

THE CATAFAGO FAMILY AND THE COMMERCE OF ACRE

E. L. Rogan 1816-1825 IN MEMORY OF ALBERT CATAFAGO

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The city of Acre was built on commerce and cotton. An eighteenth-century boom town, Acre emerged from obscurity to become the third largest city of Bilad al-Sham, with an estimated population of 20-25,000 in 1786¹. These developments are related to the reigns of two strong leaders: *Shaykh* Zahir al-'Umar al-Zaydani (1749-75), a tax farmer from the Galilee who ruled over Acre between 1749 and 1775, and the Ottoman governor, Ahmad *Pasha* (r. 1775-1804), nicknamed *al-Jazzar* for his ruthless methods of rule. Both built up sizeable armed forces -- Zahir's local tribesmen and later his Maghribi mercenaries, Jazzar's mamluks and *levend* and Maghribi irregulars which, by some estimates, reached between ten and fifteen thousand troops. Both undertook major construction projects: restoration of the castle and walls of the city, the development of the port, and the construction of new mosques, churches, suqs and residences. Both financed their projects through their control over the cultivation and marketing of cotton. Jazzar's monopoly over cotton has been described by one historian:

He determined prices, and made certain that these were enforced. He forbade the buying and selling of cotton through any agency other than his own, and when the

French merchants tried to remind him that this was in contravention of the capitulatory agreements, he simply retorted that in his country it was he who was Sultan².

Yet the rise of Acre was followed by decline, the boom succeeded by a bust. Local sources stress the spoliation of the land and community by Jazzar's exactions and legendary cruelty in explaining the passing of Acre's prosperity³.

Some recent historians have suggested that the commerce of Acre was undermined by overpricing and competition from international trade: '[B]y the 1780s the production of cotton had expanded so dramatically that for the first time supply had caught up with demand, i.e. prices stagnated, supplies had increased, and its sources had diversified in such a fashion that withholding Acre's cotton from the market simply made no dent anymore in the world market and its prices'⁴. In essence, Jazzar had priced himself out of the market and the commerce of Acre suffered in consequence. When, circa 1790, Jazzar expelled the French merchants of Acre for their attempts to break his monopoly, it was commonly believed that they never returned, but settled instead in Sidon 'with Jezzar's permission and on his terms'⁵. Acre's loss was Sidon's gain.

1 Thomas Philipp, 'Social Structure and Political Power in Acre in the 18th Century,' in Philipp, ed, *The Syrian Land in the 18th and 19th Century* (Stuttgart, 1992) p. 91.

2 Amnon Cohen, *Palestine in the 18th Century* (Jerusalem, 1973) p. 22. Jazzar's monopolies were extended to grain and customs duties as well.

3 Cohen, pp. 325-27; Mikhayil Mishaqa, *Murder, Mayhem, Pillage and Plunder*, tr. W.Thackston (Albany NY, 1988) pp.53-4

4 Philipp, p. 102.

5 Cohen, p. 21.

6 Thomas Philipp, 'The Rise and Fall of Acre: Population and economy between 1700 and 1850,' *Revue du Monde Musulman et de la Méditerranée* 55-56 (1990) pp. 130-31.

7 From a manuscript obituary of Antoine Catafago, 'The history of the Count Palatin, the late Antoine de Catafago', in Arabic (n.d.) in the private keeping of the Catafago family, Lebanon [hereafter Catafago (n.d.).

8 Extract copied 28 July 1846 from the registers of the Latin Curate of Terra Santa in Aleppo notarised by Henri Guys gives the date of their marriage as 24 November 1764; in the private keeping of the Catafago family, Lebanon.

9 The marriage is noted in Ibrahim al-'Awra, *Tarikh wilayat Sulayman Pasha al-'Adil* (Sidon, 1936) p. 159. On Haim Farhi, see Thomas Philipp, 'The Farhi Family and the Changing Position of the Jews in Syria 1750-1860,' *Middle East Studies* 20 (1984) 39-52.

