

Jordan as an Ottoman Frontier Zone in the Sixteenth-Eighteenth Centuries

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ed. Stephan Conermann

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Mamluk Era (1250 - 1517)

Gül Şen

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in the Sixteenth-Eighteenth Centuries



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1. Introduction¹

This paper outlines some aspects of a larger project on the early Ottoman history of present-day Jordan, i.e., the region under Ottoman rule from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. There is research potential for study of the first three centuries after the Ottoman conquest of Bilād al-Shām (historical Syria) in 1516—geographically, the provinces and frontiers beyond Damascus, Aleppo, and historical Palestine; and thematically, the countryside and rural life instead of urban agglomerations. The great challenge of such a study is the yawning gap in available records from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For the present study, I have undertaken a two-pronged interdisciplinary approach. First, I establish the imperial perspective. This is best done by looking at the administrative situation in Jordan during the transition period by mating the available documentary evidence on Jordan with the rich imperial tradition of the early Ottoman period. The central aspect here is to explore the possibility of alternative sources and perform a critical re-assessment of the question of whether the presumed gap in documentary sources for the region during this period exists after all. Second and antipodally, at the local level, it is necessary to survey and to interpret the results of excavations in Jordan and systematically evaluate indicators relating to the Ottoman period as can be gathered from the relevant field reports (which sometimes are not even identified as Ottoman but subsumed

¹ I have used the transliteration system of the *Diyanet İslam Ansiklopedisi* for Ottoman words as well as Arabic or Persian words integrated into Ottoman Turkish. For Arabic terms and names, I have used the IJMES-system. Established place names given in English spelling, only in translation they are given in transliteration. I am indebted to Bethany J. Walker for drawing my attention to Jordan during the pre-modern Ottoman period and for many fruitful discussions. For their assistance during my research in July 2016 in Amman, I am grateful to Muhammad Adnan Bakhit and Hind Abu al-Shaar. Earlier versions of this paper were presented in Bonn (Annemarie Schimmel Kolleg) and in Amman (American Center for Oriental Reseach, ACOR) in 2016.

under material on the modern period). This step should be supplemented by a rural landscape survey.²

Jordan,³ today officially the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (Ar. *al-Mamlakah al-Urduniyah al-Hāshimiyah*), lies east of the Jordan River and is physiographically divided into desert, uplands, and fertile valleys. Its topographic and climatic structure has affected its land uses and, in turn, its settlement types through its history.⁴ The country is today divided into twelve administrative districts called governorates (*muḥāfazāt*).

A quick literature review relating to the Ottoman past of Jordan demonstrates the state of research: Much more has been written about the late Ottoman period, defined as commonly accepted in Jordan's history as the era between the early nineteenth century and the end of

² I have discussed elsewhere Tall Ḥisbān as an example of the rural landscape in central Jordan, see Gül Şen, "The Transition Period in Jordan: Rethinking Early Ottoman Period with Reference to Tall Ḥisbān," *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan* 13 (The Department of Antiquities of Jordan), [forthcoming]. A further paper "Multifunctional Caves as a Type of Rural Site: The Case of Tall Ḥisbān in Jordan," based on a landscape survey in 2016, is in preparation.

³ The names "Jordan" or "Transjordan" do not appear in any record of the Ottoman administration. Instead, administrative names for different parts of the region were constantly in use like *livā* 'Aclūn (referring to a district) or *nāhiye* of *Beni Kenāna* (referring to a local tribe as a sub-district). See Wolf-Dieter Hütteroth and Kamal Abdulfattah, *Historical Geography of Palestine, Transjordan and Southern Syria in the Late 16th Century*, (Erlangen: Selbstverlag der Fränkischen Geographischen Gesellschaft in Kommission bei Palm & Enke, 1977), 19; Adnan Bakhit, "The Early Ottoman Era," *Atlas of Jordan: History, Territories and Society*, ed. Miriam Ababsa, (Beyrouth, Presses de l'Ifpo, 2013), 188; For the time being, I came across Jordan (*Erdün*) only in an Ottoman geographical work of the sixteenth century which is *Menāẓır ül-'avālim* by Aşık Mehmed. The term "Transjordan" was used by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries European geographers and travelers in the region, so the term refers to the geographical location "beyond Jordan" or "the other side of Jordan" covering the area in the east of the Jordan River, bordering southern Syria and north of the Hījāz. For example, see Michael R. Fischbach, *State, Society and Land in Jordan*, (Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 2000), 8; Eugene L. Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850–1921*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 23. There is no consensus about a term for a historical definition of the present-day Jordan, which is why also a further term "Cisjordan" appears in the literature. Instead of long descriptions or historical names that indicate only one region of the present-day Jordan, like *livā* 'Aclūn, I prefer to use interchangeably "Jordan" and "Transjordan" as generic terms throughout this paper.

