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Crafts and Guilds before 1863



The patterns of restructuring and collective action in which I am interested had their origins in the first half of the nineteenth century. During these decades, the projection of European power overseas, state building, and unequal world economic integration started to alter the conditions under which crafts and service workers pursued their livelihoods in Egypt's towns and cities. Market relations began to deepen, consumption tastes started to change, and certain trades in particular areas started to come under pressure from imports, prompting the beginnings of a new kind of craft restructuring in response to new opportunities and tougher competition. As for the guilds, Baer showed many years ago that these institutions survived the dynasty and empire-building policies of Mehmet Ali, Ottoman governor of Egypt (1805–1848), and continued to hold monopolies and discharge public functions until midcentury and beyond. However, as this chapter will argue, the character of the guilds was transformed in an important way during the decades that preceded the cotton boom. Under Mehmet Ali, these venerable institutions were co-opted in the name of dynasty building, and their capacity to protect the livelihoods of their members, or to act as vehicles for protest, was undermined. The weakening of the guilds, which preceded the 1860s, and continued thereafter, set the stage for crafts and service workers' search for new forms of protection and mobilization, the story of which this book picks up in detail from the 1860s onwards.

Crafts and Guilds in the Ottoman Empire

In spite of mercantilist expansion from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, European influence in Ottoman lands until the early nineteenth century remained weak relative to later years. European merchants built far-flung mercantilist commercial networks, but these sustained a trade that in comparison with the later nineteenth century was puny and uncertain. Indeed, even in the later eighteenth century, the great bulk of Ottoman external commerce—perhaps six-sevenths—was carried on not with Europe, but with Africa and Asia.¹ European merchants existed in only small numbers in Ottoman cities. The Portuguese blockade certainly cut off much of Egypt's pepper trade during the early sixteenth century, but the irritant was short lived, had few long-lasting or systemic effects, and was nothing like as ruinous as some have suggested.² Furthermore, European military power in the region was limited. The Portuguese and Spanish, unable to colonize North Africa because of stiff resistance there, set sail across the Atlantic. The balance of military power in the Balkans only started to tip towards Russia and Austria towards the end of the eighteenth century. And until Napoleon's short-lived invasion of Egypt in search of wealth and Empire (1798–1801), not since the Crusades had a European military presence been felt in the region. Thus, even as European mercantile overseas expansion took place, the Ottomans retained a substantial measure of political, economic, and social independence from external forces.

Until the early nineteenth century, the bulk of Ottoman commerce was in the hands of Ottoman merchants, and, notwithstanding an impressive international trade, most of the crafts consumed within the empire were made locally. Ottoman cities from Cairo to Istanbul housed numerous crafts workers, known in Egypt as those who “possessed” a skill or a craft (*ashab al-hiraf wa-l-sana'i*).³ In 1800, the savants of the French occupation estimated that “established artisans” (including masters and journeymen) numbered twenty-five thousand in Cairo, or a little less than a tenth of the population of the city,⁴ which was the center of manufacture and commerce in Egypt.⁵ Most produced textiles, food, furniture, and pottery in order “to satisfy the every-day needs of the urban population.”⁶ A smaller group of more specialised crafts workers made products requiring “more capital and a greater degree of craftsmanship and skill,” such as the linen weavers of Damietta.⁷ Weaving and dyeing employed about a third of all crafts workers in the eighteenth century in Cairo, and weavers left legacies that were above the artisanal average during the eighteenth century.⁸ Less well-off leather workers, such as shoemakers, tanners, and saddlers, were the next

most numerous group of artisans in Cairo. Food trades (especially milling and baking) wood, metal, and construction work occupied most other crafts workers. Workshops tended to be small, and tools relatively simple, although in some cases larger numbers of artisans were grouped under one roof, as in a linen factory at Mansura, or a larger dyeing establishment in Cairo—with thirty or forty workers.⁹ Whatever their trade, artisans were rarely wealthy. Raymond shows that during the eighteenth century the average value of the wills of 154 craftsmen was about eight times smaller than the value of the legacies of 143 regional and international merchants.¹⁰

A variety of service workers also plied their trades in Ottoman towns. In Cairo, most were engaged in transport, the principal trades being water carrying, camel driving, donkey driving, and portage. Numerous water carriers, for example, carried water in leather skins from the Nile to Cairo's inhabitants from the tenth century onwards.¹¹ Others provided services to markets, such as weighers and measurers, worked as entertainers, or held household positions as grooms, cooks, servants, messengers, and so on. These service workers were generally of lower status and poorer even than most crafts workers. They usually possessed little or no capital of their own, and were often engaged in work considered dirty or immoral. Al-Jabarti referred to them, as well as one or two humble crafts such as blacksmithery, as the *abl al-biraf al-safila* (people of despicable crafts), or *arbab al-biraf al-dani'a* (people of inferior crafts).¹²

Since at least the Ottoman conquest of 1517, most crafts and service workers in Egypt (along with merchants and retailers), whatever their wealth or status, belonged to guilds (*ta'ifa*, plural *tawa'if*).¹³ In contradistinction to Massignon, who had seen the Islamic guild as above all a pact of honor between brothers, a pledge of chivalry rooted in mysticism whose origins lay among the antiauthoritarian and communally oriented Qarmatians of the seventh and eighth centuries,¹⁴ Baer more usefully defined a guild on the basis of craft specialization: "a group of town people engaged in the same occupation and headed by a shaykh."¹⁵ His definition has broadly stood the test of recent research, although most have stressed the flexibility of the term *ta'ifa*, which could be used to refer to other social groups, such as Copts (*ta'ifat al-aqbat*) or Armenians (*ta'ifat al-arman*). It has also been noted that some *tawa'if* appear to have gone without shaykhs, or sometimes, other aspects of guild organization.¹⁶ In the light of these complications, the use of the term "guild" as a translation for the more generous Arabic term, *ta'ifa*, has been questioned. The term "guild" is retained here in the absence of a better alternative, and on the basis that any simple analogy to European or other non-European guilds must be avoided.