10 Catafago (n.d.).

Jazzar was succeeded by Sulayman Pasha al-'Adil (1805-19) as governor of Sidon. The new pasha ruled in accordance with the central government's priorities: encouragement of production, collection of taxes, submission of revenues

to the central government's treasury. However, the damage to Acre's standing had already been done. Acre in the early 19th century was a much reduced town. Its population had fallen to one third its 18th century peak, to about 10,000, and its economy in a state of collapse due to the drop in European demand for its prime cash crop, cotton. In 1806 cotton was a monopoly of the Pasha and was sold uniquely within Greater Syria. French commercial archives suggest that 'no export to Europe existed' in 1806 and that by 1836 'any trade from the harbour of Acre had ceased'⁶. Between these two dates, Acre had suffered an outbreak of plague (1806), a major siege and occupation by Egyptian forces under Muhammad 'Ali's son and generalissimo Ibrahim Pasha (1831). Population estimates suggest that the number of residents in Acre had dropped below 5,000 by the mid-1830s. Not unreasonably, historians have assumed that the absence of European trade in 1806 and of all trade in 1836 held for the intervening period as well.

Boom towns gone bust provoke little scholarly interest. It is thus not surprising that the literature on Acre in the first quarter of the nineteenth century is sparse. This makes the recent discovery of one commercial register from Acre, recording some part of a merchant family's trade over the years 1816-1825, all the more interesting. For not only does Antoine Catafago's trade register shed light on the commerce of Acre, but it challenges some of the assumptions on the decline of that town. The evidence of this one register suggests not only that the commerce of Acre with European ports was still active in the 1810s and 1820s, but that the export trade in cotton was still a defining feature of the commerce of Acre. And while the European commercial presence had withdrawn from Acre, the Catafago family acted as their agents. The first quarter of the nineteenth century

shows greater continuity with trends established in the boom years of the eighteenth century than previously assumed.

The documentation for this study is in private hands. Mr. Albert Catafago generously shared his extensive family papers which shed valuable light on the life of his great-great-great-grandfather, Antoine Catafago. The commercial register kept by Antoine Catafago, spanning the years 1816-1825, is in the keeping of Mr Nadim Shehadi, Director of the Centre for Lebanese Studies in Oxford. I am very grateful to Messrs. Catafago and Shehadi for making these valuable papers available to me.

ANTOINE CATAFAGO

Antoine Catafago was one of the most powerful men in Acre at the turn of the nineteenth century. The Catafagos trace their origins back to Greece. According to family history, one branch of the family moved to Genoa at the beginning of the fifteenth century⁷. Antoine's father, Joseph Antoine Catafago, moved to Aleppo in the eighteenth century, where he worked with the French commercial community. In 1764, Joseph married Catherine Abdalla Mansur, a woman of the Greek Orthodox community of Aleppo⁸. Antoine was born in Aleppo and baptised in the Franciscan monastery in that city, though none of the records which have come to light give the specific date. Educated by the Franciscan fathers in Aleppo, he learned classical and modern languages, including Arabic, French and Italian -- languages which facilitated his many consular and commercial interests in later life. He married Regina Viseti, and had at least two sons -- Alexander and Louis.

At some point in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, Antoine and his brother Philip moved to Acre following a Janissary revolt against the French in Aleppo. At least one of Antoine's sisters also moved to Acre, where she was married to an Armenian treasury scribe working under Haim Farhi, the Jewish treasurer for the province and households of both Jazzar and Sulayman Pasha⁹. Their younger brother, Gianni, remained in Aleppo¹⁰. In Acre, Antoine established himself in

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Ahmad Pasha al-Jazzar's service. A French emissary in 1797 accused Catafago of attempting to block French merchants from the trade of Acre (from which they had been banned by Jazzar since 1790). According to family history,

Antoine is said to have spoiled relations with Jazzar Pasha by welcoming Napoleon and his army when the French laid siege to Acre in 1799, though the story is probably apocryphal. Jazzar did not suffer traitors gladly, and Catafago would more likely have ended his days impaled had he supported the French siege¹¹.

