# *Introduction*

## *The Long History of Caravans between Palmyra and Bukhara*

Caravan: a group of merchants, pilgrims, or travelers journeying together, usually for mutual protection in deserts or other hostile regions. In the deserts of Asia and northern Africa, the animal most commonly used in caravans was the camel, because of its catholic appetite, its ability to go without water for several days, and its loading capacity.[1]

Despite its brevity, the definition of the online encyclopaedia *Britannica* is in line with the definitions by which the word of Persian origin entered the English language. In these definitions, caravan is first a group of human beings who decide to travel together. Animals come next, although they take up most of the rest of the *Britannica* definition. The root of the Arabic word (*qāfila*), on the other hand, associates the journey (and in particular the return journey) and the tight bond that give meaning to a 'company of travellers, caravan'.[2] More briefly in this regard, Edward William Lane's dictionary defines the *qāfila* as 'a company, or an assemblage of persons, travelling together' or 'a company returning from a journey'.[3] The logic of insurance explains these groupings: caravans are organised to limit the risks of travel through environments considered difficult and, in particular, the desert. This logic occupies first place in the scholarship about caravan trade and in the available sources. They are the main criterion for the organisation and rationality of caravans. Although the Persian word (*kārvān*), of obscure etymology, passed into medieval Latin in the twelfth century, it is from the end of the seventeenth century that it became widespread in European languages.[4] With the development of

[1] 'Caravan: desert transport', *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (online) (accessed 26 April 2023).
[2] Albert de Biberstein Kazimirski, *Dictionnaire arabe-français*, Paris: Maisonneuve, 1860, vol. 2, 791.
[3] Edward W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, book 1, part 8 (Supplement), London: Williams and Norgate, 1893, 2991.
[4] 'Caravan', *Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé* (online).



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the various East India Companies in Europe, the caravan became the archetype of oriental travel and trade: exotic, risky and a little backward already.

The photograph inserted by the editors of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* ('Camel caravan in the Sahara, Morocco') did not *a priori* have much to do with the caravans whose tracks this book follows. At the time this introduction was being written, its depicted four travellers are four tourists in trainers and coloured polo shirts while their guide has taken care to put on the expected djellaba. The photograph reminds us that the Sahara imposes itself on our imagination when it comes to evoking caravans. Tourism, as well as a long series of works on the 'trans-Saharan' trade, have shaped a folkloric and historiographical landscape that is essentially African and that, when it comes to caravans, has no equivalent other than the Asian 'silk roads'. In this landscape, the Middle East of the Ottoman provinces is hardly visible. Cropped by the editors of *Britannica* in order to remove the tyre marks visible in Vladimir Wrangel's original photograph, the image also reminds us that, in Morocco as in the Middle East, caravans have been transformed into folkloric objects by the rise of motorised transport. On the quaysides of the Suez Canal or from the steamers' decks, on board Egyptian and Ottoman trains, the wealthiest travellers of the late nineteenth century were already looking with tenderised condescension at these lines of dromedaries that seemed to them to be from another age.[5] During the interwar period, the expansion of automobile transport gave rise to an explicit nostalgia in European, American and Ottoman literature about the 'caravane sans chameaux', as Roland Dorgelès put it in 1928.[6]

This book is not about the imaginary of caravans, however. Nor is it about the history of their irreducible decline. Rather, it proposes to consider the caravans as one of the means of modern mobility, and the hostile environment of the desert as a key site of the political economy of the Middle East. The history of domestic trade in the Ottoman and post-Ottoman Middle East is still a *tabula rasa*. It offers an ideal

[5] Christoph Herzog and Raoul Motika, 'Orientalism "alla turca": Late 19th/Early 20th Century Ottoman Voyages into the Muslim "Outback"', *Die Welt des Islams*, 40(2), 2000, 139–195; Valeska Huber, *Channelling Mobilities: Migration and Globalization in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869–1914*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 141–153.

[6] Roland Dorgelès, *La caravane sans chameaux*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1928.

terrain to resume the study of an object that is in many ways orientalist and outdated, by putting it to the test of the renewed historiography of neighbouring regions.

Through the concrete experience of men and animals that Arab and Ottoman sources allow to be reconstructed, this book defends the idea that the history of the caravans allows us to understand the political economy of the Ottoman and post-Ottoman Middle East not by seeing it first through the vantage of the Middle East's coasts and maritime exchanges with Western countries, but by giving their full place to the steppes and deserts, to the suburbs of the big cities and to the rural markets, to the most banal exchanges and to the animals that supported them, to the nomads and to the Ottoman and Arab merchants. This documentary and geographical choice allows us, in turn, to break away from dominant paradigms in order to understand the participation of the Middle East in the globalised economy and to privilege the examination of regional logics through markets and domestic networks from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century.

The slow and discrete pace of the caravans brings to light domestic economic transformations that contributed to shaping the contemporary Middle East as much as bustling and cosmopolitan great ports and capitals. It brings to light connections that were not only those of the East with the West, but those that made up the cohesion of a region studied here from the economic and social angle of commercial exchanges. These connections are studied at a time when regional cohesion was challenged by imperial and industrial globalisation before being challenged by the construction of nation states in the following century.

Although imprecise, the term 'region' describes fairly well the portion of the Middle East that extends from the Hijaz, Najd and the Arab emirates of the Gulf (the northern half of the Arabian Peninsula) to Egypt and Anatolia: a space and scale beyond the locality (the smallest scale of a complete society) but below the empires and the world.[7] This book does not really deal with a natural region (the diversity of the

[7] Guy Di Méo, 'Region', in Jacques Lévy and Michel Lussault (eds), *Dictionnaire de la géographie et de l'espace des sociétés*, Paris: Belin, 2003, 776–778; Susan Mayhew, 'Region', in S. Mayhew (ed.), *A Dictionary of Geography*, 4th ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 418–422.

physical characteristics of the territory is, precisely, a factor in the exchanges I study), nor with an administrative region (since it goes beyond the borders of the Ottoman vilayets and spills over into neighbouring states). It is rather a functional region, the product of a certain cultural cohesion of the inhabitants (as evidenced, among other things, by merchant literature and the worldview it uncovers) and by the economic exchanges that the cities polarised.

Between the second half of the nineteenth century and the interwar period, the ability of the Ottoman Empire to reintegrate a large part of this space under its direct sovereignty (the Hijaz, the steppes and deserts of Iraq and the *Bilād al-Shām*) or into a network of effective alliances (the emirates of the Najd and of the Arabian Gulf coast) provided this region with an unprecedented degree of political unity, as useful for business as for the security of the caravans, albeit unfinished. Because it was an intermediary space between the world and the locality, the scale of the region makes it possible to geographically apprehend the relations of Kuwaiti merchants with their correspondents in Damascus at the beginning of the twentieth century (Figure I.1).

This regional historical geography sheds light on the way a territory is constructed by the mobility of people and the exchange of goods that were not limited to urban areas but expanded to the arid lands. In this region, that more or less overlapped the Arab East (*al-mashriq al-ʿarabi*), social interactions constituted a common regional economic and political system including Bedouin and more sedentary dwellers.[8]

Finally, this regional scale, and its evolutions from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, corresponded to what the caravan traders and drivers themselves described very concretely as the space-time of their active life, or of a moment of their life. To put it in a nutshell, this book is both a history of the *interior* and from the *inside* of the Middle East, thanks to the sources that make it possible to access the lives and the horizons of those who were part of a group of 'merchants, pilgrims, or travellers journeying together usually for mutual protection in deserts or other hostile regions'.

[8] Johann Büssow, Kurt Franz and Stefan Leder, 'The Arab East and the Bedouin Component in Modern History: Emerging Perspectives on the Arid Lands as a Social Space', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 58(1/2), 2015, 1–19, 6.

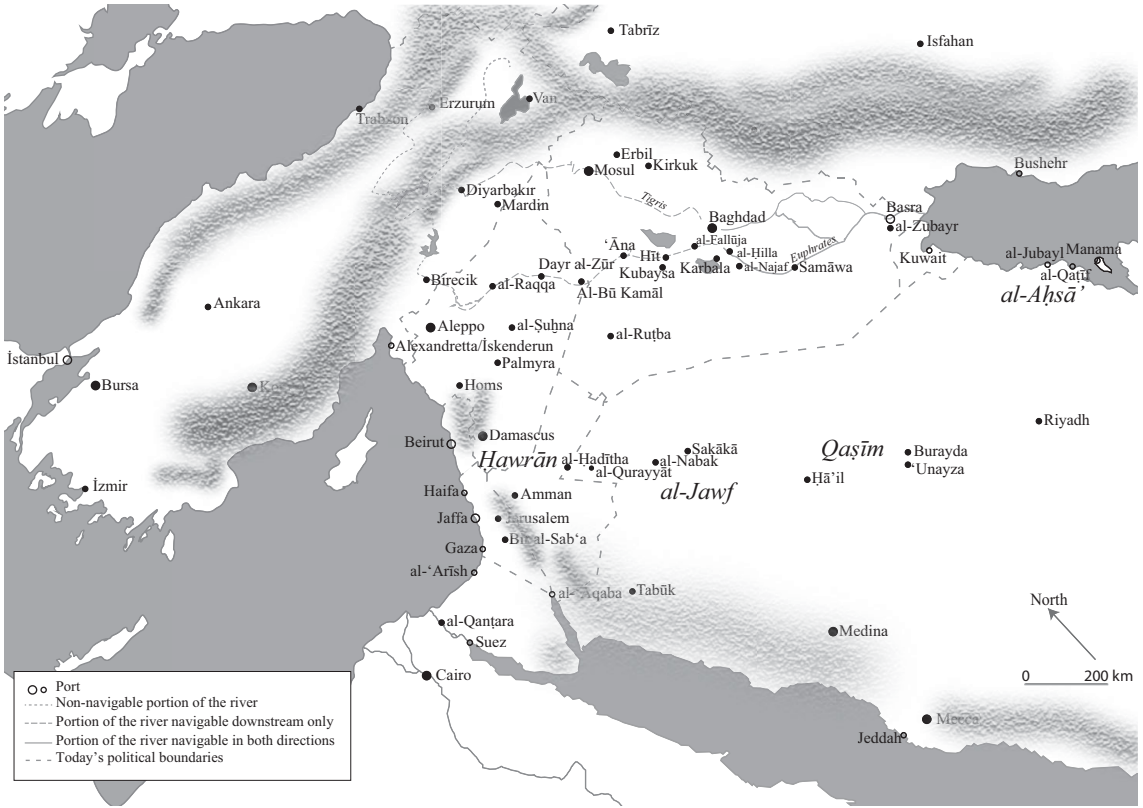



**Figure I.1** Map of caravans of the Middle East

## I.1 Bringing Back Camels and Steppes on the Historical Stage

Caravans are an ancient story, even more so in Arabia than elsewhere. The role of caravans in the formation of regional markets in the Middle East appears from Ancient History and, in this introduction, I recall the major stages and the debates that this role arouses among historians.