⁴ See Hussam Al-Bilbisi, "Topography and Morphology," in *Atlas of Jordan: History, Territories and Society*, ed. Miriam Ababsa, (Beyrouth, Presses de l'Ifpo, 2013), 42–6.

Ottoman rule in Jordan in 1918. The reform era known as the *Tanzimat* (1839–1876) started with the proclamation of the reform decree (*Ṭanzīmat Fermānu*) by the Ottoman Sultan Maḥmūd II (r. 1808–1839). The resulting administrative and military reorganization of the Ottoman state, together with reforms in education and taxation in the frontiers, especially in Jordan, was very successful. Since many institutions were pioneered in this era, it is more significant than for the other administrative units of the Ottoman state, especially when it comes to property rights. Within this research field, Raouf Saʿd Abujaber (1989) presented land and family relationships based on his own family documents and interviews.⁵ In the same year, Hanādī Yūsuf Ghawānmah published Ottoman documents from the early twentieth century relating to the Hawran region.⁶ These studies were followed in 1994 by a volume edited by Eugene L. Rogan and Tariq Tell,⁷ in which Martha Mundy in particular discusses the late Ottoman land registration in the ʿAjlūn district on the basis of the 1858 Ottoman Land Law⁸ and Rogan investigates the introduction of state power over land.⁹ The latter author presented a comprehensive study of Ottoman rule in Transjordan during this period in 1999,¹⁰ with particularly close attention given to the application of the 1858 Ottoman Land Law in the ʿAjlūn and Saḷḷ districts.¹¹ Michael R. Fischbach in his monograph from 2000, based on his doctoral dissertation, scrutinizes two crucial issues of the history of present-day Jordan:

⁵ Raouf Saʿd Abujaber, *Pioneers over Jordan: The Frontiers of Settlement in Transjordan, 1850–1916*, Second Edition, (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 1989).

⁶ Hanādī Yūsuf Ghawānmah, *Some Ottoman documents on Jordan: Ottoman criteria for the choice of an administrative center in the light of documents on Hauran, 1909–1910*, (= *Manshūrāt al-Jāmiʿah al-Urdunīyah*), (Amman: University of Jordan, 1989).

⁷ Eugene L. Rogan and Tariq Tell (eds.), *Village, Steppe and State: The Social Origins of Modern Jordan*, (London, New York: British Academic Press, 1994).

⁸ Martha Mundy, “Village Land and Individual Title: Mushaʿ and Ottoman Land Registration in the ʿAjlun District,” in *Village, Steppe and State: The Social Origins of Modern Jordan*, eds. Eugene L. Rogan and Tariq Tell, (London, New York: British Academic Press, 1994), 58–79.

⁹ Eugene Rogan, “Bringing the State Back: The Limits of Ottoman Rule in Transjordan, 1840–1910,” in *Village, Steppe and State: The Social Origins of Modern Jordan*, eds. idem and Tariq Tell, (London, New York: British Academic Press, 1994), 32–57.

¹⁰ Rogan, *Frontiers of the State*.

