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France in the Levant: Trade and Immaterial Circulations in the “Long Eighteenth Century”

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Abstract

The article analyzes aspects of French trade in the Levant during the eighteenth century by tracing the link between commercial exchange, institutions, and socio-cultural interaction within the system of French *échelles* in the Eastern Mediterranean. As the paper argues, this trade not only acquired a primary relevance within Ottoman and French economies but also created institutional and social interdependencies that prefigured nineteenth-century developments. The study discusses how economic, institutional, and social aspects are highly intertwined, each of them playing a core role in explaining the relevance of the French presence in the Early Modern Eastern Mediterranean.

Keywords

Early Modern Levant – France – Ottoman Empire – Mediterranean trade – diplomacy – economic development – economic dependency

Introduction

In 1754, Claude-Joseph Vernet completed his painting *Intérieur du Port de Marseille vu du Pavillon de l'Horloge du Parc*.¹ The work offers a fascinating glimpse into French Levant trade as viewed from Marseilles, giving figurative

1 Leon Lagrange, *Les Vernets: Antoine, Joseph, Carle, Horace* (Paris, 1864), 70-87. See also Nicolas Gaudreau, “La Gloire du peintre et les errements de l'Académie: des pistes pour l'étude des marines De Claude-Joseph Vernet au Salon,” *RACAR: Revue D'art Canadienne / Canadian Art*

evidence of its relevance for eighteenth-century France.² The port is depicted as a regular triangle, flanked on the left side by the Rive Neuve and the Arsenal, and on the right by Quai du Port and Fort Saint-Jean. In the foreground are the *Plan-Formiguiér* and the docks. Encompassed within the triangle is the sea, animated by a multitude of ships, whose sails obscure the horizon. Urban architecture testifies to the city's commercial might, while the presence of numerous vessels bespeaks its international relevance, also visible in the frantic activity at the docks.

It is by looking at the quay that the spectator notices aspects of the commercial and social relations between Marseilles and the Levant.³ At the waterfront we see a diverse, bustling crowd preoccupied with the procession of goods being loaded and unloaded on the ships moored at the wharf. Among them, we find a group of Ottoman merchants distinguished by their attire, discussing a pack of what is most likely cloth.⁴ Slight sartorial differences within the group underline the geographic reach of the French presence across the Eastern Mediterranean, from Egypt to the Black Sea.⁵ They are accompanied by an elegant woman, interpreted either as a personification of the Orient or as the port-city, mediating between the disparate religious and ethnic groups of the Mediterranean.⁶

Review 27, no. 1-2 (2000): 74-86, and Alexandre Cantin, "Les Ports de Vernet sont-ils une série de vedute," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 72, no. 4 (2009): 577-586.

- 2 Claude-Joseph Vernet's commission was to create "un tableau concernant le port avec la quantité considérable de bâtiments de commerce de toutes espèces et de toutes nations que s'y trouvent continuellement." Cf. Gilles Grandjean, "Les Marchands Levantins, un décor inspire par Claude-Joseph Vernet," in *La Marine à voile de 1650 à 1890: autour de Claude-Joséph Vernet*, ed. Claude Pétry (Rouen, 1999), 69-72.
- 3 "Levant," as applied throughout the paper, corresponds to the French understanding of the term, which encompassed the Ottoman territories spanning from the Black Sea to Egypt, but excluded the North African provinces, see Amury Faivre d'Arcier, "Le service consulaire au Levant à la fin du XVIII^e siècle et son évolution sous la Révolution," in *La fonction consulaire à l'époque moderne. L'affirmation d'une institution économique et politique (1500-1700)*, ed. Jörg Ulbert and Gérard Le Bouëdec (Rennes, 2006), 161-190.
- 4 By giving the Levantine tradesmen such a prominent place in his painting, Vernet tried to emphasize the role of this trans-imperial trade in Marseilles's prosperity (Grandjean, "Les Marchands," 69-72). The structure of French trade in the Levant incentivized French merchants' presence in the region instead, see Junko Thérèse Takeda, *Between Crown and Commerce: Marseille and the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore, 2011), 78-88. However, Marseilles itself hosted significant Ottoman communities, mirroring a more complex and multifaceted reality, Emile Temine, "Marseille, ville de migrants," *Vingtième Siècle: Revue d'Histoire* 7 (1985): 37-50; and Mathieu Grenet, *La fabrique communautaire. Les Grecs à Venise, Livourne et Marseille, 1770-1840* (Rome, 2016), 156-160.
- 5 Grandjean, "Les Marchands," 90-95.
- 6 *Ibid.*

The waterfront is teeming not only with merchants but also with other professional groups, including artisans. The presence of craftsmen underlines local industry's link with the Levantine trade. Another figure checks the quality of grain, highlighting the role of Eastern Mediterranean grain imports to complement the limited local supply. The presence of an inspector, dressed in black, checking the marks on cloth bundles and the sturdiness of the packaging, refers to the quality system managed by the Chamber of Commerce, an administrative body in charge of handling all aspects of the Levant trade.⁷ Closer to the waterfront, a man sporting a brown jacket, typical for consular personnel, is engaged in conversation.⁸ A fisherman is Vernet's reminder that Marseilles was also an important fishing port, and a reminder of the relevance of pedestrian workers for ensuring the city's economic flourishing. This frantic activity along with the intensive traffic of merchant vessels conveys the commercial power of Marseilles and its intimate link to the Eastern Mediterranean.⁹ It also suggests, through the presence of Ottoman merchants, the connections, complementarities—and competition—between French and Ottoman trading networks.¹⁰

Vernet's painting, though deliberately neglecting the complex and often conflictual relations between institutions—first of all the Chamber of Commerce—artisans, such as the weavers of the *Manufacture de Languedoc*, and the merchants themselves,¹¹ as well among trading networks belonging to different “nations,” nevertheless highlights aspects of Marseilles's Levant trade addressed in the present paper. Its depiction of varieties of wares, of different institutions and social groups, as well as of diverse nationalities engaged in Eastern Mediterranean commerce stresses, in fact, the intertwining of institutional, economic, and social aspects that are at the core of the present paper.¹²

7 Gilbert Buti, “Des goûts et des couleurs. Draps du Languedoc pour clientèle levantine au XVIII^e siècle,” *Rives Méditerranéennes* 29 (2008): 125-140, esp. 126-127.

8 See Anne Mézin, *Les consuls de France au siècle des Lumières, 1715-1792* (Paris, 1997), Figure 1, *Portrait d'un consul de France en Uniforme*.

9 Cf. Daniel Panzac, *La caravane maritime: Marins européens et marchands ottomans en Méditerranée 1680-1830* (Paris, 2004), 230; and Takeda, *Between Crown and Commerce*, 1-19.

10 Cf. Grenet, *La fabrique communautaire*, passim.

11 Buti, “Des goûts et des couleurs,” 125-140.

12 Focusing on French trade in the Levant, the paper does not directly tackle the relations, often complementary, between French, Ottoman and other nations' commercial networks. See Virginia H. Aksan, *Ottomans and Europeans: Contacts and Conflicts* (Istanbul, 2004); David Do Paço, *L'Orient à Vienne au dix-huitième siècle*, (Oxford, 2015); and Elena Frangakis-Syrett, “The Economic Activities of Ottoman and Western Communities in Eighteenth Century Izmir,” *Oriente Moderno*, new series, 18, no. 1 (1999): 11-26.