### *I.1.1 The Invention of the Camel as a Means of Transport*

The domestication of the dromedary took place between 4500 and 2500 BCE in Southern Arabia, between the present-day territories of Hadhramaut and Oman. Its breeding spread to Somalia and then to the north of Arabia during the second millennium through the incense trade networks, for which it became a means of transport. A prestigious animal, capable of feeding (milk, sometimes meat) and clothing (wool) its owners, the dromedary was also appreciated for its carrying capacity. However, it was rarely used as a draught animal (North Africa, and Tunisia in particular, is an exception) or even as a racing animal.[9]

In a synthesis published in 1975, Richard Bulliet suggested that the use of the dromedary for carrying became so competitive that, between 500 and 100 BC, it displaced the use of wheels and carts.[10] Bulliet's synthesis actually dealt with the opposite phenomenon of what anthropologists were observing at the same time, that is, the marginalisation of animal caravans by wheeled and motorised vehicles in the internal trade of North Africa and the Middle East.[11] By the 1960s, the

[9] Margarethe Uerpmann and Hans-Peter Uerpmann, 'The Appearance of the Domestic Camel in South-East Arabia', *Journal of Oman Studies*, 12, 2002, 235–260; Michaël Jasmin, 'Les conditions d'émergence de la route de l'encens à la fin du IIe millénaire avant notre ère', *Syria*, 82, 2005, 49–62; Martin Heide, 'The Domestication of the Camel: Biological, Archaeological and Inscriptional Evidence from Mesopotamia, Egypt, Israel and Arabia, and Literary Evidence from the Hebrew Bible', *Ugarit-Forschungen*, 42, 2010, 331–382.

[10] Richard W. Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1975, 28–56 and 66–67.

[11] William Lancaster, *The Rwala Bedouin Today*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981; Dawn Chatty, *From Camel to Truck: The Bedouin in the Modern World*, New York: Vantage Press, 1986; Lois Beck, *The Qashqa'i of Iran*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.

pendulum between the 'camel' and the 'wheel' was swinging in the opposite direction.[12]

Bulliet's general conclusions about the social and political consequences of these transformations have been discussed widely, but his chronology of the technological inventions leading to the widespread use of the dromedary for transport remains illuminating. The first step was the 'Sudarabic saddle', that appeared around the thirteenth century BC. It made the dromedary an efficient carrying animal, that could be sold or rented by nomadic herders to sedentary merchants. It was also around this date and with this function that dromedaries appeared in Northern Arabia, Syria and Mesopotamia, where they were probably introduced by nomadic groups. By the seventh century BC, dromedaries were numerous enough in the steppes of Syria and Mesopotamia to compete with animal-drawn carts.[13]

The second stage, decisive according to R. Bulliet, took place in the same regions between 500 and 100 BC with the invention of the 'North Arabian saddle'.[14] The new saddle (two pieces of wood in the shape of an inverted Y, placed one at the front and the other at the back of the dromedary's hump, and connected by wooden crosspieces) made it possible to use the dromedary as a means not only for more efficient transport (the saddle distributes the weight of the load on both sides of the animal's ribcage) but also for warfare (the saddle is more stable and allows the rider to be in an elevated position). R. Bulliet has insisted on the latter quality to conclude that the Arab groups of nomadic breeders were more integrated into the Middle Eastern economy, thanks to the mastery of transport and dominant military position. This 'North Arabian' saddle encouraged the replacement of the wheel by the dromedary between the third and seventh centuries AD, with only a few exceptions, like Muslim Spain, India and Asia Minor, where the wheel continued to be used alongside the dromedary in urban and rural areas. The use of the saddle spread

[12] Ilse Köhler, 'The Dromedary in Modern Pastoral Societies and Implications for Its Process of Domestication', in J. Clutton-Brock and C. Grigson (eds), *Animals and Archaeology 3: Early Herders and Their Flocks*, Oxford: BAR Publishing, 1984, 201–206; Jasmin, 'Les conditions d'émergence de la route de l'encens'; William Lancaster and Fidelity Lancaster, 'Was There a "Bedouinisation" of Arabia?', in Laïla Nehmé and Ahmad al-Jallad (eds), *To the Madbar and Back Again*, Leiden: Brill, 2017, 645–711.

[13] Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel*, 76–77. [14] Ibid., 87–110.

along caravan routes and it fostered the development of trade between South Arabia and the main cities of the Near East on the one hand and between South-West Arabia and the Persian Gulf on the other.

### *I.1.2 Nomads, City-States and the Control of Caravan Trade*

The ancient texts on *Arabia Felix* and their focus on the incense trade may have led to an overestimation of the role of this long-distance trade and more specifically the role of the caravan trade in the formation of South Arabian cities and states between the end of the second millennium BC and the first two centuries AD. Inscriptions are in fact very sparse on this trade, perhaps because it was controlled and organised by nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes while sedentary groups only participated through these same tribes. The decline of the caravan trade in favour of the sea routes around the Arabian Peninsula from the first century AD onwards did not only lead to increasing tensions between sedentary and nomadic herders, it also makes it clear that agricultural production played a role at least equal to the role of the caravan trade in spices and incense in the organisation of South Arabian cities and in the accumulation of wealth by their elites.[15] Hypotheses minimising the role of long-distance trade are nevertheless opposed by the multiple attestations of cultural contacts with North Arabia, Syria-Palestine and Mesopotamia in the first millennium BC and by the sedentary character of tribes such as the 'Amir, one of the main tribes involved in caravan trade. The debate is therefore not only about the economic and cultural impact of long-distance trade in the formation of South Arabian cities and kingdoms. It extends to the role of nomadic and semi-nomadic groups as either 'marginal' or 'principal' in the organisation of that trade.[16]

The caravan activity of the northern Arabian trading cities is less debated. Archaeological and especially epigraphic data are not more explicit about trade but there is more of it. This difference may be due to the opening of the Red Sea routes from the first century AD, that

[15] Michel Mouton and Jérémie Schiettecatte, *In the Desert Margins: The Settlement Process in Ancient South and East Arabia*, Roma: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, 2014, 132–134 and 236–241.

[16] Alessandra Avanzini, 'M. Mouton et J. Schiettecatte, In the Desert Margins. The Settlement Process in Ancient South and East Arabia (Review)', *Topoi: Orient-Occident*, 19, 2014, 867–874.

competed with the trans-Arabic caravan routes for trade between the Mediterranean, Arabia and India. Between the mid-first and third centuries, the ports of South Arabia themselves experienced an unprecedented development.[17] While the caravan trade in incense declined from the first century AD, caravan activity in Syria continued to blossom. Apart from textiles (and in particular silk), that were the most important items of the long-distance caravans, little is known about the merchandise. The relationship of the production of the rural areas of the merchant cities with the caravan trade, in particular, is never explicitly mentioned, even though the development of cities like Palmyra took place during a climatic period that was clearly favourable to the development of agriculture.[18]

At Palmyra, Bosra, and Jerash, epigraphy shows the convenience of the imperial framework offered by the Roman conquests for the extension of caravan networks in northern Arabia and Syria from the first century AD. Roman troops and administration worked in synergy with the caravan networks to integrate trade on a Middle Eastern scale. The inscriptions of Palmyra and other cities frequented by Palmyrene merchants paint a picture of a fundamentally caravan trading notability. The richness of the epigraphic documentation allows us to deepen our understanding of caravan activity on the city's scale.

The organisation of the caravans in Palmyra involved two main types of actors: the 'patrons' or 'great caravanners' (J.-B. Yon) on the one hand, and the 'caravan leaders' (synodiarchs) on the other. The former financed the commercial enterprises and ensured, thanks to their authority and their tribal affiliation (duly specified in the inscriptions), the security of the caravans' passage through the territories controlled by the nomadic groups. The organisation of caravans on a city scale implied the distinction of this group of notables, who were both protectors of the caravans crossing the desert and financiers. Their civic role was sometimes formal, as for magistracies, sometimes informal, as for their interpersonal skills. The geography of the inscriptions allows us to see, for the most famous notables, the extent of their influence along the network of Palmyrene 'fondouqs', the

[17] Jérémie Schiettecatte, 'Ports et commerce maritime dans l'Arabie du Sud préislamique', *Chroniques yéménites*, 15, 2008, 65–90; Mouton and Schiettecatte, *In the Desert Margins*, 239–240.

[18] Jean-Baptiste Yon, *The Notables of Palmyra*, Damascus: Ifpo Press, 2002, chapter 3.

establishments that used to accommodate travelling Palmyrene merchants and in which the Palmyrene community used to meet. This organisation, however, has left in the shadows the caravan leaders and the crowd of smaller traders, guides and other Bedouin camel drivers. They remain anonymous or are known only in groups.

