



Amnon Cohen. *The Guilds of Ottoman Jerusalem.* Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2001. vi + 305 pp. \$86.00, cloth, ISBN 978-90-04-11918-5.



Reviewed by John J. Curry

Published on H-Mideast-Medieval (January, 2003)

Scholars interested in the history of Palestine in Ottoman times most likely are familiar with the work published by Amnon Cohen of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Since the publication of his *Palestine in the Eighteenth Century: Patterns of Government and Administration* in 1973, Cohen has published multiple monographs and articles dealing with various aspects of life in Palestine during the early modern period (sixteenth-eighteenth centuries). Several of these works have focused specifically on Ottoman Jerusalem and particularly its Jewish population. Since many aspects of the period in question have, until fairly recently, suffered from a lack of serious scholarly inquiry, Cohen's work is often the basis for further study.[1]

The Guilds of Ottoman Jerusalem seeks to address a problem that has troubled a number of Ottoman historians over the past several decades. Namely, it is an attempt to clarify the nature and the degree of importance of the various guilds as a facet of the Ottoman urban experience during the early modern period. Some scholars have viewed the guild system primarily as an instru-

ment of control employed by the Ottoman central government over economic life, while others have suggested that the guilds were autonomous, locally based organizations that operated primarily in defense of their own interests. Cohen situates himself squarely in the latter camp (pp. 4-5).

This work represents, in part, a continuation of Cohen's earlier work, *Economic Life in Ottoman Jerusalem*. In the previous monograph, Cohen examined the extensive references in the sixteenth-century court records of the city concerning the producers of soap, olive oil, and various foodstuffs.[2] The present work picks up where the earlier narrative left off, describing the subsequent records of these and other professions during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The two monographs might best be read in conjunction with one another.

A key component in the functioning and legal status of the guilds was their close ties with the *qadi*, or head Muslim judge, an official appointed from the capital. He was responsible for keeping records of the members of a given guild as well as settling disputes that arose among them. As a re-

sult, Cohen has made extensive use of the Jerusalem court records, dating from the late sixteenth through the early nineteenth centuries, to construct a more detailed picture of the local conditions that marked the various guilds present in the city during this period. He occasionally supplements this evidence with the records of the French consulate and reference to secondary literature; however, the bulk of his discussion rests upon the cases that came before the Jerusalem courts concerning the guilds during this period.

In many ways, the book resembles an encyclopedia of the various trades that marked the urban inhabitants of the city. Divided into forty-five sections with a brief introduction and conclusion, Cohen's study covers a dizzying array of professions broadly divided into seven categories of occupations, including those involving food and drink, municipal services, leather goods, metal works, textile production, construction, and household implements, and a final section which deals broadly with other forms of commerce.

The descriptions of these various professions range from the fascinating to the banal, perhaps determined by the amount of material on a given guild available to Cohen in his investigation of the court records. Some of the highlights include his documentation of the introduction of coffee and coffeehouses into the city of Jerusalem during the 1550s, and the subsequent conflict amongst the citizenry over the legality of their operation (pp. 50-59). Readers interested in the history of this beverage, and the social institutions that it spawned throughout the Near East and elsewhere, will find this aspect of the narrative engaging. In addition, his examination of the brokers and public criers exposes the broad nature of their responsibilities as well as their potential power in local and inter-regional trade during this period, which explains the periodic attempts to have the position filled by appeals to the Ottoman court in Istanbul (pp. 178-183).

Cohen also excels in piecing together the hidden meanings behind problematic rulings by the court. Decisions that at first glance appear to be aimed at persecuting religious minorities in fact frequently had an internal logic that was aimed at preventing the breakdown of economic order in the city. For example, a ban on selling water from the Temple Mount to Jews and Christians was an attempt to keep the guild of water-sellers—who sold water to those who were not permitted access to the site—from sucking the reservoirs dry in order to make a profit (pp. 61-62).

Another benefit to organizing the study by profession is the emergence of broad patterns that characterized the life of these early modern urban professionals. They usually derived a measure of prosperity and success from their job, which is indicated by the substantial sums that men of various different professions were able to invest in real estate, expansion of their businesses, or to be passed on through inheritance. Perhaps more importantly, a gradual trend appears in many of the eighteenth-century records that indicate a breakdown in the power and professional discipline of a number of the guilds, especially those that were becoming increasingly tied into international trading networks in the Mediterranean port cities. Still, on the whole, Cohen suggests that the guild system was fairly successful in its own time, and that its underlying logic frequently did serve the economic interests of the general public. Far from being a static arrangement that failed to comply with economic reality, Cohen argues that the judge (in conjunction with the guild heads and the city's political rulers) was able to craft flexible arrangements that allowed merchants to make roughly a 20-25 percent profit on their trade, while protecting public access to important commodities.[3] When set against a general rate of 10-15 percent interest on loans granted by the moneylenders of the region, this indicates that Jerusalem, along with many other smaller urban settlements of the region, was a po-

tentially fruitful place for economic investment (pp. 196-199).