In the study, I focus on the conjunction of these aspects. I demonstrate how local manufactures, merchant families, institutions, and the French communities in the Levant were tightly linked into single processes, that, though sometimes contradictory, ensured the success of Eastern Mediterranean trade in the eighteenth century.¹³ I argue the relevance of juxtaposing material and immaterial flows, institutional and social features, and public and private aspects to grasp the complexity of economic relations typical of the eighteenth-century Levant, and of proposing a unified reading of traded items, institutional action, and private endeavor, often on the verge of legality, to explain French economic success in the early modern Eastern Mediterranean.

These aspects are all the more relevant in that the region assumed particular complexity in that period. The sixteenth century brought a shift in the geopolitical landscape of the Eastern Mediterranean. With the conquest of Egypt and Syria in 1516-1517, the Ottomans established uncontested hegemony in the region. Extending from the eastern Adriatic coast to the Persian Gulf, the empire controlled the main routes of trade between the economies of the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, effectively becoming the hinge of Western Eurasia. Although earlier scholarship assumed that the role of the region in global commerce diminished following the opening of the Cape route to India, recent research has shown that the Ottoman Middle East retained its commercial importance throughout the early modern period.¹⁴ The economic landscape of the region changed also because of new commercial and political actors entering the stage, a process that Fernand Braudel dubbed a “Northern Invasion” of the Mediterranean,¹⁵ which was followed by flows of merchants and diplomats trying to secure “each nation’s” positions in what seemed one of the most relevant economic and political chessboards of the time. As a result, commercial ties between East and West soared, the Ottoman Empire ultimately being integrated into the emerging Western-dominated world economy. The Western European presence consisted mainly—but not only—of

13 Nelly Hanna, “Les réseaux dans le monde Ottoman aux XVI^e et XVII^e siècles: le migrant et l'étranger,” in *Gens de passage en Méditerranée de l'Antiquité à l'époque moderne: procédures de contrôle et d'identification*, ed. Claudia Moatti and Wolfgang Kaiser (Paris, 2007), 117-134.

14 Giancarlo Casale, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration* (Oxford, 2010), 3-12; and Ania Loomba, “Mediterranean Borderland and the Global Early Modern,” in *Representing Imperial Rivalry in the Early Modern Mediterranean*, ed. Barbara Fuchs and Emily Weissbourd (Toronto, 2015), 14-32.

15 Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds, vol. 2 (New York, 1972), 615-642.

resident merchants spread through the region, carrying with them new personal and social contacts, and cultural interchanges. The discussion around the phenomenon continues to unfold, with its scale, character, and impact remaining hotly debated topics.¹⁶ However, as numerous scholars point out, among the main “invaders,”—England, the United Provinces, the Habsburg Empire, Russia, and France—the commercial pursuits of this last set it apart from the others.¹⁷ France’s position as both an Atlantic colonial empire and a country adjacent to the Mediterranean enabled it to establish a more robust presence in the region, engaging in both long-distance shipping and cabotage trade, the so called *caravane maritime*.¹⁸ Marseilles, as one of the largest French and Mediterranean ports, enabled relatively easy flows of goods and people, trade being coupled with migration trends that cannot be totally explained through the merchants’ prism. The city also became a hub for re-exporting colonial items in high demand, thus progressively including the Ottoman Empire in the world economy through French mediation. This commerce involved a wide array of commodities, ranging from cloth to coffee and sugar imported from the Caribbean. For many branches of growing French industry, the Eastern Mediterranean also constituted a potential source of raw materials, with imports of wool and raw cotton soaring in the course of the century.¹⁹ Institutions—the State and the Chamber of Commerce of Marseilles—played a central role in this process. They addressed such core questions as quality and price controls; they tried to manage French communities abroad into a single body, acting coherently and consistently in the international market; and they addressed problems arising with Ottoman merchants and administrators. Starting from these premises, the paper argues that a joint analysis of

16 See for instance, Molly Greene, “Beyond the Northern Invasion: The Mediterranean in the Seventeenth Century,” *Past and Present*, 174 (2002): 42–71; Maria Fusaro, “After Braudel: a Reassessment of Mediterranean History between the Northern Invasion and the *Caravane Maritime*,” in *Trade and Cultural Exchange in the Early Modern Mediterranean: Braudel’s Maritime Legacy*, ed. Maria Fusaro, Colin Heywood, and Mohamed-Salah Omri (London, 2010), 1–23; and Albrecht Fuess, “Braudel and the Sea: Revisiting Braudel’s *Méditerranée* for the Study of the Greater Mediterranean Region in the Early Modern Period,” in *La frontière Méditerranéenne du XV^e au XVII^e siècle: échanges, circulations et affrontements*, eds. Albert Fuess and Bernard Heyberger (Turnhout, 2013), 47–66.

17 Panzac, *La Caravane maritime*, 115.

18 Daniel Panzac, “Les échanges maritimes dans l’Empire ottoman au XVIII^e siècle,” *Revue de l’Occident musulman et de la Méditerranée* 39 (1985): 177–188.

19 Daniel Goffman, *Izmir and the Levantine World (1550–1650)* (Seattle, 1990); and Faruk Tabak, *The Waning of the Mediterranean, 1550–1870* (Baltimore, 2008), 1–32.

economic, institutional, and social aspects offers interesting insights into the French presence in the eighteenth-century Eastern Mediterranean.

Relying primarily on diplomatic and economic documents from the *Affaires Étrangères* (AE) and *Economie* (F12) collection in the French National Archives in Paris (AN), I first present the most important products of the Levant trade, focusing in particular on the changing objects of trade throughout the eighteenth century, and then depict the material challenges of Marseilles's trade with the Ottoman Empire. I next investigate the relevance of administrative and diplomatic activity in sustaining this commerce, discussing its assumptions, contradictions, and results. Finally, I tackle the question of the contacts between French and local Ottomans, evaluating their role in overcoming otherwise rigid barriers drawn by political and economic institutions, raising the question of the influence of these "illicit" relations on trade, as well as on the emergence of the peculiar society that later formed the Levantine world.²⁰

Textiles, Wheat, and Colonial Commodities

The circuit of French commerce in the Levant included a plethora of commodities. The cargoes sent to the Eastern Mediterranean ranged from raw textiles through coffee, sugar, and dyestuffs, to a wide range of manufactured goods, such as clocks, books, wine, or the so-called *pacotilles*, which filled Marseilles warehouses and eastbound merchant vessels.²¹ Both the variety of products and the scale of commercial exchange underpinned Marseilles's role as one of the most relevant hubs of Levantine trade, a reality that Vernet sought to capture in his painting. Looking deeper into the inner structures of trade, we can discern clear patterns characterizing the commercial ties between France and the Levant (Tables 1 and 2). While the data, aggregated for three representative periods in the eighteenth century, refers to France's exchange with the Levant as a whole, it also reflects the dynamics of trade in Marseilles, since the city held monopoly rights on the trade.

What is immediately evident is the central role of textiles in the exchange. These commodities, either as raw materials or finished products, constituted

20 Olivier Jens Schmitt, *Les Levantins: Cadres de vie et identités d'un groupe ethno-confessionnel de l'Empire Ottoman au "long" 19^e siècle* (Istanbul, 2007), 13-54.

