution of work. In slow periods the master might opt to keep the greater portion of work for himself or his relatives. The exploitative nature of the master-journeyman relationship was clearly visible. The master covered his expenses and made his living at the expense of the journeyman; he retained for himself a portion of the fee the merchant paid for the journeyman’s work. The latter had reason to be dissatisfied not only with the master for whom he worked but with all masters.

Masters and journeymen belonged to a common professional organization, the craft corporation or “guild” (ṣināf; pl. ʿanāf) of weavers. The affairs of the weaving community—production standards, output, training of weavers, settlement of disputes—were regulated under its auspices. The guild provided weavers with a collective means of dealing with outsiders, negotiating subcontracting rates with merchants, and articulating grievances to the state.

The weaver’s guild was not, however, a democratic institution. A small group of masters, the elite of the weaving community, monopolized power and exercised control over the journeyman’s life in ways that the latter did not always find agreeable. Masters limited how many journeymen were promoted to their ranks. Since only masters were entitled to operate workshops, employ journeymen, and take on apprentices, they determined whether the journeyman became a self-employed small businessman or remained a wage employee for the duration of his career. The Ottoman state’s use of guild structures to control and tax the urban population gave rise to other grievances. The authorities did not deal with weavers individually but as a group, through the head of the guild, the shaykh. This allowed the shaykh, in consultation with a few master craftsmen, not only to distribute the tax burden among guild members but also to place a disproportionate part of it on the journeymen.

If the guild structure embodied inequalities that fueled the journeyman’s discontent with the masters, it also provided a counterweight. Its existence gave substance to the notion of collective identity and common interests. The rhetoric of craft solidarity and rituals buttressed the journeyman’s feeling of solidarity with masters and downplayed differences. Ceremonies of initiation, for example, imbued potentially divisive issues with nondiscriminatory meanings. By presenting unequal positions as sequential stages in a career, the professional hierarchy appeared to hold the promise of advancement rather than to be an obstacle to it. Thus the weavers’ guild played a role in maintaining the journeyman’s identification with the master who employed him and served to minimize conflicts between them.

The journeyman’s perception of himself as a member of a corporate group united by common interests was not entirely illusory. It had a basis in social reality. As a rule, masters used their power to ensure that the textile industry remained competitive and that weavers had jobs. To this end they enforced production standards, protested increased financial burdens slapped on the industry by the state, and attempted to limit the number of weavers trained to compete for available work. Rarely did the guild masters flagrantly abuse their authority. Although bias against journeymen weavers in disputes and in the allocation of tax burden was pervasive, it was also well calibrated and subtle.

Even though the master profited at his expense, the journeyman made an adequate living. Paid eight to ten piasters per piece of alāja, weaving four to five pieces a week, the journeyman could expect to earn forty piasters a week in the 1820s and 1830s. In the Damascene context this was satisfactory, since bread, the staple of the workman’s diet, was not expensive, and most journeymen weavers lived in inherited housing or paid low rents. Overall, the earnings of journeymen weavers...
compared favorably with those of other textile workers, such as silk thread twisters and loom mounters. Though slightly less than those of the best-paid skilled workers like shoemakers, blacksmiths, and carpenters, they were substantially more than those of unskilled laborers and domestic servants.

The artisanal character of the weaving profession made the master-journeyman relationship a personal and multifaceted one, not simply one of exploiter and exploited. Although at times he might see his master as harsh or even unjust, the journeyman identified with him and might be linked to him by feelings of affection and gratitude. The master was an employer but also a coworker. The fact that he left the journeyman to set his own pace of work, giving the journeyman some control over his work environment, put them on somewhat of an equal footing. Further, the master embodied the journeyman's hopes for the future. Since the master had moved up through the ranks from apprentice to journeyman to master, the journeyman might hope to do the same. These positive bonds between journeyman and master were reinforced by their relations beyond the workplace in the local neighborhood, where masters and journeymen jointly attended weddings, funerals, and other significant occasions and took up collections for weavers in need.

The complex structure of this relationship gave the journeyman good reason to acquiesce in less than satisfactory conditions—militant confrontations might jeopardize his social relationships and economic future. He depended upon the master for employment and would one day need his goodwill to be accepted into the ranks of master weavers and set up a shop of his own. Thus although the journeyman occasionally chafed at his powerlessness and exploitation, he tended to regard the master's exercise of power as legitimate and even beneficial. Disagreements between master and journeyman were expressed individually and resolved through the intervention of guild authorities.

