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The Impact of Epidemics on Artisans and Craft Production in the Regency of Algiers (1671–1830)

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***Abstract*—**Epidemics constituted one of the most significant crises experienced by the Regency of Algiers during the period of the Deys, given the human losses and the economic and social repercussions they generated. The recurrent waves of plague had a pronounced impact on craft activity, leading to a decline in the number of artisans and disrupting certain crafts and aspects of production. These crises also affected the availability of raw materials and contributed to an increase in the prices of craft products. This article examines the nature of these epidemics, the main factors contributing to their spread, and their repercussions on artisans and craft activity, in addition to identifying the principal responses and measures adopted by the authorities to address them.

***Keywords*—**Craft activity, Regency of Algiers, Epidemics, Period of the Deys, Authority, Craft production.

Introduction:

Perhaps the most prominent characteristic of the period of the Deys was the widespread prevalence of numerous diseases and epidemics, which adversely affected social and economic conditions, including craft activity, which was widespread throughout various parts of the Regency. The principal cause may be attributed to the transmission of infections from neighboring countries, owing to Algeria's connections with the countries of the Mediterranean basin, its openness to the regions of the Sudan, and its links with the Islamic East. Therefore, the most significant diseases and epidemics and their impact on craft activity can be examined as follows:

1. Major Epidemics and Their Causes during the Period of the Deys:

During this period, the population of Algeria suffered from several diseases and epidemics, among the most serious of which were intermittent and recurrent fevers, spring fever, known as yellow fever, and summer fever, all of which caused a considerable number of deaths [1]. Among these diseases were:

a- Plague Epidemic:

The plague epidemic is considered one of the most dangerous diseases to have afflicted Algeria. Most sources, including the accounts of European and local travelers, agree that the disease constituted a persistent threat to the population and recurred in successive waves. This may be attributed to several factors, which can be summarized as follows:

- Climate: Although numerous writings confirmed that Algeria's climate was healthy and favorable, as reflected in the French reports prepared on the climate of the city of Algiers during the early years following the beginning of the French occupation of Algeria, these reports emphasized that Algeria enjoyed a moderate climate comparable to that of many European countries. During winter, temperatures did not exceed 16°C, while in summer they did not exceed 26°C[2].

Several sources likewise confirmed this view. William Shaler stated that Algeria enjoyed a healthy atmosphere and a moderate, pleasant climate, being neither excessively hot in summer nor extremely cold in winter [3]. Hamdan Khodja, however, presented a contrasting view, citing the Mitidja Plain as an example, which he considered a breeding ground for several diseases, such as fevers that appeared at different times and affected the inhabitants of the region. He attributed this to the presence of numerous swamps, as well as stagnant

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and harmful waters in the area [4].

- The transmission of the epidemic through overland routes from the eastern and western borders by means of pilgrim caravans that passed through several regions, including Alexandria, thereby bringing epidemics with them [5]. Epidemics were also transmitted via maritime routes, particularly through pilgrimage ships that passed through several Arab countries, such as Egypt, in addition to ships carrying sailors arriving in Algeria from the Sublime Porte. This was mentioned by Al-Zahhar, who stated: "...when the ships sent from Istanbul arrived, the epidemic came with them to Algeria"[6].
- The lack of interest in medical sciences and ignorance of health regulations, which were among the principal factors contributing to the spread of epidemics in Algeria and were almost pervasive. Simon Pfiefer pointed out that there was no skilled physician following the decline of Arab medicine[7]. The scarcity of physicians in Algeria enabled European physicians among the captives to assume an important position in Algerian society, as reflected in their close relationships with members of the ruling authorities. This can be observed in Simon Pfiefer's statement: "...I was transformed from a cook and a persecuted young man, subjected to mistreatment by the cooks and the other Turks, into the private physician of Khaznaji Effendi..." [8].