21 For a description of featured items, see Paul Masson, *Histoire du commerce français dans le Levant au XVII^e siècle* (Paris, 1896), Appendix 9. See also Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, *Les négoces maritimes français (XVII^e-XX^e siècles)* (Paris, 1997).

the most significant category both among imports and exports. However, there were significant changes during the century. Textiles, most of them produced by the *Manufacture du Languedoc*, increased from 46 percent of total exports in 1700-1702 to 68 percent in 1785-1789, while their share of imports decreased. On the other hand, raw materials more and more dominated imports (up to 75 percent). This shift highlights the emergence of center-periphery relations between the two poles of the Mediterranean, with the Levant turning into a peripheral economy.²² Moreover, colonial commodities—sugar, coffee, and dyestuffs—grew in importance, accounting for over a half of French exports. At the same time, the balance of French trade remained negative, with the deficit soaring from three to over five million *livres tournois* between 1750 and 1789, reflecting a constant outflow of bullion to the East.²³

A more detailed analysis of traded commodities provides us with a clearer understanding of the inner dynamics underpinning these trends and their role in the economic exchange, as well as of the influence on trade of French Mercantilism and colonial policies.²⁴

By the eighteenth century, silk had long constituted a mainstay among imports from Levantine ports.²⁵ However, in the subsequent period, its volume and importance declined sharply, from 15.54 percent of the value of imports' value in 1700-1702 to a mere 3.21 percent in 1789, at odds with overall trends. This fall can be attributed to several factors that reshaped the structure of imports from the Levant. First, Ottoman domestic demand increased in the eighteenth

22 Şevket Pamuk and Jeffrey G. Williamson, "Ottoman De-Industrialization, 1800-1913: Assessing the Magnitude, Impact, and Response," *Economic History Review* 64, suppl. 1 (2011): 159-184. On the long-term evolution of the Ottoman economy, see Şevket Pamuk, *The Ottoman Empire and European Capitalism, 1820-1913: Trade, Investment and Production* (Cambridge, 1987); and Bruce Masters, *The Origins of Western Economic Dominance in the Middle East: Mercantilism and the Islamic Economy in Aleppo, 1600-1750* (New York, 1988).

23 Charles Carrière, "Réflexions sur le problème des monnaies et des métaux précieux en Méditerranée Orientale au XVIII^e siècle," *Cahiers de la Méditerranée* 1 (1976): 1-20; Dennis O. Flynn and Arturo Giráldez, "Cycles of Silver: Global Economic Unity through the Mid-Eighteenth Century," *Journal of World History* 13, no. 2 (2002): 391-427; and Şevket Pamuk, "Prices in the Ottoman Empire, 1469-1914," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 36, no. 3 (2004): 451-468.

24 Lars Magnusson, *The Political Economy of Mercantilism* (London, 2015), 70-78.

25 David Jacoby, "Dalla materia prima ai drappi tra Bisanzio, il Levante e Venezia: la prima fase dell'industria serica veneziana," in *Commercial Exchange across the Mediterranean, the Crusader Levant, Egypt and Italy*, ed. David Jacoby (Aldershot, 2005), 263-304; and Junko Thérèse Takeda, "Silk, Calico and Immigration in Marseille," in *Mercantilismus: Wiederaufnahme einer Debatte*, ed. Moritz Isenmann (Stuttgart, 2014), 241-263.

century, reducing the surplus available for export.²⁶ Competition with other silk-producing centers also had its role, since the Marseilles Chamber of Commerce considered Italian silk to be of superior quality.²⁷ Moreover, the collapse of the Safavids and the resulting turmoil in Iran disrupted the commercial network of Armenian merchants from New Julfa that had previously brought Iranian silk to the Mediterranean.²⁸ Although the import of Ottoman silks, such as *soieries de Damas*, *les pannes de Tripoli*, or *camelots d'Asie Mineure*, increased in the second half of the century, this growth was insufficient to offset the overall downturn.²⁹ The negative trend in silk imports can also be linked to transformations in domestic French demand. By the end of the century, silk was suffering from the growing popularity of cotton, due to fashion and the latter's distinctive characteristics, as well as to Enlightenment and Physiocratic ideology, which saw cotton as more "natural" and less luxurious, and therefore more virtuous than silk.³⁰ By contrast, silks were part of French exports from Marseilles to the East, demonstrating that this trend concerned above all Western Europe.³¹

A more pedestrian commodity, wool was bought in large quantities to Syrian ports and Cyprus, amounting to one-sixth of the total value of imports. Raw wool supplied the *Manufacture du Languedoc*, whose origins were linked to

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- 26 Suraiya Faroqhi, "Declines and Revivals in Textile Production," in *The Cambridge History of Turkey*, vol. 3, ed. Suraiya Faroqhi (Cambridge, 2006), 356-375; Bruce McGowan, "The Age of the Ayans, 1699-1812," in *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Halil Inalcik and Donald Quataert (Cambridge, 1994), 710-723.
- 27 Michel Morineau, "Naissance d'une domination: marchands européens, marchands et marchés du Levant aux XVIII^e et XIX^e siècles," *Cahiers de la Méditerranée* 1 (1976): 145-184.
- 28 Rudolph P. Matthee, *The Politics of Trade in Safavid Iran: Silk for Silver, 1600-1730* (New York, 1999), 203-231; Sebouh D. Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: the Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa* (Berkeley, 2010), 202-214; Junko Thérèse Takeda, "The Princesses Representative or Renegade Entrepreneur? Marie Petit, the Silk Trade and Franco-Persian Diplomacy," in *Colonization, Piracy, and Trade in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Estelle Paranque, Nate Probasco, and Claire Jowitt (London, 2017), 141-166.
- 29 Masson, *Histoire du commerce*, 274.
- 30 David Celetti, "Filer le luxe: Travail domestique, manufactures et usines dans la France révolutionnaire," in *Les Progrès de l'Industrie Perfectionnée. Luxe, arts décoratifs et innovation de la Révolution française au Premier Empire*, eds. Natacha Coquery, Jörg Ebeling, Anne Perrin Khelissa, and Philippe Sénéchal (Paris, 2016), 80-86; and Sarah Maza, "Luxury, Morality, and Social Change: Why There Was No Middle-Class Consciousness in Prerevolutionary France," *Journal of Modern History* 69, no. 2 (1997): 199-229, esp. 215-216.
- 31 Amanda Phillips, "A Material Culture: Ottoman Velvets and Their Owners, 1600-1750," *Muqarnas* 31 (2014): 151-172; and Liliane Hilaire-Pérez, "Cultures techniques et pratique de l'échange entre Lyon et le Levant: inventions et réseaux au XVIII^e siècle," *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* 49, no. 1 (2002): 89-114.

Dutch weavers who arrived in southern France in the late seventeenth century under Colbert, and the weaving industry in Arles, with both centers producing large amounts of fabrics for the Ottoman market.³² These light, locally produced woolen *draps* constituted the bulk of French exports to the Levant, vastly outnumbering other categories of fabrics.³³ Particularly in the first half of the eighteenth century, Languedoc textiles were widely sold in the Levant, offering fierce competition to established sellers like the Venetians.³⁴ In 1719, Venetian *bailo* Carlo Ruzzini shared his opinion on the matter with the Senate. According to him, the popularity of Languedoc cloth came as a result of several technological, commercial, and diplomatic advantages. First, access to the Levantine market allowed merchants from Marseilles to acquire large quantities of high-quality wool at competitive prices. Raw wool, spun and woven in the *Manufacture du Languedoc*, resulted in a product of good quality, characterized by fine texture and available in a wide range of colors.³⁵ Since the *draps* were lighter than most of the competition, including those of Venice, they were also more affordable and more popular in the Ottoman market, “compensating their inferior durability with quantity and availability.”³⁶ As a result, French cloth became a staple of the textile landscape, used for garments and accessories, such as “veils falling on the shoulders, used by women in a variety of colors, which add grace to their silhouettes.” All this, stressed Ruzzini, stemmed not only from efficient manufacturing and trade practices but also from a coherent diplomatic infrastructure that assisted merchants and garnered the benevolence of the Ottoman administrators, creating favorable conditions for trade.