However 'great' they may have been at the time of their celebration or burial, the patrons were initially caravan 'leaders' (synodiarchs). The function was often transmitted within the family and it implied the accumulation of political and practical know-how, even if only to gather the animals and the personnel of a caravan. Their official task was to lead the caravan that the city sent once a year to Mesopotamia. Not everyone was a 'caravan leader': the leaders of the small caravans that were the city's main activity during the rest of the year obviously do not bear this title. Whatever the real volume of these smaller caravans, they were not designated as such (*synodia*) in the inscriptions, that speak instead of 'merchants', even though these merchants obviously walked in caravans.

The conduct of caravans was facilitated by the Roman imperial framework. Rome's relationship with its subjects and allies enabled the Palmyrenians to use the infrastructure of the empire's cities and ports as far as the shores of the Persian Gulf.[19] The Roman army provided essential support in maintaining the security of the desert route, a factor that probably played as much a part in Palmyra's prosperity as in the decline of its Nabataean rival, Petra. If the first guarantee of the caravaneers was based on the influence of the notables among the desert tribes and on the armament of the caravaneers themselves (as attested by the iconography of the funerary monuments), there was at least a corps of meharists, probably recruited partly among the Palmyrenians and associated with the Roman army, to lead campaigns directed as much against the Parthians as against the nomads. A city militia under the command of a *strategos* – sometimes chosen from among those who had been synodiarchs – could also organise punitive expeditions against nomadic groups that threatened trade. When insecurity was too great, as after the fall of Palmyra (273), the caravans withdrew to the route along the Euphrates. The Euphrates route was longer than the direct tracks through the steppe and desert, but much safer thanks to the string of stopover towns. This

[19] Ibid.

balance between the routes was reproduced in a very similar geography during the nineteenth century.

The history of the caravan trade in ancient history highlights the implications of this trade on the scale of a city, a state and its territory. It also reminds us of the very allusive nature of the available sources on the subject. Was the caravan trade so obvious to contemporaries that it did not need to be detailed or even mentioned explicitly? Or did it play only a marginal role in the production and accumulation of wealth? The hypothesis one chooses to follow determines the role attributed to the caravans in the functioning and structuring of a regional market.

The debate raised by Patricia Crone's 1987 book was, in its own way, part of this alternative. Crone saw the status of Mecca as a commercial capital at the time of the birth of Islam as a fabrication of Islamic historiography. According to her, the important trade routes that connected Southern Arabia to Syria rather ran through the north-western oases, when they were not maritime. The Meccan trade was mainly local and very little oriented towards products capable of finding a market beyond the Hijaz. P. Crone's reversal of the ideas about Meccan trade of the sixth and seventh centuries, although quickly and thoroughly criticised for its use of sources, restored the questions of the circuits of caravan trade (trade with neighbouring regions of Syria and Egypt rather than the great international trade, in the case of Mecca according to Crone), the integration of territories and markets on a regional scale (trade in local products, as opposed to luxury goods such as spices or silk), the participation of nomads and rural areas in trade and finally the role of caravan activity in the formation of the state (and, for P. Crone, in the formation of Islam). Although its aims were not those of an economic history, the thesis of P. Crone's book was largely based on a discussion of the scales of mercantile activity in a city whose commercial foundations have long been seen as the necessary substratum for the emergence of Islam.[20]

In the Sahara, commercial networks of caravan trade managed by Muslim traders guided the expansion of Islam. Contrary to the impressions left by the chronicles of the time, the effects of Mongol expansion from the thirteenth century on the great medieval Asian routes were

[20] Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987; and the discussion by Gene W. Heck, '"Arabia without Spices": An Alternate Hypothesis', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 123, 2003, 547–576.

positive. After the crises of the eleventh century, the reorganisation and stabilisation of power in the Middle East provided a favourable environment for long-distance trade between Central Asia and Anatolia, within the framework of an economy that remained fragmented and nonhierarchical but whose caravan movement ensured cohesion by connecting markets.[21]

Just as maritime trade under the Roman imperial aegis weakened the caravan trade between Arabia and the Mediterranean from the first century onwards, Portuguese ventures in the Indian Ocean and then those of other European states through their respective East India Companies contributed to diverting part of the overland trade between Asia and the Mediterranean to maritime routes. Although it was particularly significant for high-value commodities, the extent of this diversion is difficult to measure actually. On the one hand, the merchants of the *Estado da India* (and later their Dutch, British and French competitors) were all the more effective as they introduced themselves into a web of pre-existing regional and usually Muslim networks, particularly when it came to overland trade. On the other hand, the resistance of the Muslim states, whose economy was confronted with competition from European companies, was stronger than European sources suggest.[22] The expansion of the Mughal, Safavid and Ottoman empires from the seventeenth century onwards, and the constellation of merchant emirates located on the margins of these three empires, provided land-based networks of the caravan trade with the opportunity to adapt their routes to this new competition. The massive injection of American silver through trade with European merchants supported the expansion of all three ensembles by giving the trade routes with Asia a prosperity that was probably unprecedented. It benefitted European companies as much as the Asian traders who acted as intermediaries and helped supply the local, regional and global markets.[23]

[21] John Meloy, 'Overland Trade in the Western Islamic World', in Maribel Fierro (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 648–664.

[22] Niels Steensgaard, *The Asian Trade Revolution of the Seventeenth Century: The East India Companies and the Decline of the Caravan Trade*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1974, who insists that the establishment of the Portuguese factories did not alter the caravan trade nor did it alter the Asian maritime trade.

[23] Rudolph P. Mathee, *The Politics of Trade in Safavid Iran: Silk for Silver, 1600–1730*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

## I.2 The Questionable Decline of Caravan Trade

The Silk Roads have been the paradigm of long-distance trade carried by camelids on the network of routes that were crystallised across Central Asia between the second century BC and the beginning of the Christian era.[24] The very concept of the 'Silk Roads' was developed at a time when scholarly orientalism was focusing on the civilisations at the eastern edges of these routes and on their relationship with Europe, rather than on Central Asia. The German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen, who may have coined the term (*Die Seidenstrassen*), used it as the title of his book in 1877 to refer to the leading role of silk in the trade that passed through the oases of the Tarim Basin and linked China to the Mediterranean. At the first international congress of orientalists in Paris in 1873, the topics of the discussions and the personalities of the scholars showed that European orientalism at the time was much more focused on the Far East (China and Japan in the forefront) than on the Middle East and the Arabic-speaking areas.[25]

From the 1980s onwards, the global history movement revived the Silk Road paradigm, but not without taking up some of the biases inherited from this Orientalist approach: the focus on the extremities (Europe and China) of the routes and on luxury goods (considered the most representative products of civilisations), the primacy given to transcontinental exchanges over regional exchanges and, finally, a conception of exchanges as articulated above all by urban poles and by the great empires at the expense of peripheral emirates, the vast rural areas and the steppes. The global analysis of these movements has usually looked at China, where the silver that circulated on the Silk Roads and on the maritime routes of the Indian Ocean ended up, as the

[24] Philip Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 90–91; Jerry H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, chapter 2; Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*, London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

[25] Scott C. Levi, *The Bukharan Crisis: A Connected History of 18th Century Central Asia*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020, 38–49; Alain Messaoudi, *Les arabisants et la France coloniale, 1780–1930*, Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2015, 369–376.

driving force (André G. Frank) or one of the driving forces (Kenneth Pomeranz) of the world economy until the eighteenth century.[26]

### *I.2.1 Scales and Directions of Overland Trade between Asia and Europe during the Crisis of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*

What happened between the beginning of the seventeenth century and the end of the eighteenth century in the network of caravan routes that connected Asia to Europe? The most systematic analysis of the decline of overland trade was provided by the Danish historian Niels Steensgaard in the early 1970s, before becoming part of the historians' debates on the development of a 'world-economy'. According to Steensgaard, competition from European colonial companies (the Dutch *VOC* and the British *East India Company*) to break the Portuguese monopoly on Asian trade enabled the East India Companies to recover the bulk of transcontinental trade during the eighteenth century. The Asia–Europe trade shifted from Middle Eastern caravans to maritime routes bypassing Arabia and Africa. A serious financial crisis linked to the collapse of the value of silver currencies accentuated the decline in land-based trade.[27]

The global and basically European-centred scale of Steensgaard's thesis is primarily the result of a predominantly European documentation. N. Steensgaard explains that the documents of caravan traders, if they exist, cannot be found. As an exception, he cites the diary of a late seventeenth-century Armenian merchant, Hohvannes, of which he seems to have only second-hand knowledge.[28] In order to support the impression given by the statistics of the colonial company archives, Steensgaard compares the functioning of two institutional systems that, according to him, are in conflict. The colonial shipping companies succeeded in controlling the market and reducing the burden of 'protection costs' by integrating military means and developed insurance systems into their organisation. The caravan trade, in contrast, appears to be a 'peddling' activity, a description that N. Steensgaard borrowed

[26] André G. Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, 117; Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, 158–162.

[27] Steensgaard, *The Asian Trade Revolution*. [28] Ibid., 22–23.

from Jacob Cornelis van Leur's work on Asian (Indonesian) trade in the modern period. Caravan trade was poorly institutionalised as well, which increased its protection costs and did not encourage traders to engage in risky but rewarding ventures. Its markets were segmented and not transparent, due to slow communication and opaque information, that encouraged short-term price fluctuations. Finally, although Steensgaard recognised that its techniques could sometimes be sophisticated, the caravan trade appeared to him to be primarily a sum of small, capital-poor enterprises, in contrast to the European capitalist companies.

