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# Sunnī Historians of Aleppo in the Late Ottoman Period

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## Decline and Stagnation of Traditional Aleppo in the 19th Century

In the first half of the 19th century, Aleppo as one of the *Echelles* with European consuls was known as a prosperous city with a high culture of its inhabitants and diversified economic activities, especially in the field of commerce and production of textile. With its 120,000 inhabitants, Aleppo was the third greatest city in the Ottoman Empire, after Constantinople (400,000) and Cairo (250,000)<sup>1</sup>.

However, the demographic situation in the city of Aleppo witnessed stagnation or relative decline during the 19th century in comparison with the urban development of other cities in the Syrian region (see Table 1)<sup>2</sup>.

Table 1  
Demographic development of great cities in Syrian region

	Aleppo	Damascus	Beirut	Jerusalem
1800	120,000	90,000	6,000	8,750
1860	100,000	100,000	46,000	18,000
1900	100,000	138,000	120,000	55,000
1914	120,000	220,000	150,000	70,000
1922	156,800	169,000	94,400	62,600

The general stagnation of the population in the city of Aleppo can be explained by several factors. Among these are the demographic shocks, like the consequence of earthquakes which damaged Aleppo in 1794, 1822 and 1830, the plague which affected the city in 1802, 1803, 1807, 1813, 1814, 1815, 1827 and 1842, and cholera in 1837<sup>3</sup>. However, other factors of demographic stagnation are of both political and economic origin. The province of Aleppo had been the natural source for modern military conscription made first by the Egyptian governor Ibrāhīm Pasha in the 1830s and then by the Fifth Ottoman Army Corps. A number of industrious craftsmen, specialists, and labourers were killed in battles. A general decline of textile industry and trade, as a consequence

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<sup>1</sup> MARCUS, ABRAHAM, *The Middle East on the Eve of Modernity. Aleppo in the Eighteenth Century*. New York 1989, p. 13; RAYMOND, ANDRÉ, *Grandes villes arabes à l'époque ottomane*. Paris 1985, p. 62; ISSAWI, CHARLES, *An Economic History of the Middle East and North Africa*. London 1982, p. 101; SCHILCHER, LINDA SCHATKOWSKI, *Families in Politics. Damascene Factions and Estates of the 18th and 19th Centuries*. Stuttgart 1985, p. 3-6.

<sup>2</sup> ISSAWI, *An Economic History of the Middle East*, p. 101; KHALAF, SAMIR, *Persistence and Change in 19th Century Lebanon*. Beirut 1979, p. 115; ASALI, K. J. (ed.), *Jerusalem in History*. New York 1990, p. 231; GHAZZI, KĀMIL AL-, *Nahr al-dhahab fi tārikh Ḥalab*. 2nd ed. Ḥalab 1991, I, p. 259.

<sup>3</sup> PANZAC, DANIEL, *La peste dans l'Empire Ottoman 1700-1850*. Leuven 1985, p. 34-35.

of the Balta Limanı Commercial Convention, became another factor, which influenced the stagnant demographic situation of the city.

After the evacuation of the troops of Ibrāhīm Pasha in 1840, Aleppo returned under the Ottoman administration, which implemented the *Tanzimat* reforms of the Ottoman Sultan Abdülmecit, based on the *Gülhane Hatt-ı Şerifi* (Reform Edict) of 1839 and on the Balta Limanı Commercial Convention of 1838.

The immediate negative effect of the Balta Limanı Commercial Convention on textile industry of Aleppo was evident. The predictions made by European and Russian observers (UBICINI, BAZILI) about the complete destruction of local textile industry influenced the classical view of historiography in general<sup>4</sup>. After opening the Syrian market for European clothes, "these clothes penetrated from Aleppo into the whole country to the east and the west, brought huge profits, even if they were not of such quality and perfection (as the locally produced clothes)".<sup>5</sup> Contemporary research of the economic history of the Middle East (OWEN, QUATAERT) brings about a rather different look on the development of textile industry in Syria after the Balta Limanı Convention. It is able to demonstrate that the Syrian industry was remarkably resilient and continued to find ways to resist foreign competition. Contemporary estimates of the numbers of looms at work in Aleppo, which are selectively used to show the decline of textile production, can be used even in the opposite way<sup>6</sup>.