The picture drawn by Ruzzini changed during the second half of the eighteenth century, when the *Manufacture du Languedoc* suffered difficulties and went into decline. The rising demand for new cloths, in terms of weight and color, led to product diversification, which, in turn, made it more difficult to

32 AN, F 12 557, f. 126, *Mémoire sur la naissance et les Progrès du commerce des Draps destines pour le Levant*, 1764.

33 *Draps du Languedoc* constituted an umbrella category, which included a variety of subcategories, such as *pinchinats de Provence*, *vigans des Cévennes*, or *cadis de Nîmes*, among many others.

34 AN, F 12 557, f. 126. See also Jean-Michel Minovez, “Les manufactures royales de draps fins du Midi toulousain et leurs entrepreneurs au XVIII^e siècle,” *Annales du Midi* 112, no. 229 (2000): 21-40.

35 Ibid.

36 Archivio di Stato di Venezia [hereafter: ASV], Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia, b. 555, f. 725. Venetian wool and silk textiles, with a strong market position at the beginning of the eighteenth century, occupied the high end in terms of luxury and quality, which French manufactures strove to imitate, see AN, F 12, 645, *Mémoire pour Mrs de la Manufacture de Marseille des prix et qualités des étoffes qui se fabriquent à Venise pour le Levant*.

control quality. Supervision, otherwise carried out by a complex, yet viable, system of *inspecteurs des manufactures*, lost its efficiency.³⁷ Paradoxically, the rising demand also contributed to the *Manufacture's* difficulties, incentivizing production levels beyond the purchasing capabilities of the Levantine market, and thus provoking structural “overproduction” by the end of the century.³⁸ This, in turn, gave rise to tensions between the Marseilles Chamber of Commerce and the producers, who asked for a removal of trade restrictions imposed by Marseilles and for their own monopoly to open new markets for the *Manufacture* and so overcome the crisis.³⁹

If wool constituted the essential commodity in terms of volume, cotton emerged as the most dynamic one, as its share in the total Ottoman exports to Marseilles soared from 15 percent in 1700 to almost 41 percent by 1789.⁴⁰ Imported cotton arrived in Marseilles in the form of fibers or threads, the latter divided into two groups. *Fils blancs du Levant* were cheaper and more common, while *fils rouges* constituted a more valuable category due to the superior spinning and dyeing processes employed in their production. The threads served different purposes, *fils blancs* being used primarily to manufacture wicks, while *fils rouges* were used to weave handkerchiefs, shawls, and *siamoises* in the *manufactures* of Rouen and Limoge.⁴¹ In the first half of the seventeenth century, cotton originated almost exclusively from Cyprus and Syria through the ports of Smyrna and Alexandretta. Once in Marseilles, it was used by local manufacturers, sent to other French cities, or re-exported within the Western Mediterranean. Minor quantities reached England, Germany, and North Africa.⁴²

37 AN, F 12, 506, f. 53, *Mémoire sur l'Etat Actuel du Commerce*. On quality control, see Philippe Minard, “Facing Uncertainty: Markets, Norms and Conventions in the Eighteenth Century,” in *Regulating the British Economy, 1660-1850*, ed. Perry Gauci (Farnham, 2011), 186.

38 AN, AE, B III, f. 27. 28 mars 1784. See also François Xavier Emmanuelli, *La crise marseillaise de 1774 et la chute des courtiers. Contribution à l'histoire du commerce du Levant et de la banque* (Marseille, 1979).

39 AN, AE, B III 19, n. 2.

40 McGowan, “The Age of the Ayans,” 639-758.

41 AN, F 12, 507, f. 5. “La manufacture de Limoge produit depuis le début du [18^e] siècle de belles toiles de coton comme celles qui se font Rouen. La matière première est du lin tiré de Bretagne et le coton des Isles Françaises et du Levant,” AN, F 12, 551, f. 120.

42 Serge Chassagne, “La liberté d'entreprendre dans l'indiennage en France, 1750-1860,” in *Naissance des libertés économiques sur le bi-centenaire de la Loi Chapellier*, ed. Alain Plessis (Paris, 1993), 189-191; idem, “Les débuts de l'industrie cotonnière en Bas Languedoc,” in *De la fibre à la fripe. Le textile dans la France Méridionale et l'Europe Méditerranéenne*

While cotton imports from the Levant increased, their composition had changed considerably by mid-century. Raw cotton, initially constituting less than 3 percent of imports, reached 31 percent in 1789, whereas cotton threads decreased from 13 to 9 percent. The trade concentrated in some *échelles* at the expense of other centers. While in the early 1700s cotton came primarily from Aleppo and Cyprus, by mid-century the hubs of the cotton trade had shifted towards Smyrna, Acre, and Sidon.⁴³ The latter two declined as a consequence of political instability in the region, leaving Smyrna and Salonica as the main commercial nodes.⁴⁴ The increasing importance of raw cotton imports reflects a growing French cotton industry, which—particularly after the Seven Years' War—relied on Levantine imports to maintain production. It also shows a fundamental transformation within the Levantine commercial network, as the most important and dynamic sectors of the Franco-Ottoman trade acquired the typical structure characterizing “asymmetric commercial relation,” with an exchange of raw materials for manufactured goods.⁴⁵

Apart from textiles, Marseilles imported from the Levant a wide range of products, including carpets, leather, spices, perfumes, and incense, Syrian benzoin (balsamic resin used both in perfumes and medicine), walnut, gallnut, ashes, and beeswax. Wood was imported from Albania.⁴⁶ Olive oil, another essential import, was acquired in large quantities in Candia, especially when southern French production suffered a sharp decline in the early eighteenth century.⁴⁷

(*XVII^e-XX^e siècles*), eds. Geneviève Gavignaud-Fontaine, Henri Michel, and Elie Pélaquier (Montpellier, 1998), 129-141.

- 43 Stefan Weber, “La fabrique d’une ville portuaire ottoman: Les acteurs du développement urbain de Sidon entre le XVI^e et le XVIII^e siècle,” in *La loge et le fondouk. Les dimensions spatiales des pratiques marchandes en Méditerranée*, ed. Wolfgang Kaiser (Paris, 2014), 21-70.
- 44 Thomas Philipp, “The Trade of Acre in the 18th Century: French Merchants and Local Rulers in the World Economy,” in *Trading Cultures: The Worlds of Western Merchants*, eds. Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron (Turnhout, 2001), 87-112.
- 45 Jean-Pierre Farganel, “Les négociants français et le commerce international du coton: un enjeu économique et politique vu à travers l'exemple des Echelles d'Acre et de Seyde, 1650-1789,” in *De la fibre à la fripe*, 385-411.
- 46 AN, B 111 179, f. 15.
- 47 AN, AE, B 1 341, *Lettre de M. de Lane Consul à Cannes au Ministre de la Marine, 15 février 1716*. Molly Greene, *A Shared World: Christian and Muslims in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Princeton, 2000), 110-173.

TABLE 1 French imports from the Ottoman Empire (1700-1789) in *livres tournois*

Product	1700-02		1750-54
	value	% of total imports	value
Silk	1,549,000.00	15.54	2,095,000.00
Cotton	225,000.00	2.26	3,760,000.00
Cotton thread	1,303,000.00	13.07	1,924,000.00
Total cotton	1,528,000.00	15.33	5,684,000.00
Sheep wool	737,000.00	7.39	911,000.00
Camel hair	173,000.00	1.74	879,000.00
Mohair	639,000.00	6.41	1,835,000.00
Total wool products	1,549,000.00	15.54	3,625,000.00
total textiles	4,626,000.00	46.40	11,404,000.00
Hides	537,000.00	5.39	318,000.00
Dyestuffs	208,000.00	2.09	746,000.00
Olive oil	743,000.00	7.45	1,451,000.00
Beeswax	250,000.00	2.51	387,000.00
Wheat and barley	725,000.00	7.27	3,489,000.00
Total raw materials	5,786,000.00	58.03	15,871,000.00
Cloths	385,100.00	3.86	1,715,820.00
Other	1,628,900.00	16.34	2,289,180.00
Total	9,970,000.00	100.00	21,800,000.00

EDHEM ELDEM, "CAPITULATIONS AND WESTERN TRADE," IN *THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF TURKEY*, VOL. 3, ED. SURAIYA FAROQHI (CAMBRIDGE, 2006), 334, WITH REVISIONS BY THE AUTHOR.