By backing up his economic analysis with a more institutional analysis, Niels Steensgaard's book has established the thesis of the systemic character of the decline of trade in the silk road circuits from the seventeenth century onwards, in favour of the maritime routes between Europe and Asia. The basis of N. Steensgaard's analysis, however, concerned first and foremost transcontinental trade and, more precisely, that which supplied Europe with Asian products. It was on this particular circuit that the sailing and steam ships of the European companies pushed aside the caravan trade by taking over the bulk of the Euro-Asian transit trade. What happened on the intermediate routes, in the large area stretching from Central Asia to the Ottoman Empire? Answering this question is not only to fill a gap in the economic history of the region, but also to shed light on the most extensive part of the trade map. Until the eighteenth century, according to Edhem Eldem's estimates, the Ottoman Empire's trade with Europe must not have constituted much more than 10 per cent of the total volume of Ottoman trade, much less than the majority share of the provinces' internal trade and trade with Asia.[29] The ledgers of traders such as Hovhannes Jughayetsi, whom Steensgaard describes as one of the 'peddlers' of the Asian trade, shows that these traders were in fact the agents of powerful family firms managing transactions between New Julfa, India and – in Hovhannes' case – as far as Tibet.[30]

[29] Edhem Eldem, 'Commerce (xive–xviiie siècles)', in François Georgeon, Nicolas Vatin, Gilles Veinstein and Elisabetta Borromeo (eds), *Dictionnaire de l'Empire ottoman*, Paris: Fayard, 2015, 277–278.

[30] Sebouh D. Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011, 50–53.

By studying the history of merchant networks on a regional scale, historians of Central Asia were among the first in the 1990s to challenge the hypothesis of a global decline along the Silk Roads. The affairs of Bukhara traders in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries demonstrate the dynamism of regional networks at the very moment of the general crisis described by N. Steensgaard. Audrey Burton's pioneering book illuminated the maintenance of transcontinental exchanges between China, South Asia, Iran and the Ottoman Empire and the continued trade in luxury goods (silk, rhubarb, slaves). It highlighted the regional reorganisation of these exchanges, while transcontinental overland trade towards Europe actually decreased. The Bukharian network illustrates the ramification of transcontinental circuits along regional routes to the north (Muscovy) as a result of Russian expansion in Central Asia. Interwoven with the rural and Bedouin economies, this regional trade supplied the merchant networks with local goods that have probably constituted a major part of the volume and value of trade from the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries onwards. These included dried and fresh fruit, horses bought from nomadic or seminomadic groups, and camels sold in markets along the caravan route or further in India, Iran, Russia and China.[31]

A few years later, Scott C. Levi continued Audrey Burton's enterprise by discussing more explicitly the thesis of the decline of transcontinental caravan trade supposedly caused by European expansion in the Indian Ocean. Scott C. Levi's topic, the Indian merchant diasporas in Central Asia between the sixteenth and the nineteenth century, lends itself particularly well to that discussion. The expansion of these caravan traders and their settlement in the region's towns and villages, whose agricultural and artisanal expansion they financed, highlights the 'economic realignment' (Levi) that characterised Central Asian economic networks during the crisis of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[32] New transcontinental trade routes replaced the routes to Iran and the Mediterranean. This replacement led to the emergence of new regions (the Ferghana Valley in the eighteenth century) on the margins of the great empires. New cities and emirates like Tashkent

[31] Audrey Burton, *The Bukharans: A Dynastic, Diplomatic and Commercial History, 1550–1702*, Richmond: Curzon, 1997.

[32] Scott C. Levi, 'India, Russia and the Eighteenth-Century Transformation of the Central Asian Caravan Trade', *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 42–44, 1999, 519–548, 537.

and Khoqand developed at the expense of the former centres of the silk routes. Indian traders and the continuation of a flourishing trade by local merchants (Uzbek merchants and their lucrative trade in horses) in turn manifested the reorganisation of overland trade along lines that broke with the organisation of the silk routes.[33]

Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the old network of the silk routes branched out along north–south axes and more regional networks between India and Russia. The development of merchant diasporas managing overland trade across Central Asia and the Middle East highlights the multiple scales of a trade that was certainly transcontinental, but much more ramified, varied and segmented than the ecumenical model of the Silk Road and the hypothesis of its decline would suggest. The dynamism of maritime trade, both Asian and European, was correlated to these Asian diasporas whose land routes also led to the ports of the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean.[34]

This geographical and economic ramification from the east–west corridor to the north–south ramifications, from transcontinental trade to regional markets, and from urban to rural economies, qualifies the hypothesis of a general and homogeneous decline of land trade between Asia and Europe from the seventeenth century onwards. The support granted by the Safavid, Ottoman and Mughal empires to caravan trade through the construction and maintenance of infrastructures (roads and caravanserais), the protection of traders and the financial connections of states with merchant companies (through taxes, but also through state purchases and supplies) supported commercial activity along regionalised and segmented networks.[35]

Silk was one of the most luxurious goods on these circuits in modern times, certainly not the most voluminous. The correspondence of traders and the reports of imperial officials refer much more often to other textiles (especially cotton fabrics) and bulk goods from

[33] Ibid.; Scott C. Levi, *The Indian Diaspora in Central Asia and Its Trade, 1550–1900*, Leiden: Brill, 2002; Claude Markovits, *The Global World of Indian Merchants, 1750–1947*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

[34] Markovits, *Global World of Indian Merchants*, chapter 4.

[35] Levi, *Indian Diaspora*; Scott C. Levi, *The Rise and Fall of Khoqand (1709–1876): Central Asia in the Global Age*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017; Erika Monahan, *The Merchants of Siberia: Trade in Early Modern Eurasia*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016.

agricultural and pastoral production. Exchange involved the collaboration not only of local and regional traders, but also of nomadic groups (suppliers of means of transport and pastoral livestock products), farmers and herders of agricultural and steppe areas. The cooperation of sedentary groups with nomadic groups was not confined to the choice between the predation or protection of caravans crossing the steppes. It encompassed exchanges between the sedentary and Bedouin economies and implied the existence of regional markets based on the need to exchange goods produced and demanded in distinct ecological zones: urban zones, sedentary agricultural zones, forests and steppes.[36] The slow pace of the caravans connected the centres and intermediate markets that made up these regional markets.[37] Between the urban bazaars and the rural economy (sedentary and nomad), the great caravaneers and the intermediate merchants ensured the continuity of the regional market and the arrangement of its scales through their circuits and their multiple halts.[38] They developed trans-ecological routes whose circuits adapted to the evolution of agriculture and pastoralism.

The focus on regional as opposed to trans-regional trade is a major interest of the recent scholarship on Central Asia between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Like the 'decentralised' (Jeff Eden) Iranian slave trade organised along the caravan routes, in the rural villages and in the nomads' settlements of Central Asia, the intertwining of the scales of caravan trade conferred on the steppe economy an importance that, for regional markets, was no less decisive than the transactions of the large urban bazaars.[39] Although regularly mentioned in the literature, steppe exchanges are the least documented of overland trade before the middle of the twentieth century. Scarcity of sources has long led to the neglect of the existence of such exchanges or to their reduction to the payment of protection taxes (ar. *khāwa* or *khuwwa*) against raids (*ghazū*). As they took place far from the gaze of

[36] David Christian, 'Silk Roads or Steppe Roads? The Silk Roads in World History', *Journal of World History*, 11(1), 2000, 1–26.
[37] Monahan, *Merchants of Siberia*, 330; Elizabeth Ann McDougall, 'Conceptualising the Sahara: The World of Nineteenth-Century Beyrouk Commerce', *Journal of North African Studies*, 10(3/4), 2005, 369–386.
[38] Monahan, *Merchants of Siberia*, 330.
[39] Jeff Eden, 'Beyond the Bazaars: Geographies of the Slave Trade in Central Asia', *Modern Asian Studies*, 51(4), 2017, 919–955.

public institutions and followed procedures probably dominated by the oral, exchanges in the steppe have been recorded only rarely and their place in historiography hardly goes beyond the stage of anecdote or the generalising picture drawn from the anthropological literature of the twentieth century.[40]

### I.2.2 History and Historiography of a Regional Economy Caught between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean

In a stimulating book, Cem Emrence distinguished three main 'historical trajectories' in the history of the Ottoman Middle East during the nineteenth century: the coasts (the regions of western Anatolia and the eastern Mediterranean), the interior (the interior of Anatolia, Palestine and Syria) and the border regions in which Cem Emrence included Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula. The trajectories of these three types of spaces varied according to their exposure to the impact of the global economy, their economic integration and the relations of their local elites with the Ottoman state. According to Emrence's programmatic and quite Ottoman-centric distinction, the interior of the Empire was the region where Ottoman integration was most successful. Exposure to the global economy and the influence of non-Muslim (foreign and Ottoman) actors was minimal. Relations between local elites and the Ottoman state were fused into a 'consensual rule' that allowed an urban 'Muslim bloc' to remain dominant by associating itself with the reforms taking place in the Empire and by taking advantage of the economic opportunities that these reforms created. The production of primary goods (cereals) and a still flexible and efficient preindustrial organisation (textiles) were the main forces of market integration on a regional scale. Conversely, the coastal regions were those where the impact of the global economy and the role of non-Muslim actors were strongest. Borders, finally, were characterised by the weak presence of the Ottoman state, including in the economic sphere. The political, religious and economic elites derived most of their income from protection taxes and from a subsistence economy to which some smuggling and slave trade revenues were sometimes added. For C. Emrence, the Arabian Peninsula was the 'ideal type' of these Ottoman borders,

[40] Burton, *Bukharans*, chapter 13; Jeff Eden, *Slavery and Empire in Central Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, 55–59 and 63–65.

while the regions of northern Iraq, Hauran and Transjordan were more integrated into the empire from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards.[41]

In contrast to the majority approach to the economic history of the Middle East, the first chapters of this book begin by moving away from the coasts and ports (Figure I.1). They focus first on the functioning of the interior's markets. The history this book illuminates does not confine itself to the main cities. It tries, rather, to give its full place to the steppe, the desert margins, the nomadic groups and above all to the various circulations that connected these spaces and that are nevertheless underrepresented in the sources and in the literature. This history, therefore, challenges the distinction proposed by C. Emrence not by denying its relevance but by showing that caravans and entrepreneurs from the interior and border regions were, precisely, powerful agents of the integration of the different spaces and 'historical trajectories' of the Ottoman Middle East. Their activities often blur the aforementioned distinction between the political economy of the coasts, the interior and the borders. They shaped an integrated market on the regional scale, that gives substance to the conception of a Middle East as a cohesive entity, not just one that is extroverted or peripheralised towards its maritime horizons.