In general, guilds regulated trade life, linked trades to the government, and provided a community of some kind to members, but their practices varied by place, time, and trade. Guilds could hold the monopoly over a particular trade in a particular location, solve disputes, contract labor, distribute raw materials, levy dues, punish members, organize ceremonies for admission and promotion, remit taxes to the government, implement government regulations and requisitions, parade through the streets at certain public festivals, and organize mutual help. These many functions, however, were rarely present together in the same guild, a fact which has contributed to the controversy over the nature of the guilds. As Quataert has remarked, “[W]e do not really understand . . . the nature and functions of most Ottoman guilds. . . . [They] varied quite considerably not only over time but also contemporaneously by place. In some areas they may have been monopolistic; in others they were only loose associations of persons engaged in the same activity.”¹⁷

Nonetheless the negative depictions of guilds by an older generation of scholars have been largely debunked by the research of recent decades.

First, Baer’s view of the guild as a “tool in the hand of the government, not an independent power”¹⁸ has been successfully challenged by subsequent work.¹⁹ It has become increasingly clear that in the main, as long as the guilds maintained order, delivered taxes, and played their role in provisioning city and government, the authorities left them considerable room for local self-determination. As Gerber has shown convincingly, guilds were run not on the basis of either Sultanic or Sacred law, imposed from above, but on the basis of heterogeneous and locally determined customary law (*’urf*), or the “law of the trade” (*qanun al-kar*),²⁰ determined largely by guild members themselves, and often merely ratified in the Islamic courts.

Baer’s view of guild shaykhs as government appointees is also largely mistaken. From Anatolia to Egypt, scholars have demonstrated that guild leaders were usually chosen by guild members, not the government. Usually a group of senior members gathered before the *qadi* to make their wishes known, and generally speaking, the *qadi* ratified the appointment. It has further become clear that guild leaders were usually practicing masters of the trade in question (not outsiders), and thus were intimately involved in the interests and activities of the trade itself. Shaykhs appear in many instances to have run the affairs of the guild in consultation with senior masters (*’umad*) and the experts in the trade (*abl al-khibra*), also drawn from the ranks of senior masters.

Guilds were called on to discharge certain statelike functions, the most important of which was remitting taxes from members. Until now,

historians have tended to assume that shaykhly involvement in taxation was a form of unwelcome state intervention in craft life.²¹ Arguably, however, Bowring, back in the 1840s, was right to stress that it was, just as importantly, a privilege for the guild. “The sheikh becomes responsible for the payment of the tribute or poll-tax of all the members of the corporation,” wrote Bowring, “who are thus released from individual responsibility to the government and protected from the exaction to which they would otherwise be exposed, from the rapacity of public functionaries.”²² The state ceded this privilege to the guilds until the later nineteenth century because of its own partial blindness regarding the wealth, premises, capital, and income of crafts and service workers.

The guilds may have become more robust in the face of state power in the larger context of Ottoman decentralization during the eighteenth century. Particularly important was that during this period the Janissaries (the professional infantry corps of the Ottoman army), garrisoned in Egypt (as elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire), entered the crafts. In some cases, members of the different military corps (*oçaks*) claimed to protect a given guild and thus demanded a share of the craft surplus—often against the wishes of existing masters and journeymen.²³ In other cases, Janissaries actually engaged in the trade in question, a factor which could work both for and against the interests of fellow crafts workers.²⁴ In still other cases, existing artisans managed to affiliate themselves to one or another military corps and thus received a more favourable form of protection. For example, Janissaries, in return for a down payment from the guilds, allowed tradesmen to subvert government regulations and raise wages and prices at the expense of the consumer.²⁵ Janissary involvement thus appears to have involved both local exploitation and the protection of guilds against outsiders. It certainly appears likely that the Janissary presence made it more difficult for higher authorities to intervene in popular craft activities.

Further, it is hard to avoid the possibility that guilds were also one of several overlapping institutions in which organizing for protest took place during the eighteenth century. Edmund Burke has identified the role of the guilds in his discussion of urban social movements in the Middle East during the period 1750–1914. He notes that at moments of urban protest “the solidarities of the urban quarter, Islamic guilds, Sufi brotherhoods (and in the Ottoman Empire, local Janissary units) provided whatever coherence the crowd had, and very often the leadership as well.”²⁶ Raymond’s examination of eighteenth century protest in Egypt exemplifies this analysis. He shows how guilds (such as those of the vegetable sellers at Rumayla or the butchers at Husayniyya) popular quarters, and Sufi orders overlapped to

form a resilient organizational basis for popular protest against hoarding at moments of scarcity, and more frequently towards the end of the century, Mamluk rule. Most dramatically, he shows how various bourgeois elements, drawn from the *ulama* and the merchants, forged an alliance with artisans, guildsmen, and other townspeople against the French occupation (1798–1801). This alliance supported Mehmet Ali—an Ottoman commander sent by Istanbul to restore order—and the security his leadership promised. Raymond suggests that the guilds played a real role in the making of Mehmet Ali (Ottoman governor of Egypt, 1805–1848), noting that “the popular masses made history in Cairo.” Hence both Hajjaj, the shaykh of the vegetable sellers in Rumayla, or Ibn Sham’a, the shaykh of the butchers of Husayniyya, figured in Mehmet Ali’s victory cortège of 1805, where the *kapıcı* brought from the Sultan the nomination of Mehmet Ali as pasha of Cairo.²⁷

