FIN DE SIÈCLE BEIRUT
THE MAKING OF AN OTTOMAN PROVINCIAL CAPITAL

JENS HANSSEN

OXFORD HISTORICAL MONOGRAPHS
Ottoman postcard of the province of Beirut, c.1900
Fin de Siècle Beirut

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To
Carol and Eugene
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was conceived in May 1994 when my supervisor and I were ruminating through the library of St Antony’s College’s Middle East Centre in search of a meaningful topic for an M.Phil. thesis. I dismissed a topic on Jordan. We zoomed in on Syria, then Lebanon. As we stood on a ladder each in one of the rows of shelves, Eugene passed me a page of a book with a map of the province of Beirut. I was curious. A new Ottoman province created as late as 1888?

The province of Beirut consisted of three territories separated from each other by the autonomous province of Mount Lebanon. It stretched all along the Eastern Mediterranean coast from Lattakia in the north to Nablus in the south. The fact that this late Ottoman political entity did not metamorphose into a colonial nation state after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire as did Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine only triggered my archaeological instincts. I was to excavate an extinct geographical, administrative, and political frame within which—unacknowledged by historians—so much of late Ottoman Lebanese, Syrian, and Israeli/Palestinian history operated.

How did it come to this administrative oddity? Who decided on the borders of such a random provincial construct which covered territories in latter-day Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine? Once put in place, how did the creation of the province of Beirut affect society, politics, and trade in the region? How did Beirut relate to its administrative hinterland? Pursuing these and other questions over the past decade gave me the sense of just how important the 1890s and 1900s were for modern Middle East history.

Looking back, this book has always been more about effects and consequences than origins and causes. It became clear to me that the memory of the sectarian violence in 1860 cast a long shadow over the social and political order in late Ottoman Beirut. The municipality of Beirut emerged as a kind of nerve centre for many urban issues in post-war Greater Syria: urban design and planning, public health, education, and intellectual currents. In all of these areas, Ottoman imperialism emerged in competition with European colonial capitalism as a vital force of urban change. Above all, however, it emerged just how much the ‘sons and daughters of Beirut’ participated in that change and crucially shaped the city as their own.

This book could not have been written without the support of a number of individuals and institutions. It has been guided from beginning to end by my
supervisor Eugene Rogan. Without his patience, incision, and occasional putting me ‘in my place’ this book would not have seen the light of day. To him go my thanks first and foremost. Also in Oxford, Nadim Shehadi, director of the Centre for Lebanese Studies, has helped all along the way with biographical information, books, photographs, coffee, cigarettes, and contacts.

A number of funding bodies have made my research possible. The Oriental Institute, the Middle East Centre, the Beit Fund, the Graduate Studies Committee, and, most generously, the Scatcherd European Foundation, all of Oxford University, have provided travel grants that allowed six months’ research in Paris, Nantes, Marseilles, and Aix-en-Provence in 1996. The Skilleter Centre for Ottoman Studies, Cambridge University, has funded three months’ of archival work in Istanbul in autumn 1996. In Beirut, the German Academic Exchange Service, DAAD, funded eighteen months of my stay, and a Junior Research Fellowship at the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft financed another twelve months. Thanks to the Socrates Exchange Programme of the European Union I was able to return to Aix-en-Provence in 2001 to write up. The postdoctoral funding provided by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation has allowed me to explore further the link between city and literature.

A book cannot be written without the help of selfless archivists. In Istanbul, the members of staff at the Yildiz photo archive, the archives of the Ottoman Imperial Bank, and in the Başbakanlik have unearthed catalogues for me. In the Bodleian Library Oxford, the Public Record Office, and the British Library, the Quay d’Orsay, the Bibliothèque Nationale, and the archives of Marseilles and Nantes, I was met with unbridled helpfulness.