The above portrait, true for most of the eighteenth century, was no longer accurate by the 1830s. In the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century, the market for Damascene and other Ottoman textiles expanded rapidly, aided by the withdrawal of French competition and a burgeoning rural market. The number of weavers proliferated throughout the region. In Damascus, janissaries, textile merchants, and other nonweavers rushed to open workshops. Because of the boom conditions, these new shops, operating outside of the official guild structures, seem to have been tolerated. The unregulated expansion of the industry was to prove a liability, however. It meant that during downswings more weavers were un- or underemployed. By the 1830s normal fluctuations in market demand had eaten away at the journeyman's standard of living. Instead of owning his own loom, he now rented it from the master. This development undermined one of the most powerful bonds tying the journeyman to the master, his aspirations for the future. In theory a journeyman could escape this unequal and exploitative relationship by setting up his own shop. By the 1830s his prospects for doing so were poor. He was a wageworker who owned neither workplace, materials, nor tools of production. It was unlikely he would ever accumulate sufficient capital to rent a workshop, purchase a loom, or set up a business of his own.

The eroding position of the journeyman weaver was signaled by the fact that a declining number elected to pay for initiation into the craft corporation. As a result, a new category of skilled weavers began to emerge, trained within the corporate system, working in workshops run by master weavers, and in principle subject to decisions taken by the craft corporation but not formally entered in its rolls as journeymen.

Most of these "unofficial" journeymen failed to register because they could not afford the fees. They were not part of an organized movement, nor did they openly defy their masters. Their very existence, however, was troubling. It showed that some journeymen did not view the guild hierarchy as serving their interests or worth the cost of membership. Over time this was to drive a wedge between masters and craftsmen. Though most journeymen continued to opt for initiation, the sense of belonging to a community of journeymen and master weavers was crumbling.

In the 1840s journeymen weavers and the industry as a whole faced a qualitatively new challenge. Moreas, printanières, and other cotton fabrics that aped the patterns of the city's silk-cotton combinations but sold for a fraction of the price flooded Syrian and Eastern Mediterranean markets. Swiss moreas, for example, sold for 1.3 to 2 piasters per meter as against 8 to 9.75 for Damascene alaja. Sales of the latter plummeted as consumers rushed to buy the cheaper imports.

Moreas were not the first European imports to do well at the expense of Syrian textile products. The value of European textiles imported into the region had already jumped dramatically from less than a million francs annually in the 1810s to fifteen million in 1841. Most, however, were relatively inexpensive cottons—chiefly British-made longcloths, grey domestics, muslins, and nankeens—which did not compete directly with Damascus's silk-cotton fabrics. Imports made gains chiefly at the expense of good-quality cottons rather than the luxury fabrics, upon which the livelihoods of most of this city's weavers depended. The number of looms in use, for example, remained roughly constant into the early 1840s. Growing demand for less expensive fabrics, reflected in increased purchases of cottons, pressured producers of luxury fabrics to
hold down prices in spite of rising costs of raw silk and cotton. The merchants achieved this by substituting British machine-produced cotton yarn for the more expensive and higher-quality domestic hand-spun yarn. Thus while the position of Damascene alaja weavers remained stable for the time being, large numbers of Syrian women spinners were thrown out of work.

By the mid-1840s it was the weaver's turn to experience economic dislocation. With influx of moreas, employment opportunities contracted, and the number of silk looms in use fell precipitously from five thousand in 1839 to one thousand in 1845, leveling off at two thousand by 1848–50. Faced with ruin, the master weavers moved to close down the new nonguild workshops in hopes of securing remaining work for themselves.

A case from 1842 illustrates this effort. In that year, the master weavers of Damascus sought to enforce their monopoly over weaving by getting the local authorities to close down the weaving workshop run by a merchant interloper named Mishaqa. Mishaqa, a British protégé, used the backing of the British consul to defy the order successfully. (Protégés were exempted from local taxes, laws, and civic obligations as part of the treaty rights granted Europeans and their local agents by the Ottoman government.)

The failure of the corporate leadership to eliminate unauthorized competition not only reveals the growing intervention of the West in Ottoman affairs but also demonstrates the declining effectiveness of guild structures. Even without European intervention, "illegal" workshops continued to operate in Damascus. Master weavers, despite the weight of corporate authority, were unable to close them down. Runaway shops had become too numerous and too much a part of the fabric of textile production to be easily done away with. By the 1840s the inability of guild members to enforce their exclusive control over jobs had become an industrywide phenomenon. For example, in 1847 loom mounters attempted, also unsuccessfully, to prevent newcomers who had taken up their profession twelve years earlier from exercising it or teaching it to their children.