It was during the reign of Sulayman Pasha that Antoine began to secure his social and economic standing in Acre. He became a landholder with properties in the region of Acre, Nazareth, Sidon, and Mount Lebanon¹². He also came to serve as consul on behalf of a number of European nations and city states, including at different times: France, Russia, Austria, Tuscany, Naples, Sardinia, Spain, Denmark, Belgium and Holland¹³. He enjoyed a correspondence with the most important rulers in the region, including Ibrahim Pasha al-Misri, son of Muhammad `Ali; Amir Bashir al-Shihabi, the prince of Mount Lebanon; and the Ottoman governor `Abdullah Pasha. He also mediated between Europeans and local leaders¹⁴.

One of the more interesting visitors to call on Catafago in Acre was the Englishwoman long resident in Lebanon, Lady Hester Stanhope. According to `Awra's chronicle, Catafago treated Lady Hester 'like a queen' during her visit to Acre in 1811. In return, Lady Hester sent Catafago numerous gifts -- for him to give on her behalf to the *other* notables of Acre that she had met during her stay. For Catafago himself Lady Hester sent nothing, claiming that her visit to his house and the great honour which this conferred on him was a sufficient gift for him. 'On receiving her note, he swooned and then heaped more than twice twenty curses on her religion and abuses on her'¹⁵. A few years later Lady Hester wrote about Catafago to the British traveler William Bankes, who planned to visit Palestine:

Probably you will go to Nazareth, Tiberead etc. from Acre, in that case you must lodge at Monsr. Catafago's or at the Convent. The character of the former you probably know, he says himself he never gives a glass of water to a man without the hope of turning it to his account! But still he will probably make a great fuss about you'¹⁶.

Whatever else this exchange reveals about the character of Catafago (and his English guest), it clearly portrays him as a local notable in every respect of the term. The primary foundation for his wealth and standing was the commerce of the Levant.

THE COMMERCE OF THE LEVANT

The Catafago family trade network embraced the whole of the Eastern Mediterranean. In 1806, Antoine Catafago is described by French consular sources as operating a near-monopoly over the commerce of Acre, in co-operation with the Jewish clerk Haim Farhi. One decade later, the commercial register sheds some light on the working of a virtual network with important orders transmitted from Aleppo and, to a lesser extent, from Tripoli through Antoine's son, Louis Catafago. The full network embraced Sidon, Beirut, Alexandria and Cyprus. In addition to his family members, Catafago appears to have had two European colleagues who, from 1824, acted periodically as commercial agents on his behalf: Joseph Magloire Girandin and Victor Bernard.

The evidence of the commercial register of 1816-1825 is ambiguous. There is no way of telling what share of Catafago's trade or of the general commerce of Acre is given by this register. The 134 surviving documents span the years 1816-1825 with an irregular annual distribution. In 1819, Catafago recorded some 40 commercial consignments while in 1821 he only recorded six. On average, the house of Catafago made over thirteen consignments each year for the decade.

The bills of consignment preserved in the register reveal a regular trade link between Acre and the Mediterranean ports of Europe based first and foremost on cotton ('*coton en laine d'Acre*').

In simplest terms, the trade was conducted by Antoine Catafago, acting primarily on behalf of trading houses in Aleppo selling cotton to clients in Marseilles in the first instance, and to a much lesser extent in Genoa. The story was of course considerably more complicated, given the intricacies of financing and risk-sharing which underlay the Mediterranean trade. A transaction could be ordered by one party, paid for by a second, risk assumed by a third party and the goods consigned to a fourth. Yet, of the 134 consignments preserved in the register, a clear pattern emerges: of 62 consignments of cotton shipped from Acre to Marseilles, and 18 consignments of cotton shipped from Acre to Genoa.

