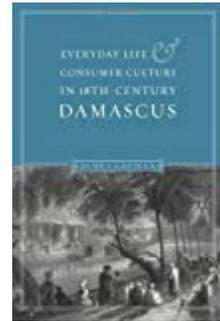




**James Grehan.** *Everyday Life and Consumer Culture in 18th-Century Damascus.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006. xvi + 310 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-98676-0.



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## **An Early Modern Middle East Consumer Society?**

James Grehan's *Everyday Life and Consumer Culture in 18th-Century Damascus* is an impressive work marred by a summary conclusion that a consumer society was not emerging in this important urban center. The author might have been better served by withholding a definitive judgment and awaiting completion of other projects that would allow comparison of his results with others that are different in time.

That said, one must count Grehan's study among the more exciting books that have appeared in the fields of Ottoman and Middle East history in recent years. Grehan's rich, vivid descriptions constitute an initial step in the process of approximating patterns and modes of daily life in eighteenth-century Damascus. In the pages of his study, the lives of Middle Easterners in historic time are shown to have been quite different from ours in this age of hyper-consumption and the construction of identity through possession. In these pages, eighteenth-century Damascus does appear as a distinctly different place and era. For example, he demonstrates the centrality of food to local consumption patterns, including the value placed on pure, clean water. And yet, despite the initial promise

of consumption analysis, this vivid social history is not driven by a thoroughgoing effort to apply this particular analytical apparatus to the study of history.

A set of 1,000 probate inventories gleaned from the Damascus court records of 1750-1763 constitutes the basis for Grehan's analysis. However, the nature of these sources—lists of the material items that some individual Damascenes wished to record as components of their legacies—limits their utility for the study of consumption. Moreover, they capture only a single moment in time, just past the mid eighteenth-century mark. This synchronic mode of analysis is characteristic of Grehan's entire study, for, with a few exceptions, there is precious little sense of change over time. The author seems trapped in his evidentiary basis that is fixed on one chronological point. Achievement of the author's main goal—to establish whether or not a consumer society was developing in Damascus—is subverted. To be fair, Grehan clearly states his position on this issue, concluding that a consumer society was not emergent during this period. To my mind, however, this is more an assertion than a fact established by the data Grehan presents. While I am grateful to the

author for the portraits of poverty that he presents, he does not demonstrate relative changes in consumption levels of foodstuffs or other commodities, or changes in the size or use of residential spaces over the course of the eighteenth century. Changes in such patterns seem essential to understanding evolving patterns of daily life in eighteenth-century Damascus.

In his conclusion, for example, Grehan discusses the doubling of wheat prices in the eighteenth century, a period during which coffee and tobacco prices remained stable. This, he argues, proves the absence of large-scale consumerism, for this would have driven up prices of the latter two commodities. However, a different argument is quite plausible. One could assert that the elasticity of coffee and tobacco prices caused suppliers to take care retaining the loyalty of a growing legion of buyers. But grain was a very different kind of commodity, essential to survival and thus inelastic in price. Here the author might have also looked to the larger empire outside the Arab provinces and, perhaps, to mounting European demand for Balkan and Anatolian wheat, a force that encouraged wheat exports, thereby reducing supplies and causing prices to climb in Damascus. Or, why not compare local with global wheat prices? The necessary sources are readily available.

In the end, the residents of eighteenth-century Damascus appear rather inert and passive in the face of changing conditions, despite Grehan's discussion of the many bread riots that the city experienced during this period. Indeed, the author's analysis would have benefited by tracking changes in the relative frequency of such riots over a longer time period, rather than focusing on these events as a priori proof of deteriorating conditions. To repeat, the major shortcoming of Grehan's study is the absence of a theoretical structure informing its analysis. In fairness, he does briefly discuss consumption studies in the introduction and returns to the subject with more satisfactory results in his conclusion. But, as previously stated, consumption analysis does not appear to inform

his study as a whole. In the end, *Everyday Life and Consumer Culture in 18th-Century Damascus* remains a very good social history, but a weak consumption study. Consumption studies, whether European, American, Middle Eastern, or East Asian, have much to offer analyses of the past. Many years ago (as the author notes) Jan de Vries wrote persuasively, if provocatively, of the "industrious revolution" that was prompted by the perception of increasing desire to obtain more commodities to eat, drink, wear, or otherwise consume. That is, such desires must have caused them to work harder and longer, practices that changed the very structure of the economy and society. Studies of the eighteenth-century imperial elites in the Ottoman capital and of eighteenth-century Ottoman sumptuary legislation clearly demonstrate dramatic changes in both consumption patterns and the Ottoman social formation.[1]

Grehan has given us a wonderful presentation of consumption patterns in Damascus but not much of an understanding of how and why these patterns changed. In fact, his analysis is curiously static; rather, the Damascene consumption patterns he portrays seem so. Admittedly, detecting change over time is an elusive and difficult goal for historians to achieve. The failure to do so in this case can, I suspect, be attributed to both the nature of the sources on which Grehan relies and the analysis to which he subjected these sources.

These criticisms aside, *Everyday Life and Consumer Culture in 18th-Century Damascus* represents an excellent step in the further development of Ottoman consumption studies, and one whose topic merits additional study by the author.

#### Note

[1]. For example, Donald Quataert, "Clothing Laws, State and Society in the Ottoman Empire, 1720-1826," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 3 (August 1997): 403-425.

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