Dyestuffs and colonial products rose to particular significance, reshaping the structure of French trade in the Levant. In this respect, dyestuffs were at once an import and an export item. Marseilles merchants bought from the Ottoman Empire alum, indispensable for fixing colors; Egyptian saffron, used for seasoning and as a coloring agent; Morean "wood of fustet," required for medicine as well as coloring wool and leather; gallnuts from Smyrna, Aleppo, and Tripoli; and Central Asian vermilion and madder. The share of dyestuff passed from 2.09 percent of the total value of imports in 1700-1702 to 6.10 percent at the end of the century. This mirrored the expansion of the French cotton industry and paralleled the increasing purchases of raw cotton, as well as reflecting the broader range of colors demanded by the European textile industry. Dyestuffs

1785-89				
% of total imports	variation	value	% of total imports	Variation
9.61	35.25	1,638,000.00	5.21	-21.81
17.25	1,571.11	9,853,000.00	31.34	162.05
8.83	47.66	2,939,000.00	9.35	52.75
26.07	271.99	12,792,000.00	40.69	125.05
4.18	23.61	2,257,000.00	7.18	147.75
4.03	408.09	1,021,000.00	3.25	16.15
8.42	187.17	1,437,000.00	4.57	-21.69
16.63	134.02	4,715,000.00	15.00	30.07
52.31	146.52	19,145,000.00	60.89	67.88
1.46	-40.78	966,000.00	3.07	203.77
3.42	258.65	1,919,000.00	6.10	157.24
6.66	95.29	3,261,000.00	10.37	124.74
1.78	54.80	753,000.00	2.40	94.57
16.00	381.24	409,000.00	1.30	-88.28
72.80		23,514,000.00	74.79	
7.87	345.55	2,529,752.00	8.05	47.44
10.50	40.54	2,457,248.00	7.82	7.34
100.00	118.66	31,440,000.00	100.00	44.22

also became a significant component of French exports to the Levant (Table 2), as Marseilles re-exported cochineal,⁴⁸ widely popular in the Levant due to

48 The Eastern Mediterranean was the major market for French cochineal exports, with Levantine ports accounting for 85 percent of Marseilles' cochineal exports, see Gilbert Buti, "Perception, construction et utilisation de l'espace. D'Oaxaca à Bassorah: les négociants marseillais et la cochenille mexicaine au XVIII^e siècle," in *Construire des mondes: Élités et espaces en Méditerranée, XVI^e-XX^e siècle*, ed. Paul Aubert, Gérard Chastagnaret, and Olivier Raveux (Aix-en-Provence, 2005), 251-268; Sébastien Lupo, "Une frontière méditerranéenne: Les maisons Roux confrontées à l'ingratitude de la cochenille (1733-1787)," in *La mer en partage. Sociétés littorales et économies maritimes (XVI^e-XX^e s.)*, eds. Xavier Daumalin, Daniel Faget, and Olivier Raveux (Aix-en-Provence, 2016), 329-342;

TABLE 2 French exports to the Levant (1750-1789) in *livres tournois*

Product	1750-54		1785-89		
	Value	% of tot.	value	% of tot.	var.
Cloth	8,243,000.00	56.46	5,767,000.00	32.99	-30.04
Other textiles	290,000.00	1.99	945,000.00	5.41	225.86
Sugar	980,000.00	6.71	1,620,000.00	9.27	65.31
Coffee	840,000.00	5.75	3,525,000.00	20.17	319.64
Dyestuff	2,330,000.00	15.96	3,608,000.00	20.64	54.85
Total colonial products	4,150,000.00	28.42	8,753,000.00	50.07	
Other	1,917,000.00	13.13	2,015,000.00	11.53	5.11
Total exports	18,750,000.00	128.42	26,233,000.00	150.07	39.91

EDHEM ELDEM, "CAPITULATIONS AND WESTERN TRADE," 334, WITH REVISIONS BY THE AUTHOR.

its bright and deep hues similar to those of purple-red,⁴⁹ and indigo, both originating from Central America.⁵⁰ Indigo, in particular, was exported from Marseilles already at the beginning of the century, and then widely resold by French merchants operating in the *échelles*. A glimpse into the dyestuff trade is offered by the case of Alexandre Roux, merchant of Marseilles. Roux was involved in a fraud case, having sold barrels of indigo "unfit for use" to the merchants Lambert and Sube, operating in Sidon, as related by a letter sent to Minister Maurepas by the deputies of trade of Marseilles on May 6, 1735. Maurepas ordered the arrest of the fraudulent merchant, and the confiscation of all the barrels he had sent to the Levant and that had not been sold. The decision was motivated by the fear that such practices might have "dangerous

and Raymond L. Lee, "American Cochineal in European Commerce, 1562-1625," *Journal of Modern History* 23, no. 3 (1951): 205-224.

49 Cochineal was also subject to restrictions, as in 1732 when exports had been temporarily suspended to preserve the precious dyestuff for local *manufactures* (AN, AE B III 1/b, f. 125).

50 Giulia Tarantola, "Cochenille et indigo en Mésio-Amérique (1770-1870)," *Études Rurales* 151-152 (1999): 43-49; and Philippe Chassaingne, "L'économie des îles sucrières dans les conflits maritimes de la seconde moitié du XVIII^e siècle," *Histoire, économie et société* 7, no. 1 (1988): 93-105.

consequences” for an extremely important trade, jeopardizing the reputation of French dyestuffs among local drapers.⁵¹

Generally speaking, colonial products, including sugar and coffee, accounted as a whole for 28.42 percent of the Levant trade in 1750-1754, but reached 50 percent by 1785-1789. This indicates the degree to which French commerce contributed to the integration of the Levant into the global mercantile network. At the same time, these exports significantly limited the French trade deficit. Moreover, some products, such as Caribbean coffee, reshaped the domestic economic dynamics of the Ottoman Empire.⁵²

By the early eighteenth century, the coffee consumed in the Ottoman Empire was imported from Yemen via Egypt, with the volume amounting to an average of 100,000 quintals annually—almost half of the whole Yemenite production in the first decade of the century.⁵³ Around 50 percent of these imports were re-exported across the empire, 20,000 quintals sold to Europe, the rest consumed in the North African provinces.⁵⁴ This business underwent a profound crisis in the 1750s and, by the end of the century, Ottoman traders were reduced to marginal roles. This decline was the consequence of the arrival in the Levant of beans from the French Caribbean colonies. Although of inferior quality, they were cheaper than Yemeni imports and quickly rose in popularity.⁵⁵ Consequently, within a few decades, the whole sector was dominated by French merchants, highlighting the degree to which the French commercial system and “economies of scale” provided a competitive advantage to the merchants of Marseilles.⁵⁶

Finally, since the countryside of southern France was unable to meet more than a third of the annual demand for wheat of such cities as Marseilles or

51 AN, AE, B III 2, f. 54.

52 Ina Baghdiantz-McCabe, *A History of Global Consumption: 1500-1800* (London, 2014), 121-155. See also Jan de Vries, “The Limits of Globalization in the Early Modern World,” *Economic History Review* 63, no. 3 (2010): 710-733.