The quantity of cotton exported varied widely from year to year, from a high of 85,000 *rotes* (approx. 170,000 kg) in 40 consignments in 1819 to 32,000 *rotes* (64,000 kg) in six consignments two years later¹⁷. While we do not know what share of the agricultural production of Acre this represented, these quantities of cotton would suggest an active countryside and possibly a level of production on a par with periods of the eighteenth century boom times. The Chamber of Commerce of Marseilles recorded figures for raw cotton exports from Acre in 1700-02 (456,500 kg), 1750-54 (3,742,750 kg) and 1786-89 (169,500 kg)¹⁸. That Catafago exported 170,000 kg of raw cotton in the

one year 1819 alone suggests more continuity than disruption in the production and commerce of cotton in Acre. Furthermore, the preponderance of cotton among the exports of Acre suggests another continuity with the eighteenth century, when cotton represented between 80-90 percent of the exports of southern Syria¹⁹.

The next most important article of freight, and equally revealing of Acre's position in eastern Mediterranean commerce, was bullion. Nine consignments of primarily Ottoman coins (*piasters*, *roubiehs*, *Mahmudi sequins*) were sent to Cyprus. Seven consignments, primarily of Maria Theresa thalers with odd lots of Ottoman coins, were shipped to Alexandria. And five lots of currency were shipped to Marseilles: three consignments of Spanish 'column piasters' and 'quadruples' and two of Ottoman coins. The shipping of Ottoman coinage to France is noteworthy.

The remainder of the commerce conducted through this one Catafago book involves odd lots of some seventeen products common to the trade of the Levant. There were artisanal goods, such as soap, spun cotton, steel, and beads. Industrial export crops figured prominently, including bales of silk from Beirut, Tripoli and Acre itself. Other industrial exports included senna, Damascene wool, gall nuts and bitumen from the Dead Sea. Among processed food products were sugar and olive oil, and among food crops, wheat. Finally there were commercial articles of the transit trade -

11 Catafago (n.d.).

12 The governor of Sidon, Sulayman Pasha, bestowed a tax farm over agricultural lands in Nazareth to Antoine Catafago in 1811; Antoine entrusted these lands to his brother Philip; cf. al-'Awra, *Sulayman Pasha*, p. 158. Among the Catafago family papers is a copy of the tax farm awarded to Antoine over a ruined bakery in Nazareth dated 8 *Rabi' al-akhir* 1227/21 April 1812; also, Catafago (n.d.).

13 Antoine Catafago signed his name as Austrian Consul in the commercial register; also, Catafago (n.d.).

14 Catafago (n.d.).

15 Al-'Awra, *Sulayman Pasha*, pp. 193-94.

16 Bankes Correspondence Collection, Dorset County Record Office, Dorchester UK, DBKL, HJ1/40. This letter was probably written at the end of 1815 or early 1816. I am grateful to Mr Norman Lewis for bringing this delightful document to my attention.

17 The Aleppin *rote* referred to in the documents is assumed to be the *ratl*, a measure of solid goods weighing approximately two kilograms; cf. Bruce Masters, *The Origins of Western Economic Dominance in the Middle East* (New York, 1988) xvii.

18 Philipp, 'Rise and Fall' Table 3, p. 130; his figures are derived from R. Paris, *Histoire de la Chambre de Commerce de Marseille de 1660-1789* (Paris, 1951).

19 Daniel Parzac, 'Commerce et commercants des ports du Liban sud et de Palestine (1756-1787),' *REMMM* 55-56 (1990) p. 79.

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صدر من قريته المشايخ قريه الصخره عيونها
 تبارك الذم في قريتنا افتخار الله بعلمه اذ طوى
 انجيله والدار الخرابه صالى القرام الكائين
 الذين يبيعون حبه كادون في قريتنا حبه
 بروم كادون فالمراد كلوه المحلوق المذكوره
 بیده ای شایر استیغی کلوه صی در صی

بفرا الفامره السابین البکلیک بروم کادون
 فی وار انجیل الذی
 فی وار انجیل الذی
 فی وار انجیل الذی

