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THE LAJĀ' IN THE LAST CENTURY
OF OTTOMAN RULE

The Lajā' is such an extraordinary area that it merits particular attention. It is a geologically recent lava flow, covering about 1,000 square kilometres, situated to the northwest of Jabal al-Durūz which it almost adjoins. It stands higher than the surrounding plain, and in many places its abrupt edge resembles a cliff. The surface of much of the interior is of jumbled and contorted masses of lava. For those who live there or are familiar with it, it provides an almost impenetrable refuge from hostile forces. Many patches of cultivable ground and a few larger expanses of fertile soil are found amongst the lava and there is grazing for sheep, goats and camels. Water shortage is often acute in summer.

This paper touches on the theme of trans-epochal comparison introduced in Dr. Schilcher's paper. It also aims to examine the ways in which the inhabitants of the Lajā' and their neighbours utilised the area during the last seventy years or so of Ottoman rule, the period in which the government first asserted and then strengthened its hold on the Lajā' and other parts of Hawran. Four groups of people are discussed: semi-nomadic 'arab tribesmen who lived in the Lajā', peasants of the Hawran plain (commonly called Hawārinah, Hawranis) who sometimes took refuge in it, Druzes of the Jabal (Jabal Hawrān or Jabal al-Durūz) for whom it served as a strategic resource as well as a refuge, and Druzes from the Jabal and elsewhere who settled in the Lajā' towards the end of the period.

1. The tribesmen

In the early part of the nineteenth century almost the only inhabitants of the interior of the Lajā', other than a shifting population of fugitives and refugees, were tent-dwelling, semi-nomadic 'arab. Conditions in the

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