Urban disturbance in Aleppo in 1850 became a manifestation of decline of both elites and commons of the Aleppine Sunnī society. It was the last in a series of revolts, specially noted for an attack against the Christian-dominated residential quarters<sup>7</sup>.

### Modernization and its Impact on Social Life in Aleppo in the Late Ottoman Period

In April 1856, the Ottoman Sultan Abdülmecit announced the *Islahat Fermanı* (Reform Decree), which opened the second stage of the *Tanzimat* reforms. Since 1864, the new reform of province administration was implemented. The Aleppo *vilayet* was chosen to be one of four experiment provinces in the Ottoman Empire together with the Erzurum *vilayet*, the great Danube *vilayet*, and the Bosnia *vilayet*. The total area of the province of Aleppo attained 78,600 km<sup>2</sup>. The whole province was allegedly inhabited by approximately 1 million people<sup>8</sup>.

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 had a negative effect on the traditional commercial activities of the city of Aleppo. The trade declined sharply to the tenth of its previous volume, and even more according to the evaluation of GHAZZI. The Aleppine merchants were obliged to search for new markets and commercial centres. In consequence, some of them moved their commercial activities to Beirut, Alexandria, Manchester and Marseilles<sup>9</sup>.

On the other hand, improved security and stabilization in the Aleppo province since the 1860s provided new conditions for modernization. In 1860, the telegraph was prolonged to Aleppo. In this period, nomad tribes around Aleppo were pushed east into the desert. During the reign of Sultan Abdülhamit II in the 1880s, a large number of Muslim refugees settled in the province, which

<sup>4</sup> UBICINI, M. A., *Lettres sur la Turquie*. Paris 1853; BAZILI, K. M., *Sirija i Palestina pod osmanskim vladycestvom*. Moskva 1962.

<sup>5</sup> GHAZZI, Nahr al-dhahab. I, p. 92.

<sup>6</sup> OWEN, ROGER, *The Middle East in the World Economy 1800-1914*. London, New York 1981, p. 93-94, 172, 261; İNALCIK, HALİL, QUATAERT, DONALD, *An Economic History of the Ottoman Empire*. Vol. 2. Cambridge 1994, p. 924-927.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. MASTERS, BRUCE, "The 1850 Events in Aleppo: An Aftershock of Syria's Incorporation into the Capitalist World System," *IJMES*, vol. 22, p. 3-20; KUROKI, HIDEMITSU, "Zimmis in Mid-Nineteenth Century Aleppo: An Analysis of Cizye Defteris". In: *Essays on Ottoman Civilization*. Proceedings of the XIIth Congress of the Comité International d'Études Pré-Ottomanes et Ottomanes, Praha 1996. *Archív orientální* (Prague), Supplementa VIII. (1998), p. 205-250; KUROKI, HIDEMITSU, "The 1850 Aleppo Disturbance Reconsidered"; cf. the present volume p. 221-233.

<sup>8</sup> GHAZZI, Nahr al-dhahab. I, p. 129-130.

<sup>9</sup> KURD 'ALİ, MUHAMMAD, *Khiṭaṭ al-Shām*. IV. Dimashq 1925, p. 270.

period, nomad tribes around Aleppo were pushed east into the desert. During the reign of Sultan Abdülhamit II in the 1880s, a large number of Muslim refugees settled in the province, which brought about an agricultural boom. The Sultan himself steadily acquired land to the south and north-east of Aleppo (1.25 million hectares by 1908)<sup>10</sup>.

Modern forms of cultural life emerged in the epoch of reforms. In 1867, the first weekly official magazine in Aleppo named *Al-Furāt* was founded. It was published in Arabic and Turkish. Among its editors were such figures, like 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Kawākibī (in 1874-1879) and the Aleppine historian Shaikh Kāmil Ghazzī (in 1882-1902). *Al-Furāt* was published until the repressions of the Young Turk authorities in 1916, the last number was 2,420.