By the 1850s the local textile industry entered a boom period, and conflict over enforcement of guild privileges diminished. The number of weavers employed in Damascus crept upward from 2,000 in 1848–50 to 2,800 in 1856, reaching 3,500 by early 1860. By the mid-1860s the number had reached 5,000, and production matched 1820 levels once more.

Four main factors contributed to the recovery of the 1850s. The first was the expansion of rural markets. In response to rising demand for agricultural products and higher agricultural prices, peasants increased production. They used a part of their greater cash incomes to expand purchases of textiles, both European and Damascene, thus boosting textile production and employment in Damascus. This trend intensified during the Crimean War (1854–57) and the American Civil War (1861–65), which heightened European demand for grain and cotton, respectively. A second factor was changing consumer preferences. In the 1840s the popularity of European imports was due to both their novelty and their low prices. The imports were of inferior quality, being made of lighter-weight, less durable cotton. By the mid-1850s many Syrians resumed purchases of better-quality local products.

Thirdly, competitive pricing by Damascene merchants aided the comeback. Between 1836 and 1860 the price of the least expensive and most widely marketed alaja remained basically unchanged. In the 1830s the price had been eighty-five piasters a piece. In 1856 it was eighty; in 1861 it was eighty-five, and a quarter-century later in 1879 it cost only ninety. Since the piaster lost two-thirds of its value over this fifty-year period, the ten-piaster monetary increase represents a dramatic fall in real terms.

Finally, the development of new products that responded to the demand for lower prices and shifts in taste also contributed to the recovery. Two cotton fabrics developed in Damascus in the late 1850s, dima and mabrum, were particularly successful. Dima was a cotton version of alaja, comparable to moreas but of better quality and only slightly more expensive—2.43 to 2.55 piasters per meter as against 1.4 to 2 piasters. Credit for developing a commercially viable version of this fabric goes to Hasan al-Khanji, a master weaver, who worked with the backing of a textile promoter, Abu al-Jayd al-Asfar. The technical problems of producing a competitive version of mabrum, a coarser cotton, the equivalent of British shirting, were also worked out in this period. When in the early 1860s these and similar fabrics proved successful, other merchants entered production, and many master weavers shifted their workshops from silk-cotton to cotton weaving.

Production statistics attest to the role these fabrics played in the recovery. During the 1830s 5,000 of the total 5,500 looms in use were employed in the making of silks, and only 500 for cottons. In 1860 most of the 3,500 in operation were still mounted with silk. However, by 1869 the number of silk looms had dropped to 1,600, those used for weaving dima had jumped to 2,000, and an additional, unspecified number were employed in the making of mabrum. By 1879 only 1,200 of a total 7,000 active looms were used for production of silk-cottons as against 2,500 for dima, and 3,000 for mabrum.

By the late 1860s, therefore, the typical Damascene journeyman weaver produced dima, not alaja. In spite of the shift to cottons, he still
worked on a hand loom for a piecework wage, weaving tie-dyed yarn with undyed cotton. Capitalists still decided what would be produced, provided raw materials to be worked, and paid masters to engage and supervise journeymen. Even the fabric patterns of *dima* and *alaja* were essentially the same.

Despite appearances much had changed. The journeyman weaver's standard of living had fallen dramatically between 1820 and 1860. Stable prices for Damascene fabrics had been maintained by freezing the journeyman's wages at 8–10 piasters per piece. Over the same period, the cost of living had increased sharply. The journeyman paid 3.2 piasters for a kilo of wheat in the 1820s, 0.3 piasters per kilo in 1856–57, and between 3.2 and 5 piasters by 1862.

Journeymen might grumble about inadequate wages, but they refrained from demanding higher pay because they viewed their falling real incomes as part of industrywide sacrifices necessary to preserve their jobs. Both merchants' and master craftsmen's profits had fallen along with their wages, and tax farmers had gone along with this spirit of sacrifice and cut tax rates. Instead, journeymen weavers identified grain speculators as the chief culprits and complained that the government had not done enough to restrain them. They called on local Ottoman authorities to set maximum prices for bread.

By the late 1860s the crisis appeared to be in the past. With the industry out of acute danger, tax farmers doubled duties on fabrics, and merchants risked a price rise in an effort to restore profit margins. They increased the price of the least expensive *alaja* from eighty to eighty-five piasters. This confidence proved justified, at least in the short run. The number of weavers continued to climb, reaching a peak of seven thousand by 1879 before leveling off to five thousand, where it stayed until World War I. The merchant passed on some of his profits to the master weaver, who in turn passed on a portion to the journeyman in the form of a higher piecework rate.