Great scholars and academic directors have been supportive and influential. In Beirut, I benefited from a superb working environment. The director of the Center for Behavioral Research (CBR) at the American University of (Ras) Beirut, Samir Khalaf, and the director of the German Orient Institute in Zuqaq al-Blat, Beirut, Angelika Neuwirth have been an inspiration and provided a lively setting to develop ideas. Angelika has opened my eyes to the possibility of integrating the thinkers of the nahḍa into urban history. So, too, have Fawaz Trabulsi and Yusuf Mouawad in their different ways. The working groups at the Orient Institute have all left their traces. The participants and particularly my fellow co-organizers, Thomas Philipp and Stefan Weber, of the 1999 conference on Arab Provincial Capitals have introduced me to the multiple ways of seeing Ottoman imprints ‘elsewhere’ in the Arab world. Our Zuqaq al-Blat working group at the Orient Institute, particularly the indefatigable Ralph Bodenstein, has fine-combed Beirut’s extant architecture from the Ottoman period with me.
To the ‘spatialists’ at the CBR this thesis owes its particular theoretical bent. Maha Yahya, Yasmin Arif, and especially Daniel Genberg have done much to sharpen my awareness of space. Dania Sinno and Zeina Misk have become critical colleagues and friends. The benefit and joy of the daily lunches at AUB with Carol Hakim throughout my two-and-a-half year association with the CBR cannot be expressed in the dry setting of an acknowledgement. Further in Beirut Stefan Weber, Jim Quilty, Jihan Sfeir-Khayyat, Yasser Munif, Wolf-Dieter Lemke, Badr al-Hajj, Hashim Sarkis, Elizabeth Picard, have discussed many of my ideas and offered their thoughts and material generously.

In Germany, Thomas Philipp offered generous advice and relentless support. He has been a second ‘doctor father’ to me. He has charted the road from Acre to Beirut and read the manuscript in its various stages. Klaus Kreisers shared freely his knowledge about late Ottoman monuments. In the US and Canada, I must thank Robert Blecher for his valuable comments and discussion of the medical history of Syria, as well as Engin Akarli, Jim Reilly, Keith Watenpaugh, Ilham Makdisi, Melanie Newton, and Carol Hakim who have read previous drafts of the manuscript. Leila Fawaz has taken time to comment on parts of the thesis and encouraged me to explore the everyday life of Ottoman Beirut. Isa Blumi, John Chalcraft, Ussama Makdisi, and Paul Sedra have provided encouragement and constructive criticism on assorted chapters. Amal Ghazal and Mostafa Minawi have helped with editing and indexing the final version. At OUP, Anne Gelling, Louisa Lapworth and Kay Rogers have been a reliable and understanding team of editors.

In Aix-en-Provence, André Raymond, Robert Ilbert, Randi Deguilhem, and Leyla Dakhli have made me feel welcome and freely given their time, thoughts, and in Leyla’s case a place to stay. Particularly discussions with André Raymond have shown some unexpected links between Henri Lefebvre and Middle East scholarship. In Paris, the late Fuad Debbas opened the doors to his immense private historical collection of Beirut. Finally and most importantly, this book owes its existence to my wife Melanie Newton. Her patience, generosity, and ‘connaissance’ of human struggle in the Middle East have kept me going.

JPH

March 2005
Toronto
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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The transliterations in the book are based on the system used by the International Journal of Middle East Studies. In late Ottoman Beirut, the boundaries between Ottoman and Arabic languages were naturally blurred and it is generally impossible to impose a rigid diacritical system to represent an accurate linguistic correspondence. Generally, for Ottoman positions I use Ottoman transliteration (va¯lı¯, not wa¯lı¯) whereas for local positions I use Arabic transliteration (baladiyya, not belediye).

I have not changed the transliterations of names adopted by authors who write in European languages (e.g. Kemal Ismail, not Kemal Isma¯īl; Néguib Azoury not Najìb ῦAzouūrī). I have translated place names to conform as closely as possible common usage (e.g. Bilad al-Sham, not Bilād al-Shām, ‘Ain al-Mreisse, not ‘Ayn al-Muraysa). Place names and Arabic and Ottoman words widely used in English are left in the familiar form (e.g. Sidon, pasha). Terms from Arabic publishing that appear in the text (newspapers, printing presses, books) have title cases whereas Arabic titles of societies or schools are in lower cases.
## NOTE ON CURRENCIES

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Introduction

A city, that is to say a geographical concentration of a large population, can only subsist or develop within a system of coherent relations between its society and the space in which it expands.