As in Central Asia, the decline of land routes in transregional exchanges across the interior territories of the Ottoman Empire coincided with a reorganisation of merchant networks within a regional market. Until the eighteenth century, Aleppo was home to a caravan trade that connected Northern Syria to Iran and Central Asia. From the eighteenth century onwards, the decline of the overland silk trade and the control that European shipping companies acquired over the transit trade between Asia and Europe fostered the economic slowdown of the Syrian city. Throughout the eighteenth century, however, caravans continued to maintain a vibrant trade between Iraqi and Syrian cities. Damascus then competed with Aleppo to polarise this land-based trade.[42] In the nineteenth century, European consuls in Damascus also attributed the commercial decline of their city to the

[41] Cem Emrence, *Remapping the Ottoman Middle East, Modernity, Imperial Bureaucracy and the Islamic State*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2012, 89.

[42] Bruce Masters, *The Origins of Western Economic Dominance in the Middle East: Mercantilism and the Islamic Economy in Aleppo, 1600–1750*, New York: New York University Press, 1988.

end of transcontinental caravans and the displacement of trade along the Suez Canal or to the Black Sea, where trade was taken over by steamship companies (Chapters 1 and 3).

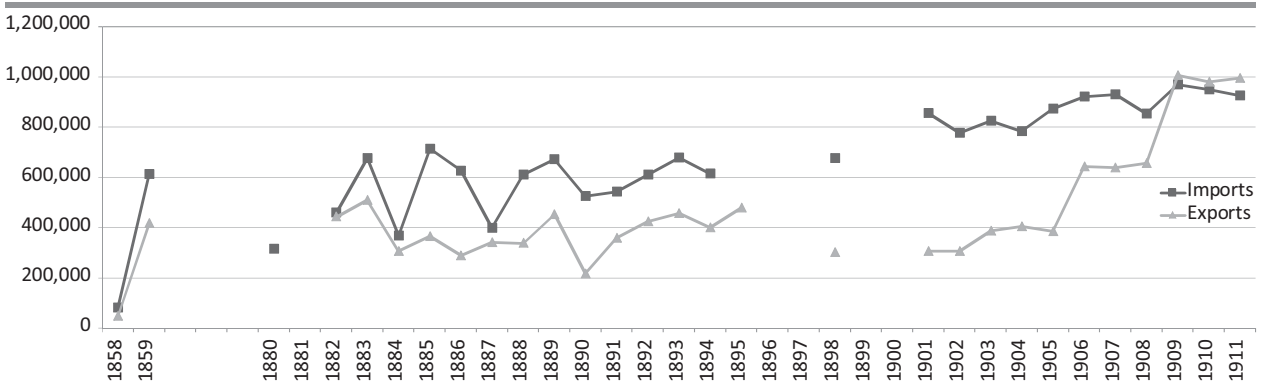
The development of export crops and the opening of the region's markets to European textile products fostered a new competition between foreign and minority traders, on the one hand, and their Ottoman Muslim partners, on the other hand. The terms of the 1838 Anglo–Ottoman trade agreement, rapidly extended to other European countries, and the generalisation of the commercial court system from 1850 onwards, accelerated the development of international trade with European countries. These transformations made the Ottoman Empire one of the most free-trading countries in the world. The improvement of the terms of trade in favour of the Ottoman Empire and Egypt during the 1820s and 1860s favoured a growth that, as noted by Şevket Pamuk and Jeffrey Williamson, has locked Middle Eastern economies into specialisations not conducive to industrialisation. The effects of the conventions modelled on that of 1838 can also be seen in the fall in transport prices, supported by technological progress and the multiplication of maritime and rail connections – a phenomenon that has to be compared to the evolution of caravan transport prices (Chapter 3).[43]

Alongside the development of the region's ports most linked to international trade (Alexandria, Beirut, Smyrna, Basra), the trade of the inland cities may have paled into insignificance, but it did not stagnate. If the picture is 'much less clear' (Roger Owen) than that of foreign trade, the land trade that connected the provinces of the Ottoman Empire is probably underestimated in the available figures, that are themselves drawn mostly from the sometimes impressionistic estimates of the consuls posted there.[44] The Damascus trade followed a fairly clear upward trend from the 1890s until the early 1910s, while the preceding decades give the impression of an evolution that is far from resembling a general collapse (see Table I.1). Basra and, as far as caravan trade was concerned, Mosul even showed periods of surplus trade balances (see Tables I.2 and I.3) that contrasted with the trade

[43] Şevket Pamuk, *The Ottoman Empire and European Capitalism, 1820–1913: Trade, Investment and Production*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 18–37; Jeffrey Williamson, *Trade and Poverty: When the Third World Fell Behind*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011, chapter 7.

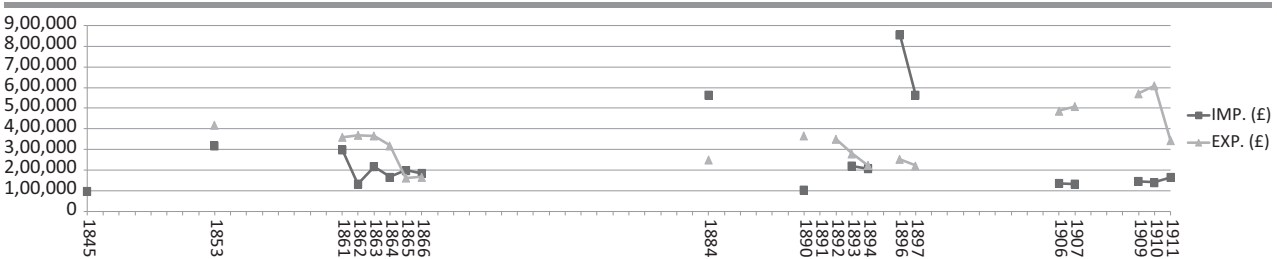
[44] Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy*, 1800–1914, London: I. B. Tauris, 2009, 276 (first published 1981).

**Table I.1** *Trade of the province (vilayet) of Damascus, 1850–1910 (current prices in £)*



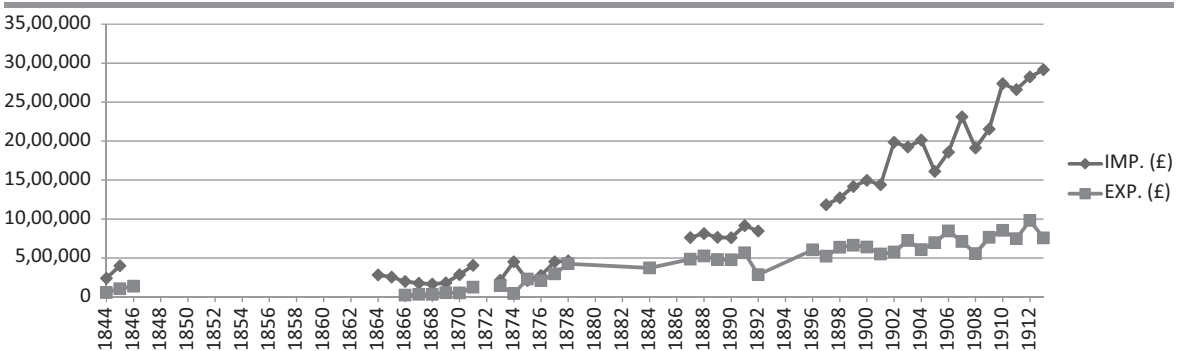

*Sources*: Charles Issawi, *The Fertile Crescent, 1800–1914: A Documentary Economic History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, 156; MAE, CCC Damas; Vital Cuinet, *Syrie, Liban et Palestine: Géographie administrative, statistique, descriptive et raisonnée*, vol. 3, Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1898, 376.

**Table I.2** *Trade of the province of Mosul, 1840–1910 (current prices in £)*




*Sources*: Charles Issawi, *Fertile Crescent*, 175; MAE, CCC, Mossoul, vol. 2; Vital Cuinet, *La Turquie d'Asie*, vol. 2, 1891, 801.

**Table I.3** *Trade of the province of Baghdad, 1840–1910 (current prices in £)*




*Sources*: Charles Issawi, *Fertile Crescent*, 173; MAE, CCC Bagdad, vol. 14; Noël Verney and Georges Dambmann, *Les puissances étrangères dans le Levant: en Syrie et en Palestine*, Paris: Guillaumin et Cie, 1900.

balances (not the balances of payments) of the major Ottoman ports such as Beirut.

This situation was not limited to the domestic trade. Consular reports indicate that, in the middle of the nineteenth century, Iranian tobacco constituted nearly three-quarters of Iraqi (re)exports from Baghdad to Damascus. In 1870, one third of the goods imported into Baghdad province came from Iran (tombac and silk). In the early 1890s, this proportion was still one third despite the intensification of Iran's exports through its own port of Bushehr, 14 per cent of which (by value) were by land. By the same date, caravan exports to neighbouring provinces (Aleppo, Damascus, Mosul, Diyarbakır) amounted to 11 per cent of the total value of exports from Baghdad province. If we add the goods transported on mules and camels to Iran via the Kermanshah road, the proportion of regional trade (Iran, Iraq and the *Bilād al-Shām*) handled by caravans amounted to 24 per cent of total exports from the province of Baghdad.[45] Even if imperfect and underestimated because they were often calculated in value, the figures transmitted by consular reports underline the vitality of the land routes connecting Iran to the Iraqi and Syrian provinces. The luxurious Iranian silk constituted only a minimal part of that trade at the end of the nineteenth century (between 3 and 4 per cent of the total value of Iranian imports to Baghdad by the Kermanshah caravans) and the bulk of it was made up of tombac, carpets, with ordinary commodities, as well as, for Europe, gums and opium. Throughout the nineteenth century, trade with Iran continued to play its role in the vitality of the land routes through the Ottoman Empire, although these routes did not go as far into Asia and did not carry as much silk to Europe as they used to.[46]

The great maritime trade, accused of having captured the activity of the Silk Roads and caused the cities of the interior to decline, handled 65 per cent of Baghdad's total value of imports and 80 per cent of its exports through Basra in the 1890s. The share of caravans in Baghdad's total value of imports was negligible. However, caravans accounted for 72 per cent of Baghdad's exports to the rest of the Ottoman Empire. Chapter 3 will show that maritime competition only

[45] MAE, CCC Bagdad, French Consulate, Baghdad, 'Rapport sur le commerce général de Bagdad en 1870', 1871, and 'Situation économique de la province de Bagdad en 1891', 1892; Vital Cuinet, *La Turquie d'Asie*, vol. 3, 1894, 69–83.