Yet many journeymen were dissatisfied with the raise. The increase came nowhere near covering the losses they had sustained over the previous half-century. While the piecework rate rose from 8–10 piasters to sixteen for a piece of *alaja* between 1820 and 1878, the cost of living had tripled. To survive, the journeyman reduced his consumption of wheat and substituted cheaper and less desirable grains. Rising housing costs forced the unmarried journeyman to share rooms and delay marriage. Falling real wages and the rising cost of urban real estate had broader import to the journeyman than his immediate standard of living. Both mitigated against a journeyman whose father was not already a master accumulating sufficient capital to set up his own workshop. His prospects for the future were at stake. These were not the journeyman's only complaints. He had expected to benefit from renewed prosperity.

Indeed, in view of his sacrifices endured for the sake of the industry's survival he felt as entitled to recoup losses as any other group. Yet his gains were minor compared with those of others. The lion's share of the profits went to the merchants.

The journeyman had to contend with another adverse development in this period. This was the tendency of large merchants to bypass the guild structures altogether and to set up large workshops that they ran themselves. These employed more journeymen weavers in one place than did the old-style workshops, a dozen or more rather than three or four, with one master at good wages to supervise them. In this fashion, the merchant could dispense with the two or three additional mastersubcontractors who would have been employed under the old system.

Because the new "factory" system allowed the merchant to benefit from economies of scale, it proved profitable. However, it was less satisfactory to the journeyman weaver, who found himself locked into the position of a wage employee with no possibility of becoming a master himself. Merchant-owned and -operated workshops made the guild increasingly irrelevant to the production process. Merchant capitalists replaced master weavers as the arbiters of workplace conditions.

In these circumstances it would have been logical for the journeyman to identify the merchant as the source of his problems. Instead, the master weaver became the target of his anger. Master weavers increased the portion of the merchant's payment that they kept for themselves and decreased that paid to the journeyman. Since masters worked alongside journeymen, this profiteering was the more visible, and the more deeply resented. The craft elite's self-serving behavior outside the workplace was a further source of complaint. For example, when taxes increased in the mid-nineteenth century, the masters placed the burden of the new impositions disproportionately upon the journeymen, thus discrediting themselves as the journeyman's protectors.

The journeyman's dismal appraisal of his prospects for selfemployment and a decent standard of living as well as his perception of the master as unable and unwilling to look out for his interests undermined the rationale for identifying with the master and for overlooking the unequal and exploitative aspects of their relationship. As a result, the journeyman gradually came to view his interests as separate from and antagonistic to those of the master. He felt betrayed—that the master had failed to honor obligations at the heart of artisanal ideology. The journeyman's antagonism toward the master intensified and found collective, public expression in the strikes by Damascus journeymen against master weavers over wage rates.

This new state of affairs was graphically illustrated by events in Damascus at the start of 1879. In January, a number of master weavers increased their percentage of what the merchant paid for piecework. They
had instituted such increases previously but had timed them to correspond with an increase in fees received from the merchant. This permitted masters to improve their position while leaving the journeyman's piecework rate intact or even raising it. On this occasion, however, no such increase was forthcoming; they lowered the journeyman's wage from sixteen to thirteen piasters.

The journeymen responded with indignation. They maintained that they would have accepted the cut if it had been instituted in order to lower the market price of fabrics. Such a move promised to make Damascene fabrics more competitive and would translate into more work for them. But since the masters merely sought their own gain, it was not accepted. The journeymen's anger was fueled by the unilaterally self-serving nature of the masters' action, a flagrant violation of the masters' historic obligation to protect the journeymen's interests as well as their own. It is noteworthy that the journeymen's novel behavior did not reflect the eclipse of communal solidarity but was spurred on by a perceived betrayal of it.

The journeymen's outrage found expression in a citywide work stoppage enforced by activists. The latter cut silk threads mounted on the looms not only of masters who had announced cuts but also of those who had not, "owing to suspicions of collusion between master and workman." After four weeks, with three thousand journeyman weavers on strike, the masters agreed to rescind the cuts. Such strikes were not a flash-in-the-pan development. Common by the 1870s, they were still part of the Damascus landscape after 1900. Journeymen were not always as successful as in 1879, as their failure to prevent cutbacks in 1902 demonstrates, but with each successive strike, their alienation from and antagonism toward the master came into sharper focus.