(André Raymond)

The city and the urban sphere are thus the setting of struggle; they are also, however, the stakes of that struggle.

(Henri Lefebvre)

Provincializing Beirut

In the early 1880s, one of Beirut’s flourishing printing presses published the first six volumes of a monumental Arabic encyclopedia: *Dāʾirat al-māʾārif*, composed by Buṭrus al-Bustānī. In the fifth volume, the city’s most prolific nineteenth-century writer and influential public intellectual dedicated ten pages to the long history of Beirut.¹ The encyclopedia entry, which culminates in lists of architectural landmarks and demographic details, not only informs the reader of Beirut’s coordinates in the global grid of latitudes and longitudes, in the Arabic alphabetical order ‘Bayrut’ also ranges between the entries for Peru (*Bayruṭ*) and Perugia (*Bayrūjā*). In a world of words, the city of Beirut had entered the academic stage of urban representations. In the Beirut entry of *Dāʾirat al-māʾārif* the entire history of the Eastern Mediterranean and Greater Syria—or Bilad al-Sham—is told as the story of the changing fortunes of this city.

Beirut was not only represented as one amongst equals, but by the 1870s had assumed centre stage in the writings of its literati. Pride of place was given not only to antiquity *per se*, but to Beirut’s extant architecture and to what it became during the Ottoman centuries: a mixed society enriched by urban diversity. Even after the European powers moved their consuls from Acre to

Introduction

Beirut in the 1830s, the presence of the foreign merchant community never dominated the cityscape and urban affairs as it did in so many other Mediterranean port-cities. The intramural markets, shops, inns, religious buildings, private and collective houses shared features and functions with coastal and inland cities in Bilad al-Sham with which they were connected through commercial, religious, and family networks. Bustânî, in fact, made it clear that the borders between city and countryside were rather fluid.² As more immigrants came to Beirut, orchards turned into suburbs, which emerged concentrically around the nucleus of the old town and along established traffic arteries.³

Bustânî’s text on Beirut begins with a few columns on Beirut’s Phoenician origins. Next, a narrative of an ever-accumulating urban past covers Greek and Roman rule, the ʿAbbasid epoch under Harūn al-Rashîd, Šalāḥ al-Dīn’s struggle against the Crusaders, and the Ottoman conquest of ʿSyria and Egypt in 1517. This was by no means a natural choice and Bustânî’s particular periodization differed from contemporary Ottoman and English histories of Beirut.⁴ On the one hand, ‘Holy-Land-scaping’ and philologico-archaeological discoveries of the time tended to favour an inverted interest in ancient history over a recent past deemed in decay and therefore unworthy of study. On the other hand, military and then capitalist mappings viewed Beirut purely in terms of its strategic location or as a future investment site.⁵

Beirut’s population grew steadily as immigrants from the immediate surroundings and far-away Arab towns settled or passed through.⁶ Unlike most other coastal towns in the Levant, Beirut had retained its Christian population after the Mamluks took over from the Crusaders. This tolerance of religious diversity was institutionalized by the Ottomans under the millet system. Until the eighteenth century, Druze, Maronites, and Shiites kept away from the towns and Jews were few in number.⁷ The Sunni Muslim community constituted a relative majority and its dignitaries operated the legal and commercial institutions of the town. Greek Orthodox Christians were the dominant minority but soon after the Greek Catholic community split from the Eastern