53 Merid W. Aregay, “The Early History of Ethiopia’s Coffee Trade and the Rise of Shawa,” *Journal of African History* 29, no. 1 (1988): 19-25.

54 On Ottoman coffee, see Ralph S. Hattox, *Coffee and Coffeehouses: The Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval Near East*, 2nd ed. (Seattle, 2007); and Eminegül Karababa and Gülriz Ger, “Early Modern Ottoman Coffeehouse Culture and the Formation of the Consumer Subject,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 37, no. 5 (2011): 737-760.

55 AN, AE B III 20, f. 62; Id., B III 31, f. 6.

56 André Raymond, “Les problèmes du café en Egypte au XVIII^e siècle,” in *Le café en Méditerranée: Histoire, anthropologie, économie, XVII^e-XX^e siècle*, ed. Jean-Louis Miège et al. (Aix-en-Provence, 1981), 31-71; Nancy Um, *The Merchant Houses of Mocha: Trade and Architecture in an Indian Ocean Port* (Seattle, 2009), 270; McGowan, “The Age of the Ayans,” 695-709; and Elena Frangakis-Syrett, “Market Networks and Ottoman-European Commerce, c. 1700-1825,” *Oriente Moderno*, new series, 25, no. 1 (2006): 109-128.

Toulon, the hubs remained highly dependent on wheat imported by sea, with Italy and the Eastern Mediterranean as primary suppliers. Egypt, Thessaly, and Thrace had always been significant producers and exporters of cereals, despite the fact that their precarious environmental and agricultural equilibrium affected commercial trends.⁵⁷ Moreover, French merchants had to compete with the demand of the Ottoman capital itself, buttressed by regulations on the wheat trade imposed and enforced by the Ottoman authorities.⁵⁸ In this context, the diplomatic ability of local French consuls and the ties they established with the Ottoman authorities became essential elements for ensuring grain imports to Marseilles, and, more generally, managing successful business relations.⁵⁹

Trade and Diplomacy

The relative success story of the French presence in the Eastern Mediterranean cannot be fully explained without taking into consideration diplomatic and social aspects. If the overall impact of diplomacy, and particularly of the consular system, on France's eighteenth-century economic performance in the Levant remains an open question, nevertheless sources suggest that this institution was an essential factor for ensuring favorable conditions for trade. Consuls interceded with the Ottoman authorities, resolved commercial disputes, acquired permits to export theoretically prohibited goods—such as wheat or olive oil—and helped French merchants or captains with the avoiding, easing, or lifting of sanctions and other *avaries*.⁶⁰ Through consular institutions, traders found official interpreters to support communication with local buyers.⁶¹ Consuls also played a complex, sometimes contradictory, role

57 AN, AE, B III 30, n. 3, *Entrée des Blés au Port de Marseille, Avril 1773*. On the topic see also Jean Pierre Farganel, "Aléas du commerce d'exportation des céréales et relations entre Levantins et Français à Acre et Seyde (1650-1750)," in *Les céréales en Méditerranée. Histoire, Anthropologie, Economie*, ed. Jean-Louis Miège (Paris, 1993), 85-107.

58 Claude Morin, "Le problème des subsistances dans une grande communauté urbaine: Toulon dans la seconde moitié du XVIII^e siècle," *Cahiers de la Méditerranée* 7 (1973): 46-58; and Daniel Panzac, "L'escale de Chio: un observatoire privilégié de l'activité maritime en Mer Egée au XVIII^e siècle," *Histoire, économie et société* 4, no. 4 (1985): 541-561.

59 Farganel, "Aléas du commerce," 85-107.

60 The Venetians, for instance, considered the French diplomatic and consular service one of the main factors behind France's remarkable commercial success, see ASV, Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia, b. 556, f. 89-90.

61 Frédéric Hitzel, "L'école des jeunes de langues d'Istanbul: Un modèle d'apprentissage des langues orientales," in *Langues et langages du commerce en Méditerranée et en*

aimed at building a united front among French merchants, downscaling internal competition and reinforcing the overall competitive position of their fellow nationals.⁶² Finally, they checked the respect of quality standards, ensuring the good reputation of French merchandise.⁶³ Examples of such diplomatic actions are countless all through the century. Space permits me to refer here to only two cases that shed light on the intertwining of economic, political, and social factors.

In September 1716, French merchants acquired a large quantity of oil in Crete and prepared its shipment to Marseilles. The local governor, however, seized the cargo and fined the merchants for trading in a commodity intended for the imperial capital, although, as Consul De Lane pointed out, the oil had been bought before the adoption of the new measure.⁶⁴ Initially, De Lane turned to the Grand Vizier, who allowed the export of a fraction of the purchased quantity under strict surveillance.⁶⁵ Unhappy with this meager concession, the consul appealed to the local governor. This time, with the help of a “small gift,” he secured permission to export not only the disputed shipment but also some additional purchases.⁶⁶ The controversy ended well for the French, although bargaining lasted for almost a year. Such disputes were frequent in all *échelles* throughout the century.

Many years later, in May 1791, the governor of Syria expelled a group of French merchants accused of fraudulent business practices and confiscated their belongings.⁶⁷ The French ambassador in Constantinople negotiated with

Europe à l'Époque Moderne, eds. Gilbert Buti, Michèle Janin-Thivos, and Olivier Raveux (Aix-en-Provence, 2013), 23–32.

- 62 AN, AE, B III 2, f. 39; AN, AE, B III 1/B, f. 189, *Maurepas au Députés du Commerce, 12 Mai 1734*.
- 63 On the role played by the consular networks and its influence on the Levant trade, see the recent volume, *De l'utilité commerciale des consuls: l'institution consulaire et les marchands dans le monde méditerranéen, XVII^e-XX^e siècle*, ed. Arnaud Bartolomei, Guillaume Calafat, Mathieu Grenet and Jörg Ulbert (Rome, 2018), especially the contributions by Guillaume Calafat and Mathieu Grenet.
- 64 AN, AE B I 341, *Lettre de M. De Lane au Conseil de la Marine 16 Janvier 1717*.
- 65 “*Tout ce que [Le Grand Vizir] on nous a accordé après biens de sollicitations consistant en un commandement particulier pour deux mille quintaux d'huile, encore accompagné d'un commissaire rigide pour qu'on n'en charge pas une plus grosse quantité à la faveur de cette permission,*” AN, AE B I 341, *Lettre de M. De Lane au Conseil de la Marine 13 Juin 1717*.
- 66 AN, AE B I 341, *Lettre de M. De Lane au Conseil de la Marine 13 Juin 1717*.
- 67 The year 1791 constitutes a watershed in the organization of French trade in the Levant. The French Revolution jeopardized the system's integrity, while the Empire only managed to formally restore the previous model, as warfare in the Mediterranean vastly limited actual French trade in the area, AN, F12, 506, f. 274, *Mémoire sur le commerce dans les Echelles du Levant*.

the Sublime Porte, securing the removal of the pasha, the restitution of the confiscated goods, and the full reinstatement of the merchants in their rights.⁶⁸

These examples, like many others preserved in diplomatic sources, convey a clear vision of the relevance of consular action for trade. Diplomatic activity, and its economic and social effects, are, however, to be interpreted within the broader framework of the complex system regulating French businesses in the *échelles*, which involved not only economic, but also far reaching social aspects, and produced, especially when analyzed from the point of view of individual merchants, contradictory results.⁶⁹

Already under Colbert the Crown adopted a series of measures meant to organize trade in the Levant along mercantilist lines.⁷⁰ The legislative framework, created between 1681 and 1691, relied on three basic principles. The so-called “capitulations” had to be systematically enforced, and extended to all the major French trade centers in the Levant, granting *müstemin* status even to long-term residents.⁷¹ The French merchants’ communities were expected to maintain a unitary economic front coordinated through their assemblies, the consul, and, on a higher level, the ambassador, the Chamber of Commerce of Marseilles, and the minister of the navy himself. Finally, only authorized merchants could reside in the Levantine *échelles*, their residence limited in time and scope, their contacts with the local population strictly confined to the necessities of trade, mediated by official dragomans, and controlled by the diplomatic institutions and the community itself.