بفرا الفامره السابین البکلیک بروم کادون
 فی وار انجیل الذی
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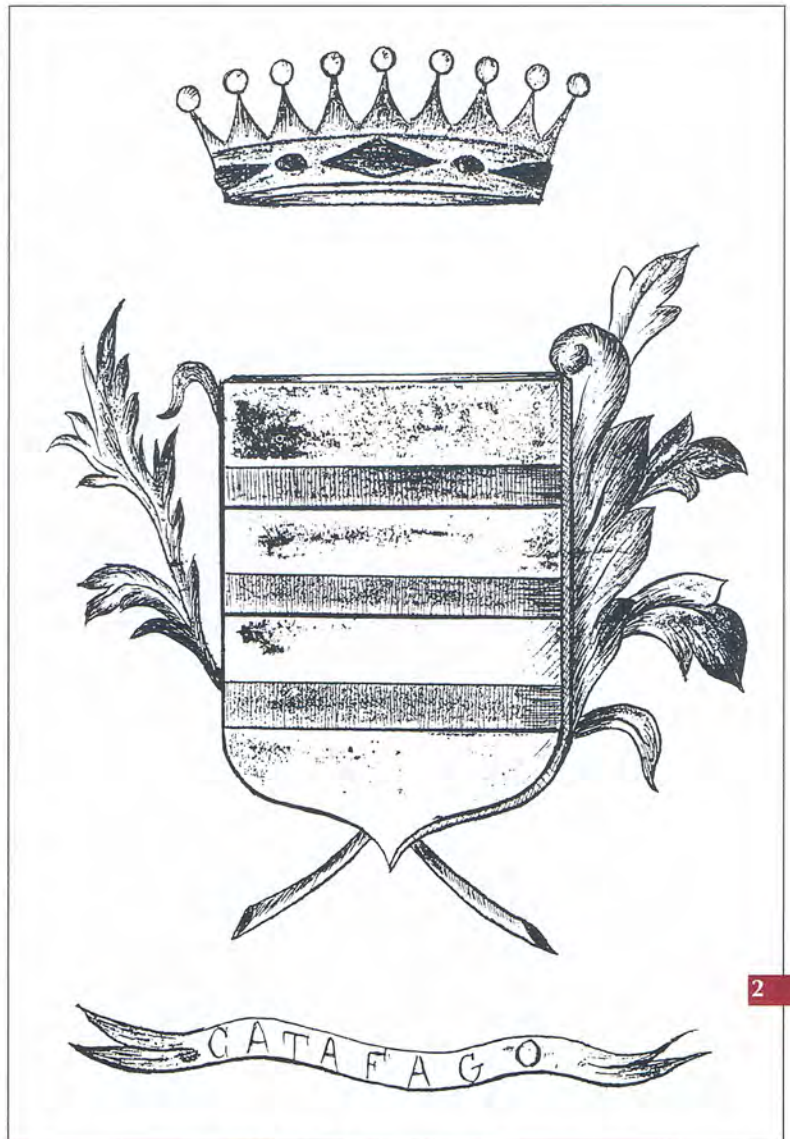
European fabrics and Meccan coffee. Of these, olive oil was the most important export, with ten consignments shipped to Cyprus and Marseilles. Silk was the next most frequent-

ly traded good (7 consignments).

The numbers of ships calling in at Acre, as recorded in the Catafago register, would suggest a high level of commerce. French sources give figures for the number of ships leaving the ports of southern Syria. Between 1756 and 1785, the number of ships sailing from Sidon and Acre combined ran from a low of 3 in 1779 to a high of 20 in 1756, and an average of 11 ships per year²⁰. The annual average recorded in the Catafago register was over 5 sailings per year for the town of Acre alone, with as many as 14 ships in 1819. It would thus seem reasonable to argue that the number of European ships calling at Acre in this period was on a par with the peak periods of the eighteenth century.

The register is a record of a regular trade community. Antoine Catafago worked on account for a number of merchants of Aleppo from a variety of states, primarily French, Austrian and British. One of his customers

was the British Consul in Aleppo and author John Barker²¹. He also represented merchant interests in Cyprus. He worked on account for a number of



²⁰ Panzac, p. 82.

²¹ John Barker, *Syria and Egypt under the last Five Sultans of Turkey*. 2 vols. Ed. Edward Barker (London, 1876).

¹ Copy of the Ottoman tax-farm awarded to Antoine Catafago in Nazareth (21 April 1812) see p. 45 note 12.