Overall, Baer and others appear to have missed or mistaken a key point: the minimality and diversity of the Ottoman government.²⁸ As Stanford Shaw wrote almost three decades ago:

In theory . . . the sultan had almost absolute powers. . . . In practice, however . . . [t]he nature of the Ottoman system in fact left the sultan with very limited power. . . . [S]ignificant aspects of Ottoman life were left to be dealt with autonomously, not only by the millets but also by the guilds, the corporations, the religious societies, and the other groups forming the corporative substructure of Ottoman society.²⁹

This guild autonomy, more than anything else, accounts for the variegated nature of guilds in the Ottoman empire, so stressed by Quataert, for no single type of guild was imposed from above. Indeed, a problem for guild members, especially those of lower status, was not to escape the clutches of some mythically despotic state, but to persuade the state—the sultan, the provincial governor, or the qadi court—to intervene to provide justice against local exploiters.³⁰

Second, the negative view that both Baer and Raymond take of guild monopolies and restrictions looks less warranted in the light of new research and changing assumptions. Baer speaks of the “economically harmful” effects of monopolistic rights and privileges.³¹ Raymond supposes that monopolistic and hierarchical guild practice contributed to an absurdly fragmented division of labor and a “spirit of routine,” which together resulted in the “stagnation of technique” and a hostility to progress.³² More plausibly, however, guild monopolies positively protected the livelihoods

of their members and ensured adequate provisioning of the city. Masters could only establish themselves—according to guild- and court-enforced custom and law—after acquiring a *gedik* or license.³³ The *gedik* “gave to an artisan or a trader the right to carry out his activities in a particular shop.”³⁴ Only a limited number of such licenses were available.³⁵ Skilled journeymen in each trade would generally have to wait their turn for the privilege of taking one of these positions and thereby opening an independent shop. Once the elders of the guild agreed that a suitable candidate could become a master in the trade, that candidate would gain the right to one of the available positions (known in Ottoman as *gedik bavai*, floating slot), sometimes the tools and equipment which went along with the position, and often the right to practice in the particular premises where the tools and equipment might be (*gedik mustakarr*).³⁶ Once in the hands of a master, the position became a kind of property, whereby the owner could sell it, pass it on to his heirs, and use it as collateral to guarantee his credit.³⁷ Guild restrictions on the number of licenses available did the crucial work of preventing too many masters from joining the trade, which could lead to glut, falling prices, internal competition, and mutual ruin for guild members. In this way guilds protected the market share of their members, as well as maintaining production to provision the city. Further, ownership of a fixed *gedik* (which gave the artisan the right to practice in particular premises) lent guild members important leverage against the landlords seeking to evict them or to raise rents.³⁸ Guild control over new membership was also the mechanism by which the guilds could maintain their reputation and guarantee the quality of their work, which in turn worked to ensure the livelihoods of their members.³⁹ This feature of craft corporate activity was only regulated by the government in exceptional cases. Raymond gives an example of where the agha “examined the workers who proposed to exercise the profession of goldsmiths, and levied a due on all those which he admitted to the mastership.”⁴⁰ This unusual situation resulted from the particularly crucial role that goldsmiths played in monetary activity.

Third, although recent research has been less than clear on this point, Baer’s claim that “any strong sense of belonging to a guild and being proud of it” was “more or less absent” is rather too emphatic a generalization, given the state of the evidence to which he had access, and is certainly not the last word on the subject.⁴¹ Guilds at some level formed a community for crafts and service workers in particular professions. First, although it is not known how widespread initiation ceremonies were in the eighteenth century, descriptions of such ceremonies continue to appear for various guilds into the nineteenth century. Lane’s reference to the *shadd*

ceremony,⁴² involving the binding of the girth of an initiate with a sash tied with knots and performed “when a son is admitted a member of some body of tradesmen or artisans,” is well known. He wrote that it “is customary only among carpenters, turners, barbers, tailors, bookbinders and a few others.”⁴³ The presence of such a ceremony, at least in certain guilds, would indicate at least the possibility of a sense of belonging, especially because the ceremony was supposed to link initiates to an unbroken chain of craft skill and virtue leading back through the generations to an original ancestor (*pir*), often a companion of the prophet. And it should be cautioned that the state-centered sources are very likely to be silent on, and thus deemphasize, ceremonies which did not bear on the essential concerns of taxation, order, and provisioning.

Second, guilds did appear in procession at numerous major public festivities and celebrations. At the marriages and circumcisions of members of the pasha’s family, at the cutting of the Cairo canal (the Khaliq) that allowed the flood waters of the Nile into the city, and at the festival of the *ru’ya* (the sighting of the crescent moon to begin the fasting of Ramadan), the departure of the caravan to Mecca for pilgrimage, and feast days (*marwalid*) for particular saints to mention some of the most important, representatives from different guilds appeared in floats, reenacting their crafts complete with tools and materials. “The different corporations,” wrote Bowring, “have associated themselves with the religious rites and ceremonies of the country, taking part in all the great processions, such as the departure of the caravans for the holy cities, so that opinion throws round the corporations a considerable amount of protection.”⁴⁴ Arguably, at least, the public appearance of crafts workers as divided into corporate entities at key religious and public festivals was a way of underlining guild membership as an important identity in a wider society. With this in mind, it does seem problematic to refuse the possibility that identification with a particular craft or guild involved some social and cultural substance.