The most significant periods during which the Regency experienced outbreaks of the plague epidemic include:

- **The 1740 Epidemic:** This was one of the most severe epidemics to affect Algeria. It lasted for three consecutive years and, at its onset, caused approximately three to four hundred deaths per day. The number of fatalities subsequently declined, reaching between forty and fifty deaths per day, until the epidemic eventually disappeared completely [9].
- **The 1784 Epidemic:** The epidemic initially struck the city of Algiers and subsequently spread to several cities in the west, eventually reaching Tlemcen in 1790. Lucette Valensi discussed this epidemic by providing statistics on the number of deaths. She stated that approximately one-third of the population of Algeria perished, attributing this high mortality rate to the prolonged duration of the epidemic, which lasted for more than six years. She also highlighted the impact of the epidemic on several craft activities, particularly wool weaving and clothing production, in which the number of weavers declined considerably as a result of the epidemic. Indeed, "...only one master craftsman remained in the city of Algiers in 1786; this led to an increase in the quantity of wool exported to the Africa Company as a result of the decline in the number of Arab weavers, who were no longer able to process the wool..."

- The 1793 Epidemic: It reached Algeria from the eastern borders through the Algerian land army. The eastern regions were particularly severely affected; however, the country was free of the epidemic by 1799.

- The 1817 Epidemic: It spread from the eastern and western borders through pilgrim caravans and continued until 1823. Lucette Valensi demonstrated the extent of the damage it inflicted on the eastern cities, citing the city of Annaba as an example, where the number of deaths increased significantly. She stated: "...one painfully realizes the devastation caused by the plague there when one sees two-thirds of the houses in the city closed...."[10].

These epidemics spread more extensively in densely populated areas, such as prisons, military barracks, and popular neighborhoods [11].

2. The Repercussions of Epidemics on Artisans and Craft Activity:

The discussion of the epidemics that affected Algeria during the period of the Deys aims to identify their adverse impact on craft activity, which manifested itself in several ways, the most important of which are:

- **The impact on the demographic situation**, reflected in the decline in the population and, consequently, in the number of artisans. This was confirmed by Lucette Valensi, who cited artisans specializing in wool weaving and clothing production as an example. During the final years of the period of the Deys, Algeria witnessed a significant decline in the number of weavers as a result of deaths caused by the epidemic[12].

In this regard, Aïcha Ghaṭṭās noted a decline in the number of silk weavers during the final years of the period of the Deys, particularly between 1817 and 1826, as a result of several problems that contributed to the deaths of numerous artisans, including the epidemics that affected the country during this period [13].

- **The shortage of raw materials:** These epidemics, together with natural disasters, contributed to shortages of raw materials used in various crafts, whether of animal or plant origin, given that most of these materials came from rural areas, which were themselves severely affected.
- **The rise in the prices of numerous craft products:** These epidemics were accompanied by a significant decline in production, consequently resulting in an increase in prices [14].

3. The Authorities' Approach to Epidemics:

After examining numerous historical writings, it appears that the ruling authorities did not adopt a clear policy to confront these epidemics and mitigate their severity, particularly in light of the population's limited interest in medicine. The writings of travelers and captives rarely mention the presence of physicians in Algeria. This is clearly demonstrated by Simon Pfiefer, who complained to his master about the loss of his medical books that had been available in his homeland and asked him to bring medical books and surgical instruments to Algeria [15].

The belief in divine decree and destiny generally prevailed among the population. During this period, the inhabitants of the Regency had only limited knowledge of medicine, as can be inferred from Pfiefer's statement: "...as for the greatest ordeal, it comes from those who are called physicians (whether physician, healer, or surgeon), for they truly torture people with poisons and fire, and no person who falls into their hands escapes their torment..." He also stated that medicine in Algeria was limited to certain herbs and plants used for treatment [16]. The members of the ruling authorities, however, resorted to foreign physicians when they fell ill, and these physicians eventually came to occupy an important position among them and enjoyed numerous privileges [17].

The Christians residing in Algeria also employed various methods of treatment. For example, to treat the fever that afflicted the galley slaves, the ship's captain would force them to row and provide them with dried bread, water, and salted meat, which helped induce perspiration and hastened their recovery from the disease[18].