The commercial activities of Aleppo were newly organized institutionally in the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce (*Ghurfat tijārat Ḥalab*) established in 1885. This was the first modern chamber of commerce in the Arab World and only the second one in the Ottoman Empire, after the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce (*İstanbul Ticaret Odası*) established in 1883. This fact demonstrates the continuous importance of commerce and trade in economic activities of Aleppo's merchants and traders. The first President of the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce was Aḥmad al-Sibā'ī. Among the presidents of the Chamber were also the above mentioned publicist 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Kawākibī (the fourth president between 1896-1898) and the historian Shaikh Kāmil al-Ghazzī (the seventh president).

Other manifestations of modernization were present, namely in transport. In 1903, the Hama-Aleppo railroad (143 km) was opened, connecting the city with Beirut and Damascus, in 1908 a part of the Adana-Aleppo railroad was built, and in 1912 the Aleppo-Jarabulus connection to the Baghdad Railroad was inaugurated.

### Aleppine Sunnī Historians between Tradition and Modernity

Despite the revival of trade and production in Aleppo, the general values of the Sunnī society remained conservative and traditional. The Syrian Sunnī historiography in general and Aleppine Sunnī historiography in particular reflected the traditional values of the society. Two important personalities represent the Aleppine Sunnī historiography of the Late Ottoman Period: al-Shaikh Kāmil al-Ghazzī, and Muḥammad Rāghib al-Ṭabbākh. Both great Aleppine historians belonged to the elite of the society from among the *nubalā'* and *a'yān*, who were given traditional religious education, were active members of the commercial and cultural activities of the city, and remained loyal to the governing Ottoman authorities. They were well-informed and their historical writings provide a good example of the reflection of historical events in the Sunnī circles of society. In the late Ottoman period, traditional methods of historical writing, e.g. the historical chronicle, biographical dictionary or encyclopaedia, and local histories still continued.

Besides the above mentioned Sunnī historians, three Christian historians of nineteenth-century Aleppo became famous. Na'ūm Bakhkhāsh, an Aleppine Syrian Catholic teacher of a small school, wrote a diary covering the period between the years 1835-1875. His memoirs, recently published, fully documented the social and religious traditions of the Christian community, as well as the conditions of the foreign community there. Bakhkhāsh had access to a large number of Aleppine families. Qusṭākī al-Ḥumsī al-Ḥalabī (d. 1941) is the author of a biographical dictionary of fifty outstanding personalities of nineteenth-century Aleppo. Father Būlus Qar'alī (Paolo Carali - d. 1952), a Lebanese Maronite priest, publicist and historian, published a monograph on the history of Aleppo in the first half of the 19th century<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> İNALCIK, QUATAERT, *An Economic History of the Ottoman Empire*. Vol. 2, p. 867.

<sup>11</sup> BAKHKHĀSH, NA'ŪM, *Akhbār Ḥalab*. Ed. By YŪSUF QŪSHĀQĪ: Ḥalab 1985-1989; QUSṬĀKĪ AL-ḤUMSĪ AL-ḤALABĪ, *Udabā' Ḥalab dhuwū al-athar fī 'l-qarn al-tāsi' 'ashar*. Ḥalab 1925, 2nd ed. 1967; QAR'ALĪ, BŪLUS, *Ahamm ḥawādith Ḥalab fī niṣf al-awwal min al-qarn al-tāsi' 'ashar*. Al-Qāhira 1933. Cf. RAFEK, ABDUL-KARIM, "Ottoman Historical Research in Syria since 1946," *Asian Research Trends: A Humanities and Social Science Review*, No. 2 (1992), Tokyo, p. 54, 71.