Third, it is reasonable to suggest that in various guilds, solidarity was bolstered through common links to one or another confession (such as the Greek Orthodox), national group (such as North Africans), or Sufi order (such as the Bayumiyya). Baer’s view is that most guilds were divided this way (although he did not see this as resulting in solidarity), Raymond’s that only a minority of guilds were monopolized by a particular ethnic, national, or sufi group. Certainly the Cairo census of 1868 strongly supports Raymond’s view, as we shall see. Nonetheless, the fact that certain guilds were monopolized by those with a strong marker of a particular identity may well have strengthened a sense of belonging to that guild.

Fourth, guilds appear to have been involved, at least in certain times and places, in organizing mutual assistance of one kind or another. Again, the claim is not that these activities were widespread—the state-centered sources do not allow one to make such an argument. But scattered references through the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth provide food for thought. Raymond reports that mutual aid had been observed by Pococke amongst the servants.⁴⁵ References to a mutual fund among shoemakers to help members in distress are several.⁴⁶ Jabarti noted how “guild members collected contributions to help arm and feed their members” prior to a battle against the French.⁴⁷ Examples of the practice of *rukiyya*, the equal distribution of guild income among members, exist, such as that involving the sugar carriers in 1720.⁴⁸ As will be discussed below, debates about the *rukiyya* flared up in Egypt the 1870s. These references do not add up to a systematic picture of mutual aid in the guilds, but they do indicate that such activities were not unknown, and where they existed, protected members and their livelihoods to some degree. Given the paucity of information on this topic, emphatic judgements one way or the other are unlikely to be persuasive, but the likelihood that in variable ways guilds formed a community of some kind for members cannot simply be dismissed.

Overall then, although the picture is not quite convincing or complete, it would appear that the guilds of the eighteenth century were more autonomous from the government, more protective of their members’ livelihoods, and more likely to have involved a social community at least in certain places and trades than Baer and to some extent Raymond suppose. The argument here is that these autonomies and protections were significantly eroded by political, economic, and social change during the nineteenth century.

European Power and Egyptian Dynasty Building

During the nineteenth century, the forms of independence enjoyed by the Ottoman empire were steadily eroded. European military and economic power was projected overseas in radically new ways. There was a dizzying expansion in world trade based above all on industrial capitalism, a trade ever more systematically structured to exchange the raw materials of the periphery with the manufactured goods of the core. Egypt’s trade with Europe, for example, increased between forty and sixty times.⁴⁹ European navies and armies, the products of both state building and capitalism, circled the Ottomans with increasing intent, first forcing favorable terms of trade, and then subjecting much of the region—along with most of the rest

of Asia and Africa—to direct or indirect colonial rule. As Hourani has put it, “Muslim states and societies could no longer live in a stable and self-sufficient system of inherited culture; their need was now to generate the strength to survive in a world dominated by others.”⁵⁰

The beginnings of this new projection of European power overseas roughly coincided with an important political dynamic emerging from within the Ottoman empire—attempts by regional strongmen to build dynasties of their own and bolster themselves against the central control of the sultan. In this, none were as successful as Mehmet Ali, an Ottoman military leader of relatively modest Albanian origin, who seized the governorship of the Ottoman province of Egypt in July 1805. Ottoman governors, in accordance with the canons of Ottoman statecraft, were supposed to move from post to post across the empire. However, the new incumbent, building on the example of local rulers in Egypt (Ali Bey al-Kabir, 1760–1773) and Palestine (Ahmad al-Jezzar, 1775–1802), sought a hereditary dynasty in the province of Egypt.

Mehmet Ali appropriated European military and administrative practices far more extensively than his immediate forebears. Inspired by the military success of Napoleon, Mehmet Ali successfully built a European-style conscript army, in the process eliminating the rival Mamluk households that had largely controlled Egypt during the preceding century. To pay for his army, he centralized the fiscal system while abolishing the rural tax farms. To the same end, Mehmet Ali Pasha actively intervened in the economy. He tried to monopolize all trade and most production in Egypt by buying all produce at an official price and selling it at a profit. He rapidly extended the area under cultivation through dredging and building canals for irrigation, converting Lower Egypt to perennial irrigation. Significantly enough, in 1820 and 1821, the Pasha, in collaboration with a Frenchman, Jumel, introduced the cultivation of long-staple cotton for sale on foreign markets. Further, between 1816 and the late 1830s, searching for revenue and munitions, the Pasha attempted a program of industrialization. He also developed the apparatus of government, established schools to train bureaucrats and military personnel, and brought the religious establishment under state control.

On the basis of his newfound strength, Mehmet Ali launched a bid for empire which brought him into direct conflict with European power. It was a showdown he was to lose. By the late 1830s Mehmet Ali's armies had taken territory from the Sudan to Syria, and now they moved into Anatolia, threatening the Sultan himself. But the Sultan requested British assistance, and their intervention in Syria from 1839 to 1841 resulted in the withdrawal of Mehmet Ali's forces, their restriction to eighteen thousand

men by the Treaty of London in 1841, and the signing of commercial treaties favoring European merchants. In recompense, however, Mehmet Ali successfully obtained the grant of a hereditary governorship from the Sultan in 1841, officially transforming Egypt into a semi-independent dynasty, while formally remaining under Ottoman sovereignty and paying a tribute to the Porte. But the meaning of 1841 was the subordination of Egypt to rapidly expanding European military and economic control. The attempt to build a relatively independent regional empire in the Levant had been crushed. From 1841 onwards Egypt's rulers had little choice but to pursue a more truncated and Egypt-centered attempt at state building—a self-strengthening movement aimed at achieving some form of autonomy in a region now clearly dominated by British and French power.