In addition, the authorities failed to adopt preventive measures capable of preventing epidemics from reaching Algerian territory. In 1817, for instance, the authorities allowed several ships arriving from Istanbul and Izmir to dock at the port of Algiers, at a time when the epidemic had already emerged in these areas[19].

Abu al-Qasim Saadallah summarized the authorities' position toward epidemics by stating that there was considerable negligence, attributable to the absence of a clear policy for confronting these epidemics [20]. In many instances, rulers would flee with their families to areas far from populated settlements and would not return until the epidemic had subsided. One example was the Bey of Oran, "Uthman Bey," who fled in 1794 to the Mleta Plain after Oran was struck by the epidemic.

Furthermore, many rulers failed to pay sufficient attention to the affairs of their subjects during periods of famine. This was the case with Bey Abdallah in 1804, when famine struck Constantine. The latter did not take any measures to reduce grain prices, as reported by Mohammed al-Salih Ibn al-Antari: "...there is no record that he opened the Beylik's granaries, for example, and distributed some grain among the needy, or provided them with loans from the treasury to compensate for what had befallen them..."[21].

Although the authorities in Algeria did not have a clearly defined policy for confronting these disasters and diseases during that period, this did not prevent them from adopting a number of measures and implementing certain stringent procedures during periods of epidemics, such as imposing quarantine on individuals arriving in Algeria whose health condition was considered suspicious [22].

In addition, several prominent figures in Algerian society during this period took an interest in exploring methods of preventing epidemics. Among them was Hamdan Khodja, who demonstrated particular interest in medical science and authored a work entitled *Ithaf al-Munsifin wa al-Adab fi al-Ihtiras min al-Waba'* ("A Gift to the Just and Cultured on Protection against Epidemics"), in which he discussed the ways through which epidemics spread, as well as methods of treating and preventing them [23].

The authorities also adopted several measures during periods of famine to address the rising prices of various commodities, particularly wheat, which was used by bakers in different cities of the Regency. This was achieved by monitoring prices and weights through the establishment of an administrative body composed of several craft guild officials, notables, the *muhtasib*, the judge, and the *Agha*, who represented the military authority. This body determined the price or weight of bread and submitted its proposal to the Dey, who could either amend or reject it [24].

The authorities also adopted a more flexible approach to tax collection from the inhabitants of the Regency, particularly those living in rural areas, during periods of natural disasters. Nasser Eddine Saïdouni mentioned that the authorities would refrain from collecting taxes or reduce their amount as a measure intended to alleviate the impact of these epidemics[25].

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the epidemics experienced by the Regency of Algiers during the period of the Deys were not merely temporary health crises; rather, they constituted a significant factor affecting various aspects of economic and social life, with craft activity being among the sectors most severely affected. The recurrence of epidemics, particularly the plague, resulted in a substantial increase in mortality and a decline in the population, which directly affected the number of artisans and the availability of skilled labor.

These crises also contributed to the weakening of certain crafts, particularly wool weaving and clothing production, which witnessed a notable decline in the number of artisans during some waves of plague. The impact of epidemics was not confined to the human element but also extended to the availability of raw materials and the decline in production, which, in turn, contributed to an increase in the prices of certain craft products.

On the other hand, these crises revealed the limited capacity of medical resources and the absence of a clear and organized health policy for confronting them, despite the authorities' adoption of a number of measures during certain periods, including quarantine, alongside the emergence of individual initiatives aimed at addressing prevention and treatment.

Accordingly, it can be argued that epidemics during the period of the Deys caused significant disruption to craft activity through their effects on artisans, production, raw materials, and prices. This confirms that the health conditions of the population were closely connected to the stability of economic life and the continuity of craft activity in the Regency of Algiers.

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Notes

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[4] Hamdan bin Othman Khodja, *Al-Mir'āt*, *op. cit.*, pp. 85–86.

[5] Lucette Valensi, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

[6] Ahmed Cherif Al-Zahhar, *op. cit.*, p.

[7] Simon Pfiefer, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

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