The persistence of labor militancy might seem to foreshadow the emergence of a mass labor movement, all the more so since the strikers did not meet with the repression that marked nineteenth-century labor struggles in Europe and the United States. The Ottoman ruling class, still dependent upon agricultural and commercial rents, did not perceive its vital interests to be riding on the outcome of industrial struggles. Government authorities and other outsiders did not intervene, leaving masters and journeymen alone to sort out their differences. Unsupported, masters were in a position of rough equality with journeymen.

In spite of favorable political conditions a mass movement of journeyman weavers did not materialize. Strikes by journeyman weavers petered out after World War I. The French postwar mandate government, not journeymen, was responsible for establishing a union of hand-loom weavers, and it included masters as well as journeymen. In the long run a decline in the number of handweavers brought an end to their militancy. The competition of factory-produced textiles, both imported and domestic, and changes in taste and life-styles reduced demand for hand-produced fabrics. The number of employed hand-loom weavers fell from five thousand before World War I to the handful who still work in Damascus today. As the handicraft textile sector became economically inconsequential, the journeymen's bargaining power eroded. They found themselves in the same boat as their employers—struggling to survive.

How do we situate the journeymen weavers' experience in Syrian history? It is clear that their novel behavior and the consciousness it implied were not imports but products of Damascene society brought into play by external pressures. Responses by merchants and masters to a head-on confrontation with European competition provoked journeymen to innovate. The conflicts of interest that emerged were rooted in the indigenous industrial structure that subsumed artisanal production within a commercial capitalist nexus.

On no account should the journeymen weavers be treated simply as victims. They did not passively endure change but actively participated in defining its shape. Nor would it be accurate to view their response to the challenge of Western capitalism as a quaint episode removed from the mainstream of Syrian history. We can hypothesize a connection between the journeymen's disciplined collective action and post–World War I labor unrest by factory workers, massive popular resistance to the French occupation during the 1930s, and the political successes of Communists and Arab nationalists whose platforms addressed the question of class in the 1940s and 1950s.

While the import of the journeymen weavers' experience for the broader shape of Syrian history remains to be specified, there is little doubt that handweavers, pushed from the dying handicraft industry into other jobs, in other sectors, took a new consciousness and models for political expression with them and used them to help move Damascus society toward its future.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

from unpublished primary sources in the British diplomatic archives housed at the Public Record Office (Kew), especially FO 371 (1878–79), vol. 70, pt. 2, Damascus, "Report by Vice-Consul Jago on the Trade and Commerce of Damascus for the Year 1879"; and from French diplomatic documents held at the Quai d’Orsay, notably "Requête des ouvriers ouvrières catholiques à Monsieur le Consul de France," 16 October 1846, encl. in Tippel to Guizot (35), 29 December 1846, Damascus.


SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING


So rapid has been the transformation of the economy of the Gulf region (and, alas, of its ecology as well) that it is difficult to recall that just a generation ago many people gained their livelihood from fishing the region’s waters. Ahmad, a Kuwaiti pearl diver, interviewed by anthropologist Nels Johnson in 1973 was one such individual.

Johnson’s account conjures up visions of a world in which Arab dhows brought the spices of China, India, Southeast Asia, and East Africa to Middle Eastern markets. Later Chinese porcelains and Indian cottons, along with coffee, tea, and pepper, became the object of interest, helping to stimulate Vasco da Gama’s voyage around Africa in 1498, which opened up the southern seas to European expansion.*

Given the hazards of the diver’s craft and the appallingly unkempt conditions under which most divers worked, it is astonishing that anyone would willingly take diving up as a way of life. As Nels Johnson shows, access to livelihood throughout the Gulf was structured by kinship and debt, and pearl was one of the few occupations open to nonkin. Pride in one’s abilities, intense bonding with coworkers, and a gambler’s love of high stakes attracted people like Ahmad to the diver’s life and retained them, even when other opportunities were available.

Prewar Kuwaiti society boasted one of the world’s highest standards of living. Its impressive systems of health care, education, and welfare have transformed the lives of ordinary people. When he was interviewed in 1973, Ahmad was still going to fish each morning as in the old days. Alienated from his children and consumed with nostalgia for the old days, Ahmad is left cold by the new Kuwait. Its ways are to him forever strange. So extensive have been the changes he has lived through, it is as if he suffers from a kind of sociological version of “the bends”—a disease that strikes divers who, failing to