Crafts and Service Workers

The details of how crafts and guilds were transformed by interaction with these changes during the first half of the nineteenth century remain somewhat obscure. In particular, the forms of craft adaptation and collective action in which I am interested, and about which this book tells a detailed story from the 1860s onwards, can only be partially inferred from rather fragmentary and sometimes contradictory evidence. Nonetheless, recent research has indicated that an older view, which consigned the handicrafts to stagnation and decline during these years, and simply ignored service workers (not to mention most Ottoman merchants and retailers), is problematic.

Statistics are few, but those which exist for employment indicate a broad continuity rather than any sudden diminution in numbers employed in crafts and trades. Mehmet Ali's urban tax census of 1821 to 1823 listed 186 guilds with about 26,000 members between them, while enumerating a further 7,000 workers in forty-two government-run establishments.⁵¹ Susan Staffa estimated that as many as 30,000 merchants and artisans worked in Cairo in 1839.⁵² The census of 1846 enumerated around 27,000 artisans and industrial workers in Cairo.⁵³ None of these figures compare unfavorably with the 25,000 "established artisans, masters and journeymen" listed by the French savants, and in fact consistently show continuity rather than decline. It would appear reasonable to suggest that as far as the evidence goes, at a time when Cairo's population remained relatively stable, so did the proportion of those working in crafts and trades.

For all the ever-earlier back projection of a world system that one encounters in the literature, it is perhaps surprising to discover that only in the 1830s did manufactured imports from Europe start to increase in a way

which had little precedent. During the eighteenth century, although specific crafts were under pressure from certain manufactured imports from Europe, notably French woollens, the impact of such pressures was limited, sectoral, and reversible, and cannot be said to have caused any universal or far-reaching transformation.⁵⁴ As Roger Owen has written, “[European imports] affected only some aspects of economic activity in some areas, and then often only for a short space of time.”⁵⁵ Indeed, British trade with the Ottoman Empire actually declined during the eighteenth century, only reestablishing itself after 1801 following improved relations with the Sultan after the British assisted in the repulsion of the French from Egypt. Furthermore, French trade practically disappeared from the Eastern Mediterranean in the 1790s because of the Napoleonic wars, and did not recover until the 1840s. In short, as Şevket Pamuk recently remarked, “[T]he volume of trade with Europe remained limited, and Ottoman manufactures were not subjected to any serious competition from European industry, until the nineteenth century.”⁵⁶

The 1820s saw the beginnings of a relatively modest trade exchanging long-staple Egyptian cotton for the machine-made and increasingly cheap cotton fabric of Manchester, as well as a much smaller value of European luxury goods in demand among Egypt’s Turco-Circassian rulers for conspicuous display. But only in the 1830s, with the development of steam shipping, increasing tonnages and speeds, and deepening and bigger harbors in the Mediterranean did this commerce start to increase rapidly.⁵⁷ Egypt imported about six times more cotton fabric in exchange for currency earned from ginned and pressed cotton at the end of the 1830s than it had in the later 1820s. Then, in the wake of the Commercial Treaties of 1838 to 1840, which imposed a low external tariff of 5 percent on European imports, Egypt’s purchases of British cotton goods doubled again between the later 1830s and the later 1840s to reach a value of about 300,000 LE. With cotton production and prices rising, Egypt’s total external trade came to be worth around 4 million LE in the later 1850s. Thus it was probably only from around the mid-1830s that imports started to have an impact of any significant kind on artisans in Egypt.

The assumption must be that from that time, pressure was brought to bear by these imports on particular crafts. Those who produced certain luxury items for the upper classes, who now turned, if modestly at this stage, to certain European products, must have been hit. Above all cotton weavers were now encountering unprecedented competition in the shape of rising imports of machine-made cotton. Nonetheless, the impact of these changes on local crafts should not be exaggerated. Even by midcentury, Egypt’s

external trade with Europe remained less than half of its total trade. Commercial increases were accompanied by local population expansion and new wealth acquired through the agricultural production of cotton. The absolute level of imports at this stage, especially compared to later in the century, remained relatively small. The absence of case studies means that it is not definitively established that even cotton weavers were thrown out of work by the rapid increase in Manchester's market share. It is hardly likely that local cotton weavers were actually flourishing under new conditions, but there are no adequate statistics to allow one to pronounce the death of cotton weaving during these years, and reports from later in the century certainly affirm that cotton weaving was a vital and in some cases expanding industry in Egypt.

Quataert argues that in Anatolia urban and workshop weavers were hit quite hard by the initial wave of imports (but were able to recover later in the century), an argument echoed by Reilly and to some extent Chevallier for Syria.⁵⁸ These analyses are plausible, but it must be pointed out that to a considerable extent they remain based on deductions, and relatively firm statistical evidence has only been discovered respecting particular trades. If the initial wave of imports was purchased with the increased wealth which came from growing cotton, which it inevitably was (because such imports could only be bought with hard currency—excepting a drain on specie), then the impact of such a growing commerce on local weaving production must have been diminished.⁵⁹

It is important to note also that cotton weaving was not by any means the only textile production in Egypt, let alone the only handicraft production. As for textiles, silk, wool, and flax were spun and woven, dyers worked with either imported or locally woven cloth, and weavers of straw baskets, reed mats, rope, and twine, and braiders and trimmers of various kinds were not directly affected by the import of cotton cloth. Quataert has also made the important argument that Anatolian countryside and household weavers were in a relatively strong position (compared to their urban counterparts) to expand production for growing markets because of low production costs and proximity to markets.⁶⁰ He has also showed that textile production migrated in some measure to the countryside in Anatolia in response to imports. Tucker suggests that putting-out systems may have multiplied during these years, although Cuno sees no substantial evidence of this, noting only that women appeared to work independently as spinners in the textile industry.⁶¹