[46] Ibid.

widened a long-standing gap, that was due to the profit structure of Baghdad's trade with the other Ottoman provinces and to the presence of river transport routes.[47]

The decline of overland trade in the mid-1900s, as seen by foreign observers, might thus be explained by the shifting of trade with Europe to other routes rather than by a general collapse. The few figures available for the mid-nineteenth century show that, in the early 1860s, European imports represented only 23 per cent of Damascus' imports, behind goods from Baghdad and Lebanon, while 39 per cent of Damascus' trade was carried inside of its own province or *vilayet* (that extended from Hama and Damascus, with their hinterlands, to Hauran and the sancak of Karak). At the beginning of the same decade, Aleppo's exports to the other provinces of the Empire were more important than exports to Europe: the province used to redistribute most of what it imported to Baghdad, Maraş, Mosul and Mardin.[48] In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, Mosul's trade with Europe, the United States and India accounted for between 20 and 26 per cent of the province's total trade. The rest was regional trade.[49] From the eighteenth century onwards, new urban centres (oases or ports) polarised a regional market organised by dynamic caravan networks between Iraq, the northern Gulf ports and the Najd. The strength of this regional market was based on 'alternative' marketplaces that did not enter the European trade circuits and on the capacity of merchants and 'shaykhs–entrepreneurs' (Hala Fattah) to organise transnational networks in that they were not limited to the role of 'client–merchants' of British companies.[50]

The second half of the nineteenth century was finally a time of recovery for regional production. After the Great Depression and a series of climatic and political difficulties, the growth of production

[47] MAE, CCC Bagdad, 'Situation économique de la province de Bagdad en 1891', 1892; Cuinet, *La Turquie d'Asie*.

[48] Faruk Tabak, 'Local Merchants in Peripheral Areas of the Empire: The Fertile Crescent during the Long Nineteenth Century', *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 11, 1988, 179–214, 201; MAE, CCC Damas, Consulate, Damascus, 9/07/1863; export figures are unfortunately not available.

[49] Sarah D. Shields, 'Regional Trade and 19th-Century Mosul: Revisiting the Role of Europe in the Middle East Economy', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 23(1), 1991, 19–37.

[50] Hala Fattah, *The Politics of Regional Trade in Iraq, Arabia, and the Gulf, 1745–1900*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997, 207.

and trade resumed fairly rapidly from the 1880s onwards.[51] At the end of the nineteenth century, the dynamism of agricultural, craft and industrial production contributed to the growth of both foreign and domestic trade.[52] For the Ottoman Empire as a whole, Donald Quataert, Şevket Pamuk and Roger Owen have all highlighted the importance of this domestic trade, both in volume and in value.[53] In 1913–1914, domestic trade was still responsible for 'the vast majority of goods traded', leading Donald Quataert to conclude: 'in order to fully understand the character, volume and mode of trade in the nineteenth century, researchers must take into account not only the modes and levels of international trade but also those of regional and interregional trade'.[54]

Yet it is external trade that has been granted a decisive role in the transformation of the Middle Eastern economy. The relegation of local and regional scales of Middle Eastern trade to the background until the 1980s was arguably a consequence of approaches inspired by modernisation and, somewhat later, in reaction, dependency theories.[55] These approaches have made relations with industrialised countries the

[51] Charles Issawi, *The Fertile Crescent, 1800–1914: A Documentary Economic History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, 147–151; Owen, *Middle East in the World Economy*, 240–242.

[52] Donald Quataert, 'Industrie', in François Georgeon, Nicolas Vatin, Gilles Veinstein and Elisabetta Borromeo (eds), *Dictionnaire de l'Empire ottoman*, Paris: Fayard, 2015, 591–593; Owen, *Middle East in the World Economy*, 253–264 and 274–286; Issawi, *Fertile Crescent*, 78–80 on the cotton industry in Damascus and Lebanon at the end of the nineteenth century.

[53] Donald Quataert, 'Commerce', in Halil İnalcık and Donald Quataert (eds), *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300–1914,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 824–842, 828 and 833–837; Şevket Pamuk, *The Ottoman Economy and Its Institutions*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2009, 109–110; Edhem Eldem, 'Capitulations and Western Trade', in Suraiya N. Faroqhi (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Turkey, vol. 3: The Later Ottoman Empires, 1603–1839*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 286–289.

[54] Donald Quataert, 'Commerce', in François Georgeon, Nicolas Vatin, Gilles Veinstein and Elisabetta Borromeo (eds), *Dictionnaire de l'Empire ottoman*, Paris: Fayard, 2015, 278–280.

[55] Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961, 27; Charles Issawi, *The Economic History of the Middle East*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966, 3. See also introductions and conclusions in Issawi, *Fertile Crescent*, despite the many sources in his *Documentary Economic History* that illuminate the huge volume of domestic and overland trade.

determining factor of the region's economic evolution, measured in particular by trade balances and terms of trade.[56]

From the 1980s onwards, however, a series of works began to place the reactions and adaptations of merchant, labour and peasant groups at the centre of global approaches.[57] When it comes to trade, however, the communities of foreign merchants and minorities established in the ports and cities of the empire (from Izmir to Basra) have been privileged by scholarly literature. Their history often overshadows that of Muslim traders and domestic overland trade. Only a few historians have explored the merchant networks expanding to the hinterland of the empire's maritime façades, the links of port and urban economies with the rural economy and the circuits of those goods that did not integrate trade with Europe and India. As he pointed out this bias in the literature at the end of the 1980s, Faruk Tabak weighed up the opportunities that the integration of the Middle East into the ongoing industrial globalisation had provided for Muslim merchant networks. Although he explained the theoretical tenets of this work, Tabak did not address the question of the available sources that would make it possible to go beyond anecdotal descriptions of overland trade. Ten years later, after revisiting the work of the mandatory period on the Syrian steppe and noting that the periods of crisis recorded by European sources in the nineteenth century could be followed by dynamic revivals of caravan trade, Françoise Métral reached a similar

[56] Immanuel Wallertsein and Reşat Kasaba, 'Incorporation into the World-Economy: Change in the Structure of the Ottoman Empire', in Jean-Louis Bacqué-Grammont and Paul Dumont (eds), *Economie et sociétés dans l'Empire ottoman*, Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1983, 335–354; Owen, *Middle East in the World Economy*; Sarah D. Shields, 'Take-Off into Self-Sustained Peripheralization: Foreign Trade, Regional Trade and Middle Eastern Historians', *Turkish Studies Association Bulletin*, 17, 1993, 1–23.

[57] Donald Quataert, *Social Disintegration and Popular Resistance in the Ottoman Empire, 1881–1908: Reaction to European Economic Penetration*, New York: New York University Press, 1983; Dominique Chevallier, *Villes et travail en Syrie du XIX^e au XX^e siècle*, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1982; Tom Nieuwenhuis, *Politics and Society in Early Modern Iraq: Mamlūk Pashas, Tribal Shayks and Local Rule between 1802 and 1831*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982; Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *Merchants and Migrants in Nineteenth-Century Beirut*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1983; Linda Schatkowski-Schilcher, *Families in Politics: Damascene Factions and Estates in the 18th and 19th Centuries*, Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1985; Reşat Kasaba, *The Ottoman Empire and the World Economy: The Nineteenth Century*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1988; Fattah, *Politics of Regional Trade*.

conclusion: 'one may wonder whether the economic and social history of this period has not been written for too long almost exclusively from the perspective of intercontinental trade and international relations'.[58]

The extraversion of Middle Eastern economies in the nineteenth century has therefore been corroborated by a literature that has considered it mainly from the vantage of its ports, its foreign or minority entrepreneurs and from European sources. In the 1990s and 2000s, this extraversion has been revived by transnational history that penetrated scholarship on the Mediterranean and, somewhat later, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.[59] In studies of the Gulf countries, the 'oceanic turn' was envisioned as a heuristic tool capable of bringing to light the neglected connections between the Indian Ocean and the Middle East. Scholars have thus illuminated transnational or interregional logics, often at the expense of the more local and regional logics.[60] They have often contrasted coasts and inland trajectories and neglected the terrestrial dimension of exchanges in favour of their maritime orientation. Transnational history has also led to a new division of the Middle East into regions defined above all by their maritime logics and extraversion.[61]

For the Persian Gulf, as for the Middle East as a whole, however, the risk of this approach is to turn ports into islands and to make the sea

[58] Tabak, 'Local Merchants in Peripheral Areas of the Empire', 179–214; Françoise Métral, 'Changements dans les routes et les flux commerciaux du désert syrien, 1870–1920: Le sort incertain des oasis du nord de la Palmyrène', in Thomas Philipp and Birgit Schäbler (eds), *The Syrian Land: Processes of Integration and Fragmentation in Bilad al-Sham from the 18th to the 20th century*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1998, 29–52, 48.