In an extensive set of appendices at the end of the work, Cohen provides a service for his readers by including facsimiles, transcriptions, and translations of nineteen court register entries that he uses for some of his documentation in the body of the work. Demonstrations of successful primary source research in Ottoman Turkish and Arabic paleography are fairly rare in the secondary literature of the field of Ottoman studies. Therefore, Cohen should be strongly commended for giving his colleagues in the field a useful tool for educating their students on the problems and pitfalls of research in original source material. Unfortunately, there are no references made to these sources in the body of the work itself.

Notwithstanding the potential strengths of this book, I have some reservations on its overall nature. First of all, some 80 to 90 percent of the citations in the body of the work refer to the Jerusalem court records, published or otherwise. While this is laudable in a way, the author makes no attempt to integrate the information provided here with other relevant secondary literature in the field (with the notable exception of his own writings). Considering his erudition and experience in the field, this is a disappointment. This lack of comparison on Cohen's part is frustrating, given that Beshara Doumani recently focused extensively on the trades of soap and textile production in the neighboring Palestinian city of Nablus, during an overlapping period of time.[4] In addition, Dror Ze'evi's discussion of the guilds as part of the economic life of seventeenth-century Jerusalem, which includes material directly relevant to many of the professions discussed by Cohen, is largely ignored (although Cohen does cite the work in his bibliography).[5] Thus, some of the material offered in this work appears as a shallower study of material covered in greater detail elsewhere.

Perhaps more troubling is the fact that Cohen never really provides a clear explanation of his methodology. My general impression is that he has combed through a substantial sampling (if not all) of Jerusalem's *qadi*-court records and pulled out key examples that document the functioning and/or problems affecting the various professions. While not denying that court records are invaluable sources for social and economic history, there appears to be only limited acknowledgment of the fact that these sources, like any other, are subject to potential biases and problematics. Readers unfamiliar with the field of Ottoman historiography, along with the nature of these sources and debates surrounding them, might feel ill-informed with regards to analyzing or proceeding with Cohen's findings. Moreover, in many aspects, Jerusalem represented an extraordinary case, being home to some of the holiest sites in the three monotheistic faiths and attracting attention from the Ottoman court in Istanbul as a result. Might this extra attention potentially inflate the prosperity of many of the city's residents during the period under review? Such questions are still in the realm of speculation, as Cohen does not address the issue in any depth.

Despite these faults, I would recommend this book as an important contribution. While its primary value will be to specialists in the field of Ottoman history interested in an important case study of a significant smaller urban center, specialists in other fields should also consider its conclusions. In particular, those researching the history of certain professions and/or commodities may draw varying degrees of comparative evidence from the relevant chapters dealing with their area of interest. It is difficult to dismiss a significant presentation of evidence relating to the guilds, an institution that may have included one of every nine residents in Jerusalem, if not in the majority of all Ottoman urban centers.

Notes

[1]. It is surprising, in light of the subsequent and continuing conflicts of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that the preceding period has been so understudied. See, in particular, the remarks of Beshara Doumani critiquing the impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict upon the historiography of the region, in *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 6-9.

[2]. Amnon Cohen, *Economic Life in Ottoman Jerusalem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). In this work, Cohen limits his presentation to the guild of the butchers, soap producers, and millers/bakers, as compared to the greater variety appearing in the present work under review.

[3]. Cohen here sets his arguments against hypotheses advanced by David Landes in his recent work, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998).

[4]. Doumani demonstrates how these two professions were key to a capitalist transformation of the economy of the region during the eighteenth century; cf. Doumani, pp. 236-240. While Cohen documents findings that suggest a similar conclusion, he never really tackles the issue, and Doumani's book is cited only once in the context of a reference.

[5]. See Dror Ze'evi for a number of specific cases: *An Ottoman Century: The District of Jerusalem in the 1600s* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 154-161.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-mideast-medieval>

Citation: John J. Curry. Review of Cohen, Amnon. *The Guilds of Ottoman Jerusalem*. H-Mideast-Medieval, H-Net Reviews. January, 2003.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7081>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.