With regard to other handicrafts, tailoring and shoemaking were hardly affected negatively by imports until the 1860s, along with construction, carpentry and related trades, metallurgy, food production, and a number

of luxury trades such as work in precious metals. Cuno's examination of the land tax registers of two villages in Lower Egypt in the 1840s revealed the presence of a "significant number of households engaged in non-agricultural pursuits," including millers, builders, carpenters, blacksmiths, boatmen, and jewellers.⁶² These findings prompted Cuno to propose discussion of transformation rather than simple deindustrialization. Very few persons in Egypt could afford to import consumer goods (other than cotton cloth) from Europe during the first half of the nineteenth century. In other words, the majority of Egypt's handicrafts were probably not dramatically affected by the increases in external trade, rapid though they were, between the 1830s and the 1850s. Although European capitalism had now encountered Egypt's crafts and trades, more far-reaching transformation was to wait for the deeper world economic integration that accompanied the cotton boom of 1861 to 1864.

The impact of Mehmet Ali's program of import substitution was also somewhat mixed, and older views which asserted the destruction of handicrafts in this context have long been discredited. It is certainly the case that a number of weaving workshops were mandatorily closed, and their masters and journeymen forced to work in the Pasha's establishments. It was in this context that al-Jabarti reported the abolition of the *tara'iq* (customs) of the weavers' guild. Further, the textile trades found themselves (at least for a time) in stiff competition with the Pasha's establishments. There are also a number of bloodcurdling tales of the punishment meted out to crafts workers, such as weavers, who violated Mehmet Ali's monopolies or contravened his regulations.⁶³

However, as early as 1964, Baer usefully pointed out that Mehmet Ali's industrialization drive of approximately 1815 through the 1840s did not affect all handicrafts by any means and was in any case short-lived.⁶⁴ Certainly, the majority of artisans worked outside of textiles, and so suffered little direct competition from the factories. Owen's work has underlined these points through a relatively sober analysis of the extent of Mehmet Ali's import substitution projects, even at their peak in the 1830s: Mehmet Ali's experiments probably employed only about thirty to forty thousand workers, rather fewer than the one or two hundred thousand suggested by earlier historians. And even then, not all workers were employed all the time, because factories were often not running at full capacity because of operational problems relating to placement, machinery (and its maintenance), and fuel costs. Further, a certain proportion of even these workers were recruited from the *fallabin*, and not just from urban crafts workers. Finally, most of Mehmet Ali's factories were destined to close

during the 1840s, which meant that weavers and others were now able to return to their workshops. In certain instances they took with them training in European-style skills, methods, and the use of machinery. Clerget gives an example of a family of weavers who successfully weathered the transformations of import substitution. The son of a weaver of fine lingerie was employed in one of Mehmet Ali's factories, Khurunfish at Cairo, but after it closed, the son set up a silk-weaving establishment of his own, along with a shop from which to sell its produce. His sons in turn went on to produce new products, making striped silk for headgear and sashes for luxury robes.⁶⁵

A further point, which has not received sufficient emphasis, is that when one examines the factories themselves, one finds not wage labor subject to a single productive discipline and a significant degree of mechanization, but instead aggregates of artisans organized under one roof. At the arsenal at Alexandria, for example, according to Bowring, one found hundreds of carpenters and joiners, and scores of borers, caulkers, rope makers, smiths, filers, turners, coppersmiths, sailmakers, block makers, tailors, shoemakers, painters, plumbers, coopers, sawyers, and others. In all, three thousand artisans who possessed a craft skill of one kind or another were employed in the arsenal. Bowring also mentions the Coptic handloom weavers in the textile factories, an indication that one should not assume in advance that "factory" meant mechanization and power-driven machinery. Khurunfish brought together numerous different trades: more than a hundred fitters (*barradin*), more than ninety local carpenters (*najjarin baladi*), more than fifty ironsmiths (*baddadin*), forty iron turners (*kbarratin badid*), and so on.⁶⁶ The very limited deployment of steam power—"at most . . . seven or eight steam engines" across the country—gains fresh significance in this context.⁶⁷ In other words, import substitution and its factories did not simply displace or work to destroy artisans, even where it was relatively successful, but employed them and to some extent provided training in the use of new equipment. The sheer variety of trades present in the factories is striking. Further, apart from one or two European-made machines brought over to serve as models, most factory equipment in the 1820s and 1830s was actually constructed—under the supervision of the French advisor Jumel and his assistants—by Egyptian carpenters, smiths, and turners using improved lathes and tools.⁶⁸

Thus, although the details remain largely unknown, it seems most likely that the economic activities of crafts and service workers were not radically transformed during the first half of the nineteenth century. Artisans continued to work in numbers up and down Egypt. Most still plied

their trades in Cairo, which remained the center of production, although this distribution was probably starting to change with the growth of cities connected to the export economy, most dramatically Alexandria, but also other towns in Lower Egypt, such as Mansura. In spite of new pressures, textiles probably continued to be the largest sector of production. Moreover, there is no reason to suggest the general extinction or decline of Egypt's numerous service trades. Indeed the expansion of trade probably provided new employment for weighers, measurers of grain, porters, and so on.