Until the 1720s, these rules were enforced only sporadically, and merchants enjoyed relative freedom. The situation changed with the appointment of

68 AN, AE B III 22, f. 96. On late-eighteenth-century French diplomacy in the Levant, see Amaury Faivre d’Arcier, *Les oubliés de la liberté: négociants, consuls et missionnaires français au Levant pendant la Révolution 1784-1798* (Paris, 2007), 233-250; and idem, “Le service consulaire au Levant,” 161-175.

69 David Celetti, “French Residents and Ottoman Women in 18th Century Levant: Personal Relations, Social Control, and Cultural Interchange,” in *Women, Consumption and Circulation of Ideas in South-Eastern Europe: XVII-XIX Centuries*, ed. Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu (Leiden, 2017), 47-64.

70 Géraud Poumarède, “Naissance d’une institution royale: les consuls de la nation française en Levant et en Barbarie aux XVI et XVII siècles,” *Annuaire-Bulletin de la Société de l’histoire de France* (2001): 65-128; Jörg Ulbert, “La fonction consulaire à l’époque moderne: définition, état des connaissances et perspectives de recherche,” in Ulbert and le Bouédec, eds., *La fonction consulaire*, 9-20.

71 AN, AE, B III, n. 11, Aout 1773. On the topic see also Maurits van den Boogert, *Capitulations and the Ottoman Legal System. Qadis, Consuls and Beraths in the 18th Century* (Leiden, 2005), 19-62; and Ian Coller, “Cosmopolitanism and Extraterritoriality: Regulating Europeans in Eighteenth-Century Turkey,” in *Europa und die Türkei im 18. Jahrhundert*, ed. Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp (Bonn, 2011), 205-218.

Jean-Frédéric P. de Maurepas as the minister of the navy (1718-1748), and Louis-Sauveur de Villeneuve as French ambassador in Constantinople (1728-1741). Both fiercely supported regulated rather than spontaneous trade, seeing in the strict application of rules a perfect instrument to support the development of French commerce in the Levant. In their view, French merchants organized in several *échelles* should act as a single body and not as individuals operating on their own behalf: competition among them would have an adverse effect on business and on the political influence of France. This approach emerges clearly from a note issued by the minister of the navy on March 30, 1735, instructing merchants to deal with local traders through joint purchases and sales at fixed prices, determined by the council of the Nation, the merchandise and profit being proportionally divided among those involved. Otherwise, the minister claimed, competition between French residents would enhance the position of Ottoman brokers, thus damaging national interests.⁷²

While the note did not officially make the procedures mandatory, Ambassador De Villeneuve interpreted it in the strictest way possible, transforming the guidelines into a system of obligations. Moreover, in 1737, new regulations were imposed on trade in most essential commodities, such as cotton and dyestuffs. From then on, for instance, cotton could be purchased only by the whole merchant community through local brokers, with purchases from foreign traders being banned. Merchants were prohibited from entering into preliminary agreements that would allow them to claim the harvest from particular villages or regions. All forms of credit and advances for cotton producers were also banned. The provision also included measures regarding quality control, as well as marking, packaging, and shipping the commodities, thus narrowing the legal limits of French commerce in the Levant.⁷³ The emphasis on collective purchases constituted the cornerstone of the system envisioned by the ambassador and the minister;⁷⁴ a united front of the merchants of the *nation française* would establish hegemonic position in a market otherwise dominated by autonomous, individual actors. Quality control by French officials would guarantee compliance with the standards set by French *manufactures*.⁷⁵

Individual merchants saw things differently. Their primary concern was the potential loss of business opportunities. For them, the new measures weakened their overall market position, pushing local dealers towards

72 AN, AE, B III 2, f. 39, 30 mars 1735.

73 Farganel, "Les négociants français," 385-411.

74 AN, AE, B III/2, f. 53.

75 Farganel, "Les négociants français," 385-411.

competing “nations.”⁷⁶ The new regulations sparked protest and obstruction that hampered the law’s enforcement. The contrast between the state’s will and private interest gave rise to a long series of infringements, consular interventions, and, sometimes, repression in the form of immediate repatriation.⁷⁷ Consuls found themselves in the cross-fire, on the one hand compelled to enforce the law while at the same time naturally closer to the interests of individual merchants. Minister Maurepas’s response to the consul in Cairo on October 30, 1735, regarding collective trade contracts, illustrates the dilemma:

*Il est nécessaire que vous veiller avec plus d’attentions que vous n’avez fait jusque-là aux contraventions qui peuvent être commises par rapport aux arrangements qui sont et qui seront pris dans la suite par la Nation pour la vente de marchandises en ligue. Je suis informé [...] que à Alexandrie et à Rosette des négociants [...] non contents d’avoir fait des ventes de draps pour le comptant et pour le terme au-dessous des prix porté par la délibération de la Nation ont introduit une autre pratique qui n’est pas moins préjudiciable au bien général du commerce et font des ventes au prix du comptant à payer dans deux ou trois mois [...] en chargeant un pour cent par mois [...]. Il est nécessaire que vous veilliez de plus près à l’avenir sur les démarches de ces négociants et que [...] s’ils tombent [encore] dans cet abus vous ayez attention à m’en rendre compte à fin que je prenne les mesures pour les faire rappeler en France.*⁷⁸

This example pinpoints a typical deadlock originating from the internal contradictions of the new regulations. To conduct trade, individual merchants were ready to make concessions by agreeing to a price lower than the official one or deferring payments. At the same time, the rules had to be enforced, otherwise—as the minister saw it—the commerce would suffer from internal competition among French merchants. Between the two ends of the spectrum, merchants and consuls forged their own strategies. The latter, as in the case mentioned above, frequently took a pragmatic approach. In effect, the consuls’ responses to infringement often lacked determination and conviction, thus illustrating their role—and willingness—in mediating between the law and the wishes of the mercantile community they were supposed to support. As a result, the rules were never fully applied and infringements continued throughout the century.