² On Beirut’s population growth, demographic changes, and the umbilical link between city and mountain, see Fawaz (1983: chs. 3–5).
⁴ See e.g. the illustrated history of Beirut printed in the Ottoman Salname of 1908/1326 for Beirut (pp. 224–30). The Ottoman text, taken from Şemseddin Sâmi Frašeri’s Qâmîs al-dâm, focuses on the pre-Islamic grandeur of Alexander the Great while purposefully accompanying the narrative with photos of the Ottoman clocktower, Grand Serail, Petit Serail, a police station, and two panoramas of Beirut. Compare also with Harvey Porter’s undated ‘History of Beirut’ (partially reprinted in Amīn al-Khu¯rī, Dalīl Bayru¯t (Beirut, 1889) and fully in al-Kullîyya, Beirut, 1912) who concludes that, since the 18th cent., ‘Beirut was evidently in decline’.
⁵ For a study of three 19-cent. maps of Beirut, see Davie (1984: 37–82).
⁶ Bustânî estimated Beirut’s population in the 1870s at 75,000 inhabitants, many of whom, he insists, were registered in Mount Lebanon.
Church in 1734 it, too, began to play a prominent role in Beirut’s economic life. Although by the early nineteenth century travellers noted the presence of Maltese and Italians in the port area, non-Muslim minorities were largely Ottoman_dimmis rather than Europeans as in the cases of Algiers, Tunis, or Alexandria.9

Significantly, over half of Dāʿirat al-Māʾrif’s Beirut text is dedicated to Ottoman history. Bustānī’s narrative did not subordinate Beirut to its natural environment of Mount Lebanon and Bilad al-Sham. Instead, Bustānī presented regional and global events and epochal transformations through the prism of Beirut’s own histories of adaptations, changes, and resistances under local potentates such as Imam Uzāṭi (707–74), the Tanūkhīs, and Arslāns during and after the Crusades (twelfth to sixteenth century), and after the Ottoman invasion of 1517. Since the rule of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Maʾnī (1590–1633), Beirut and the surrounding mountains became more and more socio-economically integrated, often, though not always, forming a political entity.10 In the nineteenth century, Beirut began to expand dramatically beyond its city walls as Christians in the mountains fled from decades of peasant struggle and sectarian violence.11

The reinstatement of direct Ottoman rule over Mount Lebanon in 1861 ended two decades of civil strife in Mount Lebanon and Bilad al-Sham. Commerce with Europe began to boom again, especially the silk trade, benefiting particularly Beirut’s traders and moneylenders. The harbourfront and markets in the old city continued to be the centre of commercial activity even as the merchants and notables moved their residences to more lofty locations on the terraces overlooking the port. Clusters of mansions soon became urban quarters proper, which were identified over time as the new and modern city.12 While the port was the economic heartbeat, the new city was the place where social elites of all confessions—foreign, Ottoman, and local—mingled and where schools, hospitals, libraries, clubs, salons, and diplomatic residences mushroomed in the 1860s and 1870s.

City of Letters

Buṭrus al-Bustānī’s particular reading of Beirut raises a number of important historiographical and methodological questions that this study intends to address. The central thesis of this study is that modern Beirut is the outcome of

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persistent social struggles over the production of space. First, the tenacious Beiruti struggle for a provincial capital between 1861 and 1888 provides the historical lens through which I examine the integrated political economy and public sphere of Bilad al-Sham. Rivalling representations of urban consciousness between inhabitants of Beirut, Damascus, Tripoli, Haifa, and other towns in Bilad al-Sham brought about a proliferation of overlapping imagined communities stratified into urban, provincial, and imperial geographies. Second, I will argue that the city of Beirut was at once the product, the object, and the project of imperial and urban politics of difference. Overlapping European, Ottoman, and local civilizing missions competed in the political fields of administration, infrastructure, urban planning, public health, education, public morality, journalism, and architecture.¹³

Discursive practices of social exclusion and inclusion were at the centre of the production of space in late Ottoman Beirut. On the one hand, a distinctly Ottoman version of Orientalism represented distant Arab provinces as stagnant peripheries and backward others.¹⁴ On the other hand and in contradistinction to the Orientalist forms of power which the imperial government employed in San’a, Baghdad, or rural areas such as Mount Lebanon, Ottoman bureaucratic reform pursued a policy of social integration—albeit highly elitist—in the provincial cities of Anatolia and Bilad al-Sham. The provincial, urban elites of the reform period—the holders of economic, social, and cultural capital—were attracted to the Ottoman state-building project through symbolic, ceremonial, and selectively participatory politics.