[59] David Armitage, Alison Bashford and Sujit Sivasundaram, 'Introduction: Writing World Oceanic Histories', in D. Armitage, A. Bashford and S. Sivasundaram (eds), *Oceanic Histories*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, 1–28; Markus P. Vink, 'Indian Ocean Studies and the "New Thalassology"', *Journal of Global History*, 2, 2007, 41–62; Kirti N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

[60] Fahad Ahmad Bishara, Bernard Haykel, Steffen Hertog, Clive Holes and James Onley, 'The Economic Transformation of the Gulf', in John E. Peterson (ed.), *The Emergence of the Gulf States*, London: Bloomsbury, 2016, 187–222; Fahad Ahmad Bishara, *A Sea of Debt: Law and Economic Life in the Western Indian Ocean, 1780–1950*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

[61] Nile Green, 'Re-Thinking the "Middle East" after the Oceanic Turn', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 34(3), 2014, 556–564; Nile Green, 'The View from the Edge: The Indian Ocean's Middle East', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 48(4), 2016, 746–749.

and the ocean the only suitable frameworks for exploring the 'alternative universalisms' (Fahad A. Beshara) of non-European societies. It is also to obfuscate, precisely, the outlets and sources of supply of maritime networks. When questioned in 1917 by the British Political Agent in Kuwait about the ways to revitalise trade, two of the city's leading merchants, Ṣaqr 'Abdallāh al-Ṣaqr and Aḥmad Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Ḥumaydī, replied that such a vitality was 'dependent on facilitating the continuation of the exports of the people of Najd (*maqrūna bi-tashīl istimrār ṣādirāt ahli Najd*)'.[62] The identical expressions they used indicate that the two traders had probably concerted to contest the blockade imposed by the British representatives and to drive the point home. Yet this was clearly not the response the British Political Agent in Kuwait expected when he sent them a questionnaire that essentially geared towards solving the problems of maritime trade with India. Judging by the reports that accompany the transmission of the merchants' answers to the British imperial authorities, as well as by the scholarship based on British imperial archives, this advocacy for land trade did not have much resonance.

Focusing on the history of Kuwait under British protectorate, Robert Fletcher has emphasised the documentary reasons for this maritime orientation. Ports were the focus of attention of British administrators in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while their reports most often described deserts as empty spaces that should not be the concern of the India Office.[63] Oral sources, that form the basis of much of the emirate's Arabic historiography, also favoured 'witnesses' from the pearl trade, not so from overland trade.[64] Steppes and deserts were nonetheless essential to the functioning of port-cities, for the supply of agricultural production and labour as well as for the outlets that this interior offered to the maritime economy.

[62] IOR, R-15-5-73, Letters by Ṣaqr 'Abdallāh al-Ṣaqr and Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Ḥumaydī, Kuwait, 11/04/1335 (03/02/1917).

[63] Robert S. G. Fletcher, '"Between the Devil of the Desert and the Deep Blue Sea": Re-orienting Kuwait c. 1900–1940', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 50, 2015, 51–65.

[64] Yūsuf 'Alī al-Muṭayrī, *al-Kuwayt wa tijārat al-qawāfil fī-l-nuṣf al-awwal min al-qarn al-'ashrīn (1899–1946)*, PhD dissertation, 'Ayn Shams University, 2018, 235–236; Fahad Ahmad Bishara, 'Narrative and the Historian's Craft in the Arabic Historiography of the Gulf', in L. Potter (ed.), *The Persian Gulf in Modern Times: People, Ports, and History*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 47–72.

Following the caravans imposes a slower pace and more circuitous detours than the steam-powered routes to which studies of the economic and transnational history of the modern Middle East have accustomed us. It means moving away from the seas and oceans into the more arid environment of the interior. It implies considering, from this environmental and geographic interior as well as from the vantage of its people, the circulations that very concretely connected the different 'trajectories' distinguished by Cem Emrence. The availability of sources for this alternative and complementary history is a challenge, as this introduction has already mentioned. In the history of the modern Middle East, there are few subjects as rarely documented as steppes, deserts and caravan trade, especially when compared to the wealth of sources on port societies and maritime trade with India or Europe.

## I.3 Available Sources for a Complementary Narrative of Modernisation

The use of mainly European sources (diplomats, travellers or shipping companies) goes a long way towards explaining the arguments for an economic history of the Middle East as structurally torn apart by its connections with Europe on the one hand and with Asia on the other. One of the earliest economic histories of the *Bilād al-Shām*, by 'Alī al-Ḥasanī in 1923, is an example of this, although the author was an advocate of Syria's economic independence. The sources 'Alī al-Ḥasanī used are exclusively European and the turning points that organise his chapters are those of the 'discovery' of the route to India, followed by the opening of the Suez Canal. The author no longer mentions caravans for the period after the opening of the Suez Canal.[65] Conversely, the scant trace left in the archives by overland exchanges before the interwar period of the twentieth century makes it particularly difficult to evaluate these exchanges' participation in trade. It is only from the interwar period onwards that a series of transformations, that coincide with the disappearance of the caravans, allowed for a more precise recording of these exchanges. The bureaucratisation of border controls

[65] 'Alī al-Ḥasanī, *Tārīkh Sūriyā al-iqtiṣādī: al-iqtiṣād rūḥ al-ḥurriya wa-l-istiqlāl*, Damascus: Maṭba'at badā'i' al-funūn, 1923.

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and the gradual standardisation of transport circuits were instrumental in that process.

Although they provide a fascinating amount of economic information, reports by European diplomats in the Middle East are primarily concerned with the level of trade with Europe, a foreign and mostly maritime trade. This was the trade their statistics accurately recorded, thanks to the information provided by the traders they used to frequent, figures that local administrations (customs in particular) agreed to transmit to them and statements of the European transport companies. Caravan activity was only recorded on a regular basis in the case of pilgrim caravans – which already provides valuable information since these were also trading caravans – or when a caravan was attacked with high losses (Chapter 1). Despite the impression of exhaustiveness and continuity that this standardised and quantified documentation might produce, it misses the massive share of the underreported domestic and regional land trade.[66]

When they showed a little of their feelings, foreign consuls were the first to complain about the withholding of information by Ottoman or Persian officials and suspicious Muslim traders. It was not uncommon for them to begin their reports by pointing out the imperfection of their statistics.

> I regret that I could not make it more complete but I hope I shall have satisfied you that I did the best I could, under the circumstances. … I have no experience of the trade and being unconnected with commerce no one is interested in furnishing me with particular. There are no British merchants established here …; there are no records of the Custom House to refer to, or if such exist, they are not accessible to me,

said the British consul in Damascus in the introduction to his report on 1858, that nevertheless concluded that the city's market is depressed.[67] 'It is difficult to assign a figure, even approximately, to the value of Persian imports as well as to those of the internal trade of our place with the other cities of the Ottoman Empire', wrote the French consul

[66] Donald Quataert, 'The Age of Reforms, 1812–1914', in Halil İnalcık and Donald Quataert (eds), *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300–1914,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 749–943, 828 and 833–837; Pamuk, *Ottoman Economy*, 109–110.

[67] FO 195-647, British Consulate, Damascus, 01/06/1858.

in Baghdad in 1867.[68] In 1900, the French consul in Damascus refused to draw up a statistical table, arguing that it would give a misleading appearance of exhaustiveness with impressionistic information.[69] The following year, his colleague in Aleppo also began by lamenting the impossibility of providing precise figures. He did not see the traders mentioned by his predecessor as reliable sources but rather as a poor expedient:

> As I pointed out in the previous years, it is impossible to make a serious trade report in a city where there are no customs, no commercial newspapers, no statistics, and where the only sources of information are the more or less fanciful details provided by traders. The report that I have the honour of addressing to Your Excellency has been drawn up on the basis of figures given by a German trader who is considered to be serious. Are these figures correct? I would not dare to guarantee it, and all I can say is that this report must be no falser than those sent by my foreign colleagues.[70]

While European diplomats sometimes suspected local officials of withholding information and complained about the lack of cooperation from local authorities, Ottoman sources are of little help in filling the gaps in European documentation. A few customs registers (*gümrük defterleri*) have been preserved for some ports and inland towns but they are rarely accessible. Domestic trade was not subject to a systematic registration, probably because the taxes were often leased and because they were rare in a largely common market that 'was often not taxed, and was usually not accounted for except by sellers, buyers or land or sea carriers'.[71] Customs duties on internal trade ceased to be collected regularly in many towns of the interior after their abolition in 1874, although the application of this abolition varied according to province and time.[72] British political agents in Kuwait in the 1920s do

[68] MAE, CCC Baghdad French Consulate, Baghdad, 05/02/1867.
[69] CADN, 189P0/1/65, Trade Report for the year 1899, French Consulate, Damascus, 14/08/1900.
[70] MAE, CCC Alep, 39, French Consulate, Aleppo, 03/11/1901.
[71] Quataert, 'Commerce', in Georgeon et al. (eds), *Dictionnaire de l'Empire ottoman*, 279.
[72] Linda Darling, 'Ottoman Customs Registers (Gümrük Defterleri) as Sources for Global Exchange and Interaction', *Review of Middle East Studies*, 49(1), 2015, 3–22; Masters, *Origins of Western Economic Dominance*, 137; Mehmet Genç, 'Osmanlı Devleti'nde İç Gümrük Rejimi', in Murat Belge (ed.), *Tanzimat'tan Cumhuriyet'e Türkiye Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 3, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1985, 786–790.

mention the existence of 'Arabic' registers prepared by the local Customs. They seemed to use them for their own trade reports but these reports showed only maritime import and export figures. Is this because overland trade records were not carefully kept or archived? Or is it because customs were mainly imposed on imports (mostly maritime) and less on exports (many products were not taxed)? The collectors at the gates of the city, however, recorded the collection of customs taxes on caravan goods. 'Not a thing used to escape us', said Sulaymān al-Mūsā al-Sayf, a tax collector (*muḥaṣṣil*) of the early twentieth century.[73]

Written documents are not lacking, yet they do not offer the same possibilities of treatment (especially statistical) as the documentation of European ventures. The reader will notice that the chapters in this book draw on a wide variety of sources. Their cross-checking and matching are not always obvious and their language not always easily accessible. However, the aim is to bring to light the many traces of an unremarkable and often unremarked trade with the rich information that can be drawn from such heterogeneous sources. An economic and connected history that does not ignore the vast interior of the Middle East requires that the material aspects of production and exchange, the *realia* that are not always documented because they have not systematically left traces, be laid out as concretely as possible. This is something this book tries to do by keeping pace with the caravans it follows.[74]

The ordinary circulation of letters between merchants, in particular, was an indispensable medium of accountability and trust between distant partners.[75] When the spelling of a letter was not the one the addressee was used to, the latter would send it back for verification.