76 On the concept of “nation” see Grenet, *La fabrique communautaire*, 19–22.

77 Katsumi Fukasawa, *Toilerie et commerce du Levant d’Alep à Marseille* (Paris, 1987), 71–110.

78 AN, AE, B/111/2, 30 March 1736.

Cementing unity among merchants might ultimately have helped their competitive position vis-à-vis their Ottoman counterparts, and, though somehow haphazardly enforced, those rules might have served to reinforce a dependence of Ottoman merchants on French purchases, already determined by the difficulty of moving to other potential buyers. The “natural” and “artificial” ways of creating a stronger competitive position might, therefore, have influenced and complemented, more than hampered, each other.⁷⁹ The effect of the two competing visions of trade was thus a controversial one, entailing both immediate adverse outcomes for individual merchants and long-term opportunities for asserting the supremacy of French commerce.⁸⁰ The issue was all the more complex in that it entailed not only economic but also social aspects, as it directly touched the personal lives of the French community living in the *échelles*. This side of the question, though neglected as a source of instability, may have represented one of the main weaknesses of the French institutional framework in the Levant as it created tensions among the different actors of the *nation française* itself, ultimately threatening its social cohesion.⁸¹

Beyond the Boundaries of the “French Nation”

Ideally, the “French Nation” in the Levant constituted a small-scale replica of France on foreign soil. Therefore, its members were to present an edifying vision of France as a well-ordered, dignified, and successful monarchy. This task necessitated control over residents that went beyond economic matters. Merchants willing to operate in the *échelles* had to be vetted by the Chamber of Commerce of Marseilles, which held monopoly rights on the Levantine trade and issued passports valid for a limited period, fixed in 1731 at ten years. The passport could be voided in case of economic failure, misconduct, sexual contact with local women, unauthorized marriage, and socializing with Ottoman officials. United in a single body, “protected” from external threats by “capitulations” and the vigilance of French consuls, carrying out trade through appointed interpreters and subject to the regulations mentioned above, French residents had no need or opportunity to deal directly with the local population.

However, the realities on the ground remained far from this abstract vision, a fact well-illustrated by the constant need to reaffirm rules and control measures and the ever-growing number of infringements described in the sources,

79 Farganel, “Les négociants français,” 385-411.

80 Takeda, *Between Crown and Commerce*, 20-49.

81 Celetti, “French Residents,” 47-64.

but also by the open opposition of the French residents that emerged at the end of the century.⁸² Controlling the community was no small feat, even in fundamental aspects, such as registering French subjects living in the *échelle*. All nodes of French commercial networks, including small ones such as Crete, faced the problem of “illegal” immigration. On November 4, 1716, Vice Consul Dubois informed the *Conseil de la Marine* that he had learned of captains who had allowed “young men and women” to disembark without passports. He added that many of them illegally sold cloth of Languedoc, smuggled onto the island by the same captains.⁸³ Constantinople, the major *échelle*, posed similar problems on a larger scale. In 1732, Ambassador de Villeneuve noted that a large number of poor artisans inhabited the Ottoman capital and other *échelles*. Consuls received orders to draw up lists of people living under their jurisdiction, verify their legal status and material well-being, and send back those without valid documents or sufficient means to support themselves and their families.

Matters became much more serious if such individuals engaged in illicit interactions—whether personal or commercial—with the local population. Both French and Ottoman authorities prohibited, for example, unions between French and Ottomans, and the consuls were to ensure the enforcement of the interdiction, even appealing to Ottoman assistance. Ambassador De Villeneuve periodically issued orders to the consuls to verify merchants’ marital status, not to recognize mixed marriages, and to send back to France all who married illegally.⁸⁴

These stipulations were a secondary concern for the “marginal” French population in the Levant. This group included illegal residents, destitute artisans, sailors, and merchants, who often pursued marriage strategies of social integration outside the French community.⁸⁵ However, the group also included the middle ranks of the *échelles*’ personnel, such as dragomans, who acted as the official interpreters and “cultural mediators,” attached to the embassy and consulates across the Levant.⁸⁶ On April 27, 1735, De Villeneuve wrote to Minister Maurepas, informing him that he ordered M. Dez to verify the alleged marriage between dragoman Boissat and a certain Rose Martin, presumably

82 Ian Coller, “East of Enlightenment: Regulating Cosmopolitanism between Istanbul and Paris in the Eighteenth Century,” *Journal of World History* 21, no. 3 (2010): 447-470.

83 AN, AE, B I 341, *Lettre de M. Dubois au Conseil de la Marine, 4 novembre 1717*.

84 AN, AE, B III, 1, f. 189. See also Celetti, “French Residents,” 47-64, and Takeda, *Between Crown and Commerce*, 78-105, 158-179.

85 AN, AE, B I, 173, f. 9; AN, AE, B III 1/B, f. 189, 10 March 1734.

86 E. Natalie Rothman, “Interpreting Dragomans: Boundaries and Crossings in the Early Modern Mediterranean,” *Comparative Studies in History and Society* 51, no. 4 (2009): 771-800.

a Frenchwoman living in the *échelles*. In particular, Dez was to verify if the wedding had been officiated by Joseph de Saint-Rème, a clergyman serving at the *Hôspice de Terre Sainte*, with the consent of Gabius Modart, a Franciscan tertiary. In spite of the religious sanction and the validity of the marriage, De Villeneuve argued, Boissat was to be sent immediately back to France, whereas his wife should be refused entry to Marseilles.⁸⁷

On the one hand, the cases reflect the distance between legal stipulations and reality. On the other, they demonstrate the extent of intimate relations even between high-ranking French residents and local women, supporting the argument that a much broader web of contacts existed between local communities and merchant *échelles*, despite the legal and political framework that divided them along ethnic, religious, and cultural lines.⁸⁸ They highlight how many-sided was the reality of French commerce in the Levant, where economic, institutional, and social aspects were tightly intertwined into a single, complex picture. Eighteenth-century French trade in the Eastern Mediterranean appears in fact deeply rooted within a multifaceted, and apparently contradictory framework, whose pillars are not only the material relevance of the traded items, and the institutional framework based in Marseilles, but also the personal links of individual merchants, captains, and sailors with the local population. Formal and informal networks complemented and supported each other, easing the flows of merchandise up and down the Mediterranean.

Conclusion

As shown in the painting by Vernet, the eighteenth-century Levant trade of Marseilles encompassed a vast set of material and immaterial circulations. Goods flowed in great quantities, letting men of trade flourish and crumble, shaping and reshaping local and regional economies in the process. People met and interacted with each other: traders, diplomats, ship captains, sailors, men, and women crossed national, religious, and administrative barriers, forming a wide network of social, and economic interactions. Cultural and commercial transfers were juxtaposed.

If Vernet's painting conveys a clear and easy to read picture of French commerce with the Levant, the reality was far more complex and contradictory, with purely economic aspects profoundly mixed with institutional and social ones, creating long-lasting ties going far beyond the chronological limits

87 AN, AE, B III, 2, f. 39.

88 Celetti, "French Residents," 47-64.

of this paper. Throughout the eighteenth century, the intensity of those links increased, molding French trade and presence in the Levant and imbuing them with their defining features. The commodities flowing between France and the Ottoman Empire tied the two economies in a way that went beyond simple commercial exchanges but made them largely interdependent. This interdependency produced divergent developmental patterns, contributing to the transformation of whole economic sectors, and prefiguring nineteenth-century developments.⁸⁹

At the same time, trade was by no means just a matter of merchants' economic activity. French state institutions repeatedly intervened, pursuing their objectives and providing tools to support and sustain French commercial success. Through diplomatic networks and the enforcement of business regulations in mercantile communities in the Levant, the state interacted with merchants in a complex relationship, which produced multiple, sometimes contradictory, consequences, but in the end appeared effective in securing economic dominance. The circulation of objects was underpinned by the circulation of people moving merchandise between the two ends of the Mediterranean. Merchants settled in the *échelles* formed communities that were by no means isolated from the local social context. In the process, people interacted, established contacts, and forged personal relations that straddled social, cultural, and confessional boundaries and circumvented official regulations.

Looking through this multifaceted mix of economic, institutional, and social factors we may perceive the roots and causes of eighteenth-century French economic expansion in the Levant and the consequent material and human ties between two otherwise apparently distant worlds. We may also perceive the genesis of the particular ties that were to link France and the Levant in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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89 Henry Laurens, "Europe and the Muslim World in the Contemporary Period," in *Europe and the Islamic World: A History*, eds. John Tolan, Gilles Veinstein, and Henry Laurens (Princeton, 2015), 257-404.