² Catafago family crest awarded on Antoine Catafago's elevation to the Lateran Court of the Vatican (see p. 48).

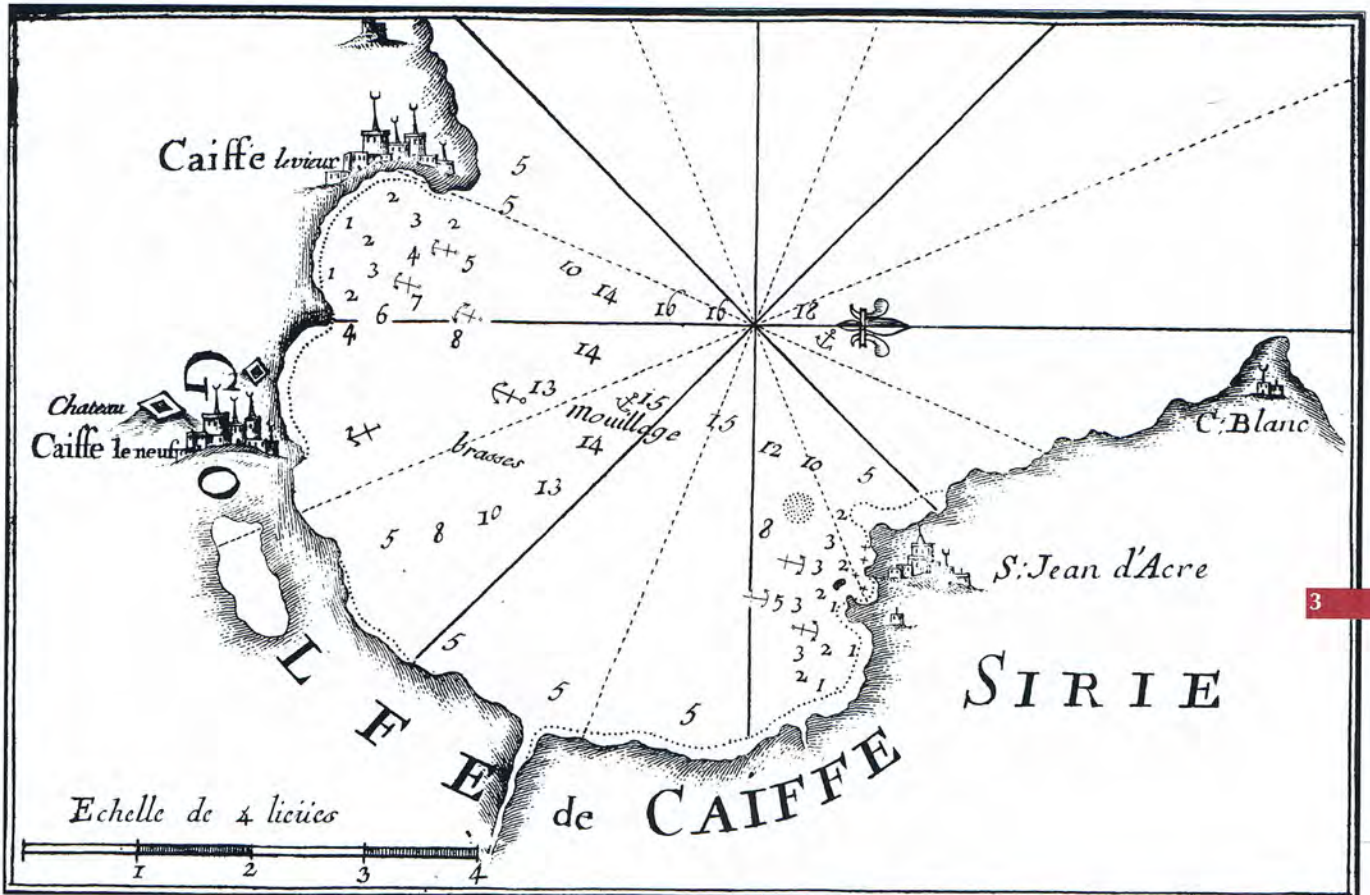
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local Christians and Jews, though he had seemingly little business with Sunni Muslims. The one deed involving a Muslim was a consignment of currency sent by Mustafa Bayazid of Damascus to Messrs Sciama brothers and sons,