### Neo-Chronicler: Kāmil al-Ghazzī

In Aleppo, this tradition of local Sunnī historiography was represented in the late Ottoman period by al-Shaikh Kāmil ibn Ḥusain ibn Muḥammad ibn Muṣṭafā al-Bālī al-Ḥalabī known as al-Ghazzī (1852-1933)<sup>12</sup>.

He was born and died in Aleppo. His father, al-Ḥusain al-Ghazzī (1819-1855), who was famous in *fiqh*, *ḥadīth* and literature, came to Aleppo from Ghazza<sup>13</sup>. Kāmil al-Ghazzī was given a traditional religious education, but he became interested in the great Islamic historians, as Ṭabarī, Ibn al-Aṭhīr, and Ibn al-ʿAdīm. He began to write and publish in Syrian and Arabic journals and magazines from his early age. In 1882, he was named director of the official weekly *Al-Furāt*, a post he held for 20 years. In 1908, Ghazzī founded the magazine *Ṣadā al-Shahbā*.

The life of Kāmil al-Ghazzī was very rich in social and cultural activities. He became director of the Industrial Bureau, director of the council of the Agricultural Bank, president of the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce and Industry, several times member of the Municipality Council, and member of the Arab Research Society in Damascus. He was named director of the Antiquities Society and director of the Administrative Committee of the National Museum of Aleppo. In the Ottoman period, he was loyal to the Ottoman Empire and maintained excellent relations with many Ottoman governors of Aleppo. At the same time, al-Ghazzī remained a local patriot of Aleppo.

As an historian, Kāmil al-Ghazzī published a three-volume history of Aleppo called *Nahr al-dhahab fī tārikh Ḥalab* (Ḥalab 1922-1926, 2nd edition 1991-1993), containing a preface and two parts of his book. The fourth volume (third part) has not yet been published. Ghazzī was an author of the old annalistic school, his chronicle dated according to the Hijra calendar is descriptive without using historical criticism<sup>14</sup>. In his method, he combined local history in the first and second volumes with a historical chronicle in the third volume of his history of Aleppo. In Syria, a similar method was used in the 1920s by the famous Damascene cultural and educational personage Muḥammad Kurd ʿAlī (1876-1953), who in his monumental well-known six-volume description of Syria called *Khīṭaṭ al-Shām* (Dimashq 1922-1928, 3rd edition 1983) also followed the tradition of local histories called *al-Khīṭaṭ* of the medieval Egyptian historian Maqrīzī and the modern Egyptian historian ʿAlī Mubārak. Kāmil al-Ghazzī was traditional in his method, however, in his methodological approach, he is a follower of modernist reforms and gives attention to the economic and social development of Aleppo. His personal experience and involvement in the social life of the Aleppine elite enabled him to bring new values into his historical writing.

The best known contemporary of al-Ghazzī's generation was the founder of early Pan-Arabism ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Kawākibī (1849-1902) from a well-known aristocratic Aleppine family<sup>15</sup>. Both his father Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Kawākibī (1829-1882)<sup>16</sup> and his brother al-Sayyid al-Shaikh Masʿūd al-Kawākibī occupied a high social status in the late Ottoman Sunnī society of Aleppo and were loyal to Ottoman rule. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Kawākibī published in journals and magazines, was active in commerce, and became mayor of the Municipality of Aleppo. Due to his ardent criticism of Sultan Abdülhamit's despotism, he was obliged to emigrate.

<sup>12</sup> GHAZZI, *Nahr al-dhahab*. I, p. 469-474; QUSTĀKĪ AI-ḤUMSĪ AL-ḤALABĪ, *Udabā' Ḥalab*, p. 115; ZIRKLĪ, KHAIR AL-DĪN, *Al-a'lām*. V. Bairūt 1979, p. 217.

<sup>13</sup> ṬABBĀKH, RĀGHIB AL-, *I'lām al-nubalā' bi-tārikh Ḥalab al-shahbā'*. 2nd ed., Ḥalab 1988, vol. 7, p. 281-286.

<sup>14</sup> ṬARABAIN, AḤMAD, *Al-tārikh wa 'l-mu'arrikhūn al-'arab fī 'l-'aṣr al-ḥadīth*. Dimashq 1970, p. 108.