[73] Interview of Sulaymān al-Mūsā al-Sayf, Kuwait, by Riḍā al-Faylī (*Ṣafaḥāt min tārīkh al-Kuwayt*, Tilifizyūn al-Kuwayt), 1964, available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWe4jJLlMmw, last accessed 28 April 2024; IOR, R-15-5-77, Trade Report, Kuwait, 26/09/1924 and Political Agency, Kuwait, 11/08/1924; al-Muṭayrī, *al-Kuwayt wa tijārat al-qawāfil*, 'Muqqadima' (introduction) on these impossible-to-find archives.

[74] An inspiring approach is Nicolas Michel's history of the Moroccan economy in the nineteenth century: Nicolas Michel, *Une économie de subsistances: Le Maroc précolonial*, Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1997.

[75] Avner Greif, 'Reputation and Coalitions in Medieval Trade: Evidence on the Maghribi Traders', *The Journal of Economic History*, 49, 1989, 857–882; Avner Greif, *Institutions and the Path to the Modern Economy: Lessons from Medieval Trade*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

When currencies were not clearly expressed, the return letter demanded clarification. When a partner was slow to report the precise and quantified outcome of the sale of the goods shipped to him, the reminder was kind, but insistent: 'Have you sold them or are they still with you? You did not answer us, which is contrary to what one would expect from a man like you who does not hide things and respects himself. So, we request you to keep us informed about this', wrote Ṣāliḥ al-Suḥaymī of 'Unayza, to his Medina-based partner 'Umar 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-'Umarī in 1931.[76]

The detailed reporting of sales, costs and profits and the careful tracking of transfers (*ḥawāla*) allowed each partner to keep track of their accounts. Although traders in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did not use written contracts for many of their partnerships, transactions were nonetheless recorded in correspondence and ledgers. Having just entered Jordan without going through customs, Ibrāhīm al-Samḥān and his fellow caravaneers were surprised by a patrol in 1356 (1937–1938). They were duly subjected to a search by the border guards. A *daftar* recording all their expenses for camels was finally found in their saddlebags and foiled them, proving that they had arrived from Syria on trading purpose.[77] Well into the twentieth century, 'current' registers (*daftar jārī*) kept by the trader or his accountant recorded balances (*bāqī al-ḥisāb*) with each of his partners. They made it possible to implement and track money transfers through book entries, a useful method to counterbalance the lack of cash and the difficulties of its transport.[78]

This documentation can be confusing as it mixes different levels of exchange (local transactions and regional expeditions), commercial and family affairs, without distinguishing them explicitly. This entanglement is an indication of the entanglement of caravan trade in the ordinary life and most common economy of the Middle East. It also

[76] 'Umar bin 'Abdallāh bin 'Umar al-'Umarī, *Ṣuwar min al-ḥaraka al-tijāriya fī 'Unayza*, vol. 1, 15; Letter by Ṣāliḥ al-'Abd al-'Azīz al-Suḥaymī, 'Unayza, to 'Umar 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-'Umarī, Medina, 04/01/1350 (22/05/1931), in al-'Umarī, *Ṣuwar min al-ḥaraka al-tijāriya*, vol. 3, 92–93.

[77] Ibrāhīm b. 'Abdallāh al-Samḥān, *Safaḥāt min ḥayātī*, ed. 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Ibrāhīm al-Samḥān, 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Ṣāliḥ al-Ṭuwayyān and 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Sāliḥ al-Ṣaq'abī, Burayda: Dār al-Nafās wa-l-makhṭuṭāt, 1440/2019, 99–124.

[78] Ṭalāl Sa'ad al-Rumayḍī, 'Daftar ḥisābāt al-tājir al-kuwaytī 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Mubaylish, 'umruhu 75 'āmman', *Kuwait History*, May 2007, available at www.kuwait-history.net/vb/showthread.php?t=3910, last accessed 28 April 2024.

accounts for the apparent paucity of local and practice documentation. In the Middle East, as elsewhere, the content of private archives remains an active one as long as it mentions patrimonies or disputes in families that are still part of the notability. Therefore, it remains sensitive and quite difficult to access. When they are integrated in the collection campaigns organised by official archives institutions, commercial archives are subjected to the same secrecy and retention policies as public archives.[79]

The matching of their different documentary traces in European, Ottoman and private Arabic archives from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century makes it possible to illuminate an interior history of the Middle East without being trapped by the national and historiographical divides that are very often rooted in archival patterns. While the French and British archives offer the possibility of reconstructing a broad picture of economic trends that is all the more relevant as foreign trade was important, the Ottoman archives enable us to hear the complaints and official requests of merchants who addressed the sultan and his servants. They sometimes provide information on the response given to these moving subjects. The most serious incidents, such as the looting of one of the great caravans connecting Damascus to Baghdad in 1857 (Chapter 1), are opportune moments to observe the matching of archives and to bring to light what Erika Monahan has called the 'invisible' dimension of the ordinary trade.[80] Otherwise, the history of caravan trade was a routine history so commonplace that observers and official institutions did not mention it before it clearly began to disappear.

For this reason, private archives are indispensable. With their information on the state of the markets as well as on the families of the correspondents, with their transfer orders and price lists, their polite formulas and the many innuendos inherent in the relations between long-standing partners, the letters of the merchants enable us to enter into the routine of business and the nature of the economic and human relations that their exchanges maintained. As much as their camels, mules and horses, and as much as the loads of goods that their animals transported from one market to another, the circulation of this

[79] Rosie Bsheer, *Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020, 110–114.
[80] Monahan, *Merchants of Siberia*, chapter 4.

correspondence was an equivalent to what Ghislaine Lydon has termed a 'paper economy of faith' in the nineteenth-century western Sahara. It kept the unity of the regional market that stretched from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf until the mid-twentieth century.[81]

## I.4 An Overview of the Book's Structure

This book follows a chronological structure, starting in the mid-nineteenth century and leading up to the mid-twentieth century, but each chapter focuses on a particular aspect of the caravan economy. In order to dive into the history of these 'groups of merchants, pilgrims, or travelers journeying together, usually for mutual protection in deserts or other hostile regions', Chapter 1 focuses on an event that is documented in quite an exceptional way by an intersection of different sources in Ottoman, Arabic, English and French: the attack of a big caravan on its route from Damascus to Baghdad in 1857. The first aim of Chapter 1 is to immerse the reader in the life and business of caravans in the mid-nineteenth century – a period that is introduced here as a turning point for life and business in the steppe of the Ottoman realms. The other aim is to follow, in parallel, the enquiry into the attack's motives and into what the historiography has considered a major handicap of overland trade, that is, insecurity. By so doing, Chapter 1 illuminates the regional system that dealt with the hazards of caravan trade.

Chapter 2 engages with social sciences theories about 'institutions' in order to understand the resilience and intensification of overland caravan trade thanks to an increasingly and efficiently organised system involving urban traders, Bedouin, and Ottoman officials. It introduces the figure of Muḥammad 'Abdallāh al-Bassām, a caravan trader whose impressive career is followed as a common thread in the remaining part of the book. Chapter 2 tries, accordingly, to rely as much as possible on the viewpoint of caravan traders, in order to offer original insights on the debates about the changing roles of state institutions in the Ottoman Empire, the echoes of these changes among both urban and nonurban dwellers, and the economic and political competition by

[81] Ghislaine Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, chapter 5.

political entities that were built on the monopolisation of trading routes. Chapter 2 actually aims at unveiling a new panorama of the political economy of the Middle East by focusing not on the coastal and urban societies but on the hinterlands and the steppes.

Chapter 3 discusses the resilience of caravans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by suggesting a move from competition- and technology-focused narratives to more comprehensive histories of mobility in the Middle East. It promotes a synergy approach in that speed was not systematically the decisive factor, the experience of mobility could be differentiated depending on business opportunities or social status and the networks of exchange and mobility were structurally changing or, to put it a different way, when the 'channelling' of mobility was not yet an unescapable future. Geography, season and the markets' specific features provided economic rationality to slow and incremental transport and to an efficient synergy of different types of mobility.

Chapter 4 begins with the First World War when camels were used in unprecedented numbers by fighting armies. The Great War was the first step of a gradual transformation in the economic and political geography of the Middle East, with deep influence on caravan trade. In following the caravans during the war and in the midst of borders negotiations, one can see how transnational and national formed in parallel through overland mobility, a case already argued in a different way by recent scholarship that this chapter aims at expanding. With Chapter 5, this chapter benefits from a denser and more heterogeneous source base, that allows for the inclusion of lively narratives in order to give their full extent to the Middle Eastern experiences of these transformations.

As Chapter 4 will have already made clear, hopefully, Chapter 5 is not a caravan-to-car story. Nor is it another case study of mobility versus governmentality in the modern post-Ottoman States. It is rather a continuation of what precedes in order to address the transformations of economic and political geography that put caravans to test during the interwar period. Contrary to developmentalist notions of modernisation, this chapter argues that the end of caravans was a cumulative process, just like its persistence. New kinds of economic and political territorialisation, automobility and what I define as the evening of mobility fostered the gradual disintegration and divergence of the caravan regional market. This would gradually erode the caravans' *raison d'être*, while camels and traders found employments in line with the new economic geography of the Middle East.