Marseilles, a Sephardic merchant family. On the receiving end, a number of European households were Catafago's regular customers. Several were Sephardic Jewish families, such as Messrs Sciama

Alexandria. The only other product besides cotton shipped to Genoa was bitumen. And the only other destination revealed in the register was the Aegean island of Syra. While this reveals nothing definitive about the commerce of Acre, it is clear that Antoine Catafago's primary market was Marseilles, and his network centered on Marseilles, Genoa, Cyprus and Alexandria.



freres et fils, or Ezdra de Moises Altaras, both based in Marseilles. Other Marseilles households included Tardieu et Rey; Victor Regis; Messrs Plasse oncle neveu et Rostand. In Genoa, the most frequent correspondents were Messrs Domenico D'Albertis.

As already noted, 62 of the deeds involved cotton to Marseilles and 18 of cotton to Genoa. The other articles of commerce outlined above were sent primarily to Marseilles and Cyprus. All of the silk went to Marseilles, much of the olive oil to Cyprus. Artisanal and processed products such as coffee, steel and soap were shipped to

22 This point is made by Leila Fawaz, *Merchants and Migrants in Nineteenth-Century Beirut* (Cambridge MA, 1983) p. 26.

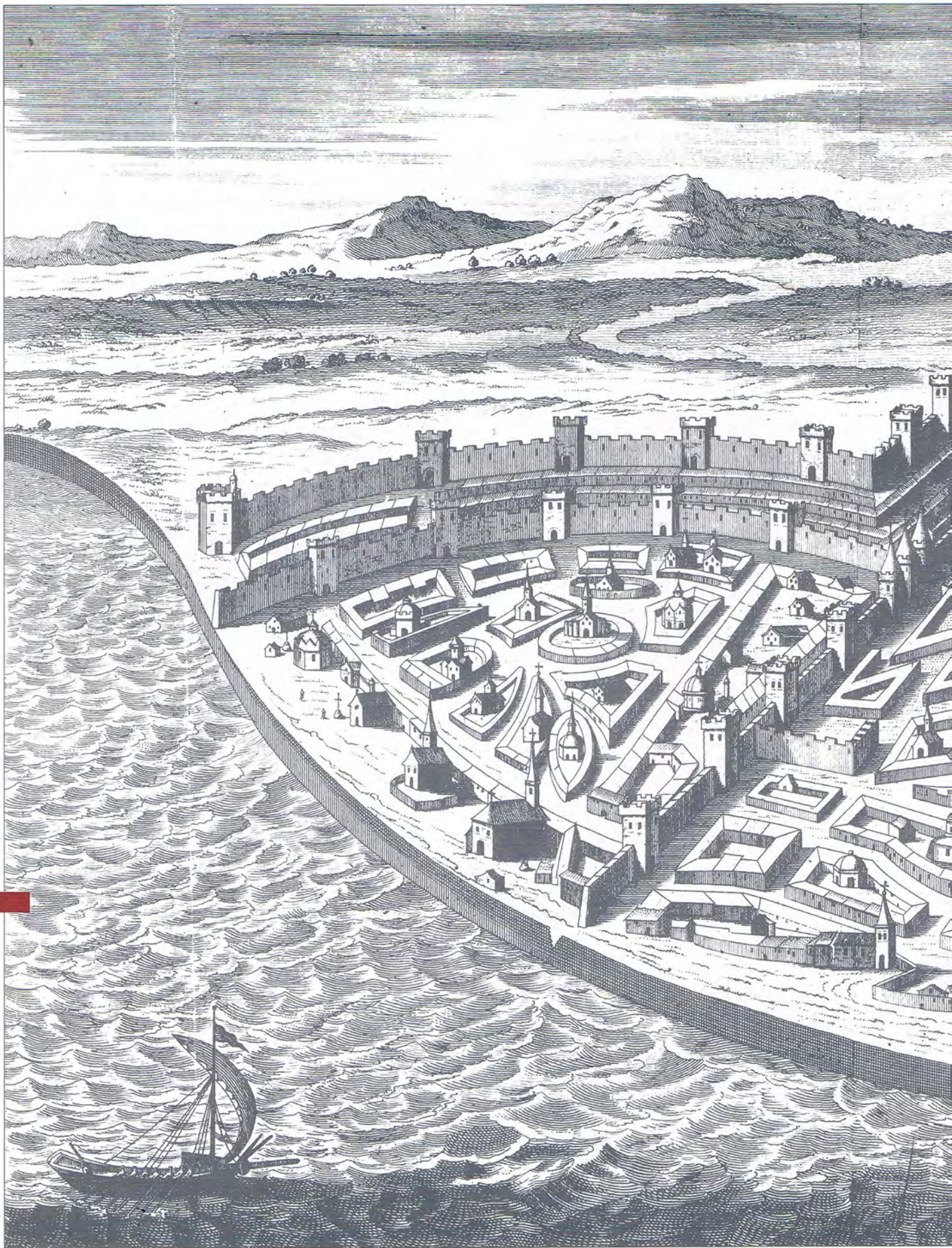
3 Acre mid-eighteenth century (courtesy of Nadim Shehadi)