¹¹ Rogan, *Frontiers of the State*, 70–94.

land ownership and land taxation after the second half of the nineteenth century, when the Ottoman state introduced the 1858 Land Code in Jordan. Fischbach defines this as the “first significant test of the state-societal relationship around land ownership.”¹²

When it comes to the period before the nineteenth century, it is safe to say that, in general, the process of transition from late Mamluk to early Ottoman rule in the southern Bilād al-Shām, incorporated into the new province of Shām (*vilāyet-i Şām*), has been underexplored beyond the confines of Palestine.¹³ While these former Mamluk imperial centers were now located in an Ottoman province, the lands of Jordan were relegated to peripheral administrative status. Furthermore, the administrative division of the Transjordan region changed several times. Despite remaining a frontier zone, it gained strategic importance: as a transit zone for hajj caravans and as a glacis against the Safavids. Thus it even gained relevance for the new masters, as is evident from the number of forts built by the Ottomans.

Scholars of the history of Ottoman Jordan agree that the Ottomans left Mamluk structures in Bilād al Shām in place.¹⁴ Istanbul sent an Ottoman governor only after the governor of Damascus, the Mamluk Janbirdi al-Ghazali, mounted a rebellion in 1522. We also know that the presence of Ottoman power in Jordan consisted of military structures, as seen in the main fortresses of ‘Ajlūn, al-Salt, al-Karak, and al-Shobak, as well as several fortresses (Ḳatrāna, Dhat Haj, Tabut, Ma‘an, and Aḳaba, among others) that functioned as caravanserai along the pilgrimage route. The total number of fortresses ranged from fifty to eighty.¹⁵ The fact that economic activity was structured around the aforementioned fortresses

¹² Michael R. Fischbach, *State, Society and Land in Jordan*, (Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 2000), 7.

¹³ For a study on Ottoman Jerusalem based on court registers in the Archive of the Jerusalem Shari‘a Court, see Dror Ze‘evi, *An Ottoman Century: The District of Jerusalem in the 1600s*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996).

¹⁴ See Muhammad Adnan Bakhit, *The Ottoman Province of Damascus in the Sixteenth Century*, (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1982), 229–30.

¹⁵ See Malcolm B. Russel, “Hesban During the Arab Period: A.D. 636 to the Present,” in *Hesban 3- Historical Foundations*, eds. Lawrence T. Geraty and Leona G. Running, (Berrien Springs/Michigan: Andrews University Press, 1989).

is emphasized by Muhammad Adnan Bakhit (1982) who performed groundwork for the study of the sixteenth century.¹⁶ Moreover, his monograph *The Ottoman Province of Damascus in the 16th Century* based on different kinds of Ottoman state registers of the sixteenth century, while a pivotal reference work for the period from the sixteenth century onward, still leaves many lacunas. Merely, fiscal activity in the late sixteenth century was documented by two geographers; Hütteroth and Abdulfattah (1972), who studied the state register (the *defter-i mufassal cedit*, new detailed register) of 1596/97.

This survey of previous research brings several salient points into focus: The source base is uneven: comprehensive textual evidence covering administrative and socioeconomic information is mostly available from the nineteenth century onward. For the previous centuries under discussion, sources remain insufficient and fragmentary. The resulting gap in scholarship offers research potential for the period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; geographically for the provinces and frontiers beyond Damascus, Aleppo, and Palestine as well as thematically for the countryside and rural life instead of urban agglomerations. The region of present-day Jordan is still absent in this picture.

From the conquest in 1517 to 1918, Jordan was part of the Ottoman Empire. Despite this 400-year span, the era has never generated much interest among scholars. Modern perceptions of Jordan's Ottoman past can be connected to political developments during and after World War I. The expression "four centuries of neglect" reflects well the general perception of the Ottoman era and its legacy for the historical narrative of Jordan, particularly in the current official national historiography.¹⁷ The website of the Hashemite Kingdom is very much to the point:

¹⁶ Bakhit, *The Ottoman Province of Damascus*, 230.

¹⁷ Eugene L. Rogan points out this perception as well: "In most histories of Jordan, the Ottoman period is cursorily summarized as four centuries of neglect." See *idem*, "Bringing the State Back," 32. Indeed, according to Raouf Sa'd Abujaber: "This last period of 400 years was indeed one of neglect and hardship; the whole area suffered the consequences of instability and depopulation." See Raouf Sa'd Abujaber, *Pioneers over Jordan*, 4.