The late nineteenth-century tensions between Ottoman exclusion and inclusion, participation and Othering, ran right through Beirut’s social fabric. The fact that Europeans emerged as powerful contestants in a number of political fields only contributed to Ottoman and local determination to carry out urban transformation. In the various Ottoman, local, and European urban discourses, Beirut’s population seemed to straddle the putative divide between provincial simplicity and capital sophistication.

The post-war period from 1860 to the creation of the provincial capital of Beirut in 1888 was a foundational moment of Beirut’s history in which local

¹³ The term ‘political field’ is borrowed from Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the constructed nature of social space: ‘When I describe a given social space as a field, it means a field of power which possesses an obligatory necessity [to exist] for the actors engaged in it. At the same time, it means a field of struggles in which actors compete with each other by different means and purposes that depend on their positions within the field of power, and thereby contribute to the continuation or transformation of its structure.’ Bourdieu (1998: 49–50; my tr.).

notables, merchants, and public moralists joined forces in an attempt to formulate a modern vision for Beirut. Their claims to represent the city were systematically and insistently articulated in the struggle for the provincial capital, in municipal politics, and in newspaper journalism. The period after 1888 ushered in a second pivotal moment in Beirut’s modern history. In the 1890s a series of factors combined to transform fundamentally the city’s urban fabric and physical appearance: the Hamidian state, European colonialism, capitalist urbanization and subaltern resistance. Beirut’s encounter with Ottoman state reforms, European colonialism, and migration from Mount Lebanon—particularly after the traumatic experience of the civil war of 1860—gave rise to particular social norms and physical forms in ways that are still felt in Lebanon today. A third pivotal moment in Beirut’s late Ottoman history was the Young Turk revolution of 1908/9 which ousted Sultan Abdülhamid II and introduced party politics to the empire. In the province of Beirut this event was received enthusiastically. Electoral politics mobilized the provincial hinterlands beyond the urban centres and generated patron–client relationships between notable and constituency that was to dominate Lebanese politics throughout the twentieth century.¹⁵

During the course of the nineteenth century, urbanization and expanding literary and artistic horizons produced a distinct political field in Beirut very much analogous to other late nineteenth-century cities in provincial European and colonial circuits.¹⁶ Intellectual elites, literary societies, and journalists acted in the field of tension between a centralizing imperial state and an evolving capitalist economy.¹⁷ A critical consciousness in Arab thought had already flourished in intellectual networks between Cairo, Istanbul, and Damascus since at least the eighteenth century.¹十八 What distinguished the intellectuals in the nineteenth century from their predecessors was their effect on society and their transformative power. If urbanization and education increased rates of Arabic literacy,¹⁹ then the challenge of this study lies in relating the literary networks to municipal politics and to the production of space in fin de siècle Beirut. That is to treat Beirutis’ intellectual activities not just as reflections of

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¹⁵ On Lebanon’s political system of patronage, see Johnson (1986).
¹⁶ Schorske (1994) has been an inspiring reference in the ways he blended intellectual, political, and urban developments in Vienna. Cooper and Stoler (1997) has informed my understanding of Beirut’s comparative global position in imperial circuits and non-European political fields. Beirut’s relation with Istanbul and Damascus, and the political field it produced, was comparable to the urban relationship between 19th- cent. Vienna, Prague, and Budapest; Berlin and Hamburg; Madrid and Havana; or Rome, Florence, and Venice, but none fully explains the Ottoman case of Beirut. On these examples, see Hanák (1998), Jenkins (2003), Schmidt-Nowara (1999), Riall (1998) respectively, and more generally Ross and Telkamp (1985).
¹⁷ See Jürgen Habermas’s classic, if Euro-centric and normative, study Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit (1994).
¹⁹ Hafez (1993).