Guilds

Baer showed long ago that contrary to the conventional wisdom, which suggested that Mehmet Ali had destroyed the guilds, a "ramified system" of guilds survived in Egypt until the 1880s.⁶⁹ Baer's point that the economic basis of the guilds in the handicrafts was not destroyed by economic or political change prior to the 1850s is only echoed here. And he rightly pointed out that Mehmet Ali's state—for all its newfound reach and strength—could not yet do without the fiscal and administrative link to the urban populace that was provided by the guilds, and even added new functions to existing ones. With one or two possible exceptions, Mehmet Ali's regime and those of his successors continued to appoint guild shaykhs and use guilds as units of urban administration, taxation, and requisition in the towns.⁷⁰ Indeed, especially in the light of recent research, it would appear that the guilds were actively brought to heel by Mehmet Ali's regime, and co-opted in the service of dynasty building and revenue raising. They were not destroyed like the Mamluk households and the rural tax farms, but pressed into service like the heads of the urban quarters and the shaykhs of the villages. Baer already assumed that guilds were supine before the government, and thus saw this process as quite unremarkable. The argument here, however, is that Mehmet Ali's regime actively subordinated the hitherto partly autonomous guilds. In other words, the heavy use of the guild by the state in the nineteenth century, and the guild's subsequent inability to protect its members, were not the timeless outgrowth of a mythical Oriental depotism, but the result of dynasty building under nineteenth-century conditions.

Local *ulama*, merchants, and popular groups may have been instrumental in the accession of the Ottoman governor, but they were soon neutralized, or eliminated. Mehmet Ali "gradually turned his back on the native bourgeoisie and popular forces that had brought him to power,"

writes Nazih Ayubi, “preferring instead to rely on the familiar Turco-Circassian elite for matters related to the army and administration and on the European bourgeoisie for matters of commerce and transportation.”⁷¹ Much of the independent wealth of the religious establishment was brought under state control, and the positions of the *ulama* gradually sidelined anyway with the spread of European-style education and law. Furthermore, the alliance that had at least temporarily bound middling strata to popular groups, and which had formed an important part of the basis for the collective action of crafts and service workers was slowly dissolved. According to André Raymond,

The alliance forged [during the early 1800s] between popular elements and the Egyptian bourgeoisie, which had been for Muhammad Ali a stepping stone towards power, did not survive the victory. Their aspiration for political stability satisfied, the ulama only desired to return to ‘normal,’ which conformed to the wishes of Muhammad Ali. Willingly or unwillingly the *ra’iyya* became resigned to disarm; their chiefs, ‘Umar Makram and Hajjaj, were progressively neutralised and eliminated. The heavy weight of the authority of Muhammad Ali fell on Egypt, and the popular masses of Cairo returned to their age-old obscurity.⁷²

Moreover, the privileges and position of the Janissaries within the crafts and guilds were progressively sidelined as Mehmet Ali’s new army took shape, and then abolished after 1826 with the empire-wide elimination of the Janissary corps under Sultan Mahmud II (1808–1839). As Quataert has noted, an important barrier to state intervention in the guilds and crafts had been removed.⁷³ Finally, the sufi orders, which had overlapped with guilds to provide another organizational bulwark against state intervention were gradually brought more closely under the control of the central institutions of the state.⁷⁴ With these changes, popular forces were isolated, and the door to state intervention in guild and craft affairs lay open.

The government now used the existing shaykhs of the trades to levy new and increased taxes on the crafts and trades, as well as to requisition an apparently increasing number of goods and services. Mehmet Ali’s income tax—the *firda*—was imposed anew and reorganized in respect of the guilds after an extensive survey of guild members in the cities.⁷⁵ According to Edwin Lane, the *firda* amounted to approximately a twelfth of a man’s annual income, the maximum being a fixed rate of five hundred piastres per annum.⁷⁶ The shaykhs of the trades were responsible for assessing this tax on guild members, as state institutions still had very little information on the

income of individual guild members. In 1842, the *firda* seems to have been replaced by another tax assessed also by the guild shaykh, the *wirku*, which became over time the key income and professional tax paid by crafts and guilds until its abolition in 1890.⁷⁷ The institution of the *wirku* may have coincided with the abolition of the role of the *qadi* and his court in ratifying the selection of a guild shaykh by the senior members of a guild. This long established practice, whereby senior guild members went to court in order to declare their wishes regarding guild leadership, a symbol of the partially independent role of the religious establishment, and of the links between the guilds and *ulama*, was now abolished and the selection of the guild shaykh was now ratified by those salaried officials responsible for administering the *wirku* in the new tax bureaus. This move simultaneously symbolized and actualized state building, the secularization of the guilds, and where appointment ratification was now in the hands of tax officials, the clear predominance of taxation in state/guild relations.

Ghazaleh's work, which provides the most important recent account of guild transformation in the early nineteenth century, draws a nuanced picture of an ascendant state which both co-opted and worked with the guilds while simultaneously transforming them. In her argument, the state attempted to "enframe the guilds within another hierarchy" controlled principally by the *dabtiyya* (the reorganized police) at the local level and the nascent Interior Ministry at the central level. She notes the prime concern of the state "to benefit from the existing guild framework, while using it for the state's ends."⁷⁸ She notes that "a few of the orders sent by Muhammad Ali to his supervisors and directors in Cairo or the provinces contain references to the removal of certain shaykhs and their actual replacement by government personnel." This was a considerable intervention into a previously more autonomous domain, but it also meant a "strengthening in the role of the shaykh, who was simultaneously drawn into closer cooperation with state authorities." However, the state was not immediately in full control, for "orders sent to shaykhs to locate missing guild members and send them to the relevant authority were often repeated several times before being either obeyed or dropped."⁷⁹