<sup>15</sup> ṬABBĀKH, *I'lām al-nubalā'*, vol. 7, p. 473-487; RĀFIQ, ʿABD AL-RAḤMĀN; *Al-'arab wa 'l-'uthmāniyyūn* 1516-1916. 2nd ed. Dimashq 1993, p. 524-528.

<sup>16</sup> ṬABBĀKH, *I'lām al-nubalā'*, vol. 7, p. 375-377.

### A Biographical Encyclopedist: Rāghib al-Ṭabbākh

Another Aleppine historian, Muḥammad Rāghib al-Ṭabbākh (1877-1951) belonged to younger generation<sup>17</sup>. He came from a well-known Aleppine family connecting merchant activity with religious activities. His father al-Shaikh Maḥmūd ibn Hāshim al-Ṭabbākh (1830-1891) combined craft activities with religious knowledge<sup>18</sup>. His grandfather al-Shaikh Hāshim al-Ṭabbākh (1802-1865) was invited to serve as *qāḍī* in Istanbul, but he apologized and became involved in craft and trade activities<sup>19</sup>. Both his father and grandfather adhered to a Sufi order.

Rāghib al-Ṭabbākh was given traditional religious education, in his 14th year of age visited the Hijaz. Among his teachers were al-Shaikh Muḥammad al-Zarqā (1842-1924) and *qāḍī* al-Shaikh Bashīr al-Ghazzī (1856-1920), the brother of the famous historian. Rāghib al-Ṭabbākh wrote for journals and magazines published in Aleppo, Damascus, Beirut, and Cairo. He taught Arabic language and religious sciences. After World War I, he was named member of the Arab Scientific Society in Damascus (1923), member of the Administrative Council of the National Museum in Aleppo (1931), and finally President of the Union of Scholars in Aleppo. Like al-Ghazzī, Ṭabbākh was a local patriot of Aleppo.

The best known work written by Rāghib al-Ṭabbākh is a biographical encyclopaedia of the aristocratic families in seven volumes called *I'lām al-nubalā' bi-tārīkh Ḥalab al-shahbā'* (Ḥalab 1923-1926, 2nd edition 1988), which covers not only the city of Aleppo but the whole of northern Syria. The new edition of the encyclopaedia, published by the author's son Muḥammad Yaḥyā al-Ṭabbākh in 1988, contains the biographies of *nubalā'* and *a'yān* arranged according to the date of their deaths until 1926. The seventh volume, which contains the biographies of the author's contemporaries, serves as a valuable primary source for the social conditions of the leading Aleppine Sunnī families in the Late Ottoman Period.

In comparison with Kāmil al-Ghazzī, Ṭabbākh seems more traditional in his method and more conservative in his methodological approach. In his method, Ṭabbākh followed the classical *Wafayāt al-a'yān* by the medieval historian Ibn Khallikān. In Syria, an example of such traditional historiography in the late Ottoman period is, among others, the Damascene historian 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Baiṭār (1837-1914), the author of a three-volume biographical encyclopaedia named *Ḥilyat al-bashar fī tārīkh al-qarn al-thālith 'ashar* (Dimashq 1961-1963, 2nd edition Bairūt 1993). Ṭabbākh eclectically collected everything written on this time. Like medieval authors, he took over long passages from other authors without exact reference. However, the results of his diligence help contemporary historians to orient themselves in the problems of local historical research<sup>20</sup>. His work remains a useful source for the study of Aleppine notable families in the 19th century.

<sup>17</sup> ṬABBĀKH, *I'lām al-nubalā'*, vol. 1, p. 10-21.

<sup>18</sup> ṬABBĀKH, *I'lām al-nubalā'*, vol. 7, p. 405-408.

<sup>19</sup> ṬABBĀKH, *I'lām al-nubalā'*, vol. 7, p. 316-319.

<sup>20</sup> TARABAIN, *Al-tārīkh wa 'l-mu'arrikhūn*, p. 109-110.