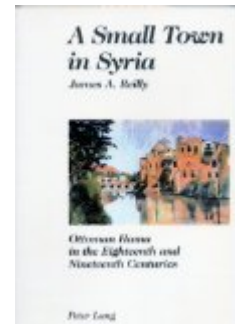


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James A. Reilly. *A Small Town in Syria: Ottoman Hama in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*. Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2002. 155 pp. \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-3-906766-90-4; \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8204-5606-5.

Reviewed by William Ochsenwald (Department of History, Virginia Tech)  
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In recent years the field of Ottoman-Arab history has flourished and the number of excellent publications dealing with it has grown rapidly. Amid this abundance, the many books and articles on Ottoman-ruled Syria have been especially notable. James A. Reilly of the University of Toronto has made a valuable and useful addition to these scholarly achievements.

The author has sought to “trace some of the ways in which the global changes of the nineteenth century affected a particular region” by examining the responses of local people, while also reconstructing and portraying “some of the patterns and complexities of local society” (p. 13). He has admirably accomplished both goals, while not aiming at constructing new paradigms or radically revising the picture of Ottoman-Syrian history so ably established by his predecessors. However, Reilly has used the social history of Hama as a microcosm to illuminate the history of urban Syria and to comment on many much debated topics in Arab and Ottoman history, thereby adding more information and evidence to support or attack various hypotheses.

In Chapter One the author introduces his chief themes, discusses his sources, and briefly places Hama within the framework of Ottoman history. In the following five substantive chapters his narrative generally follows a chronological progression, starting with the eighteenth century and then turning to changes taking place in the nineteenth century. The major topics discussed include the following: families and family values among the upper, middle, and lower classes; social networks among urban quarters, guilds, and notables; population, manufacturing, and commerce;

rural-urban relations, including land ownership, tax

collection mechanisms, debts, leases, and villagers’ use of courts; and rural-urban social networks, centering on investments, forcible pacification of villages by central authorities, and steps toward integration into the world economy.

Despite the brevity of the book, the author has raised many significant issues. He uses Albert Hourani’s analysis of the role of the *ayan*, but divides it, following Julia Clancy-Smith, into Ottoman elites and local notables. Reilly finds that the ability to inherit property more securely was a key element in explaining changes in the nineteenth century. The role of notable women in family law is explored at length, even though his sources do not permit him to say much about elite women. Monogamy was the normal marriage pattern and early mortality affected most families.

According to Reilly, urban society was a tapestry of over-lapping and interacting groups and identities. He uses the framework provided by the work of Ira Lapidus and Antoine Abdel Nour to look at urban history. Notables were linked with others in Hama and its countryside through Sufi groups, *waqfs*, the *hajj* caravans, investments, and tax collecting. The vexed issue of population is examined chiefly through estimates by foreigners rather than by using Ottoman tax registers. Women in Hama did not take part in guilds and the number of women who owned shops was smaller than expected. Reilly follows the lead of Donald Quataert in emphasizing the adaptability of local manufacturing in adjusting to nineteenth-century changes in trade patterns, while the author adds new information on the adaptations needed to meet European competition in textile production and sales.

Reilly argues that the dramatic nineteenth-century changes in land cultivation and ownership usually attributed to the Tanzimat reforms actually were related, in part, to earlier patterns of tax farming. Individual cultivators claimed rights to the land more easily when intensive agriculture was present, as opposed to the dry-farming regions, where large landowners became predominant. The author shows the variable impact of the 1858 Land Law by comparing its effects in the Hama region with those reported in other districts. In this regard, as in many other places in the book, Reilly has shown the great utility of contextualizing historical developments in Hama by referring to the experiences of Damascus, Aleppo, Jerusalem, Nablus, Mosul, and other Ottoman-Arab cities.

Hama escaped the confessional strife witnessed in nineteenth-century Damascus and parts of Lebanon. The relative tranquillity of Hama was due in part to the paucity of foreigners. Also, according to the author, Nusayri Muslims and others living in villages were forcibly brought into the ambit of Sunni Ottoman authority, thereby creating a local variation on confessional relations seen in other parts of Syria.

This carefully written study is based chiefly on Hama Ottoman court registers for three separate periods of time (1727-34, 1788-1800, 1849-52). Other sources include Arabic-language secondary studies, British and French archives, and travelers' accounts. Unfortunately, the author did not consult the central Ottoman archives, whose rich holdings might have added much data and perhaps new perspectives to the book.

In this new study, James Reilly has made a fine addition to his earlier published research on Ottoman Damascus. By examining a smaller town, he has significantly widened our knowledge of the patterns of urban life and urban-rural relations in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ottoman Syria. Many readers should find it worth their time to visit *A Small Town in Syria*.

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