CONCLUSION

The register of bills of consignment of Antoine Catafago's company is a rare document which sheds valuable light on the commerce of Acre in an under-documented period. The data which it provides overturns many of the assumptions of the current literature which ascribes a premature death to Acre. The Catafago register documents an active trade between Acre and Europe, specifically in cotton, and a level of shipping on a par with the eighteenth century. This in turn demonstrated a high level of cotton production in the region of Acre. The document also reveals a high volume of coinage flowing through Acre and an interactive relationship between inland merchants, especially in Aleppo, and Acre as one of their points of access to Mediterranean commerce.

On the basis of this evidence, the thesis that depredations among the productive population and overpricing of cotton under Ahmad Pasha al-Jazzar led to the demise of Acre is no longer tenable. A more plausible thesis would argue that a revival of Acre took place under the relatively stable government of Sulayman Pasha, and would situate Acre's decline in the decade of Egyptian occupation. Acre suffered two sieges in the course of a decade, compounded by an earthquake, which did more to disrupt production and commerce than the worst of Jazzar's excesses. Yet more destructive for Acre was the establishment of a commercial and administrative centre in Beirut under Egyptian administration. Beirut became the administrative and European consular capital of Greater Syria in that decade (the French consulate was moved from Acre to Beirut only in 1827), and commercial interests were quick to follow²². Even after the Egyptian withdrawal the Ottomans decided to preserve and consolidate Beirut's new-found gains. Acre was thus undone not by the acts of individuals but by structural changes which left behind the boom town of the eighteenth century and favoured a whole new complex of nineteenth century port cities -- Izmir, Beirut and Alexandria.

Antoine Catafago was himself driven out of Acre in the late 1820s. The governor of Sidon, 'Abdullah Pasha, took possession of Catafago's assets much as he had Haim Farhi's a few years earlier. Consular sources report that Catafago's wife and daughters were stripped of their gold and jewellery by the governor. Yet his consular connections and social standing did not suffer. In 1831 he was awarded his highest honour yet -- a knighthood in the Order of the Eperon d'Or and elevation to the Counts of the Sacred Palace and of the Lateran Court. For the last ten years of his life, Count Antoine de Catafago lived in the town of Sidon and advanced Christian and Jewish interests through the building of churches and monasteries, including the Chapel of the Terra Santa order in Sidon where he and his wife are buried. Catafago died in Sidon on 10 April, 1841, his wife a decade later. While his sons Louis and Iskandar continued the Catafago family trade, they did so on terms which increasingly favoured European interests. Antoine Catafago represents the end of an era in which Levantines negotiated on a preferential footing with Europeans in the commerce of the Eastern Mediterranean.



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4 Acre mid-eighteenth century (courtesy of Nadim Shehadi)