Customary practice, long the dominant basis for trade regulation, and a key basis of guild autonomy, was in various cases deemed inadequate by government officials for the new concerns of organization (*tanzim*), order and discipline (*dabt wa rabt*).⁸⁰ Thus codified regulations were drafted for trades of strategic or public importance, such as pharmacists, butchers,⁸¹ couriers (*sa'is*), brokers (*simsar*), engravers of seals (*bakkakin al-abkam*), real estate brokers (*dallalin al-'aqarat*), and weighers (*qabbani*). In the case of

couriers, limits were placed on the sum that could be put in couriers' care, safeguards established where couriers carried government documents, a scale of punishments for infringements was drawn up, and the regulations also required the recording of the courier's departure and arrival and the use of receipts.⁸² As Ghazaleh notes, "[N]o reference . . . [was] made to previous practice or to old laws and common usage which were so frequently mentioned in the *mahkama* guild documents [of the eighteenth century]."⁸³ The idea that only the centralizing state could deliver order, discipline and organization worked to delegitimize customary practice and erode local autonomies based on it. Government policy, although involved in an overall project to subordinate the guilds, operated in part to "strengthen the shaykhs of the guilds" in order to deliver revenues and provisions and "simultaneously to integrate them into the growing bureaucracy."⁸⁴

Guild organization—the means by which crafts and service workers had been able to resist the French and the Mamluk Beys—was now co-opted to enforce taxation of all kinds, the very task which was putting crafts and services under new pressure. In this context, especially where craft and service workers had been isolated from middle-class allies (who were weakened in any case), organization for protest and evasion was severely restricted, and collective action was apparently sporadic, and subject to repression. Reports of punishments meted out to artisans who produced illegally indicate that artisans clearly did attempt to evade new regulations and forms of extraction.⁸⁵ Al-Jabarti chronicled an incident where Cairo's butchers, being forced to sell to the government at low prices, mounted a collective protest by shutting their shops, although it does not appear that their action was successful.⁸⁶ Bowring mentions in passing that the lower classes of Cairo were involved in an attempt to "combine and resist the authorities" who were trying to count and register the population.⁸⁷ (The connections between information and power were apparently not lost on Egypt's urban crafts and service workers in the early nineteenth century). Yet, Mehmet Ali's censuses went ahead, and protests, at least at the level of changing overall policy, were not successful. (This is not to suggest that "weapons of the weak" could not have been deployed in the encounter with the census takers). But even informal protest, when discovered, was severely punished, Mehmet Ali—in the context of widespread and heavy-handed conscription—going so far as to form a corps of the very soldiers who had mutilated themselves in order to avoid conscription.⁸⁸ Further, during the 1820s in Upper Egypt, rebellions which broke out among the peasantry in the name of Mahdist and millennialist savior leaders battling conscription and exaction were ruthlessly crushed.⁸⁹ Had such state actions

become known in the towns, as they may have through Upper Egyptian migration to Cairo and the Delta, they must have acted to discourage thoughts of rebellion in the cities.

Thus, whereas the Mamluk beys had faced significant and sometimes effective popular resistance to their extractive policies from popular constituencies in the towns, Mehmet Ali's state, in the main, seems to have preempted even the possibility of such protest.⁹⁰ Indeed, the urban guilds, which had wielded a certain corporate autonomy and had proved able to robustly defend their interests in the last days of the Mamluks, were largely co-opted in the service of the new state. Mehmet Ali's "state machine," to use Hunter's language, like analogous states emerging in Anatolia after 1826 and after the 1860s in Tunisia, "greatly augmented the power of autocratic rulers over their subjects, who became increasingly subordinated to the demands of the central administration."⁹¹ Notions of Turkish superiority over local Egyptians—often contemptuously dubbed *fallahin* (peasants)—ideologically reinforced these state institutions.⁹²

Conclusion

While the story of craft adaptation and guild transformation during the first half of the nineteenth century remains rather obscure, this chapter has attempted to draw out some important points in order to set the stage for the post-1860 period. Economic change in the crafts was far less dramatic than some of the older accounts would have us believe. Where world economic integration based on the new forces of industrial capitalism remained in its early stages, the impact of imports remained sectoral and worked against the fortunes of only certain specific trades. It is likely that in the face of Manchester, textiles—especially cotton weaving—started to employ a smaller proportion of the urban workforce. On the other hand, it is quite possible that, in a process that was to become more marked as the century wore on, weavers and others started to migrate from town to country in search of lower costs. Mehmet Ali's import substitution projects probably employed just as many artisans as they suppressed, and from 1840 onwards, crafts workers were able to return to their workshops in any case. Instead of destruction or dislocation, the available statistics indicate that crafts workers continued to employ a roughly similar proportion of Cairo's population as they had in the later eighteenth century. Further research is needed before the details of how relations of production may or may not have been restructured, but it would appear that more far-reaching transformation awaited the cotton boom of the early 1860s.

Mehmet Ali's state—for all its newfound strength—did not sweep away the existing guild structure, preferring to co-opt and subordinate the guilds in pursuit of fiscal and administrative objectives. The abolition of the Janissaries and the marginalization of the religious establishment brought the guilds closer to emerging bureaucratic institutions. Guild leaders were used as intermediaries to increase taxes and to regulate their members in new kinds of ways. It would appear that the development of Mehmet Ali's state machine began to seriously undermine the customary and institutional autonomies of the guilds. Again, further research is required before stronger conclusions can be drawn as to how guild members responded to this situation. Nonetheless, it would appear that organization and collective action remained but sporadic and weak in the face of an autonomous state, which was willing to deploy heavy repression in search of dynasty and empire.