

## The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 5 (2008)

Histoires de Frontières



### Reassessing Wheat Crises in Eighteenth-century Thessaloniki

*Basil C. Gounaris*

doi: [10.12681/hr.220](https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.220)

#### To cite this article:

Gounaris, B. C. (2009). Reassessing Wheat Crises in Eighteenth-century Thessaloniki. *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, 5, 41–65. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.220>

REASSESSING WHEAT CRISES  
IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY THESSALONIKI\*

*Basil C. Gounaris*

---

ABSTRACT: Wheat crises and local riots in eighteenth-century Thessaloniki are not unknown to scholars. However, all the relative conclusions are based mostly on Svoronos' and Iliadou's indexes rather than on additional research of primary sources. Therefore, much space has been given to speculation and various issues have been left without proper examination. This paper seeks to explore, through the study of the French consular correspondence, if there was a common pattern in all wheat crises; why did not all crises develop into open revolts; and, who were the basic participants in the making and management of the crises. It asserts that the development of wheat shortages into popular riots was the outcome of local commercial interests and calculated petty politics, not of famine.

---

The story of wheat crises in Ottoman-ruled Thessaloniki is not an untold one. Svoronos made random reference to such events accompanied occasionally by local riots. He also produced elaborate tables with the fluctuation of wheat prices and exports in his now classic *Le commerce de Salonique au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1956).<sup>1</sup> But he did not enter into a systematic discussion of the crises. Partly based on Svoronos' data is the extensive paper by Asdrachas on markets and the price of wheat in eighteenth-century Thessaloniki and Patmos.<sup>2</sup> His main target was to correlate wheat market prices between the exporting East and the importing West, namely Marseille. Although using scant evidence, he suggested that the correlation between export and local market prices in Thessaloniki was not significant, due to the mediation of the guilds and the tariffs imposed on locally consumed goods. Guilds and tariffs were some of the factors and mechanisms, he wrote, which regulated prices to such an extent that historically documented shortages are not clearly reflected on price series.<sup>3</sup> However, he did not enter into a more detailed discussion of other factors and

---

\* This paper has benefited from comments and amendments suggested by Prof. John Alexandropoulos and Prof. John S. Koliopoulos, as well as by my friends and colleagues Dr Dimitris Livanios and Dr Phokion Kotzageorgis.

<sup>1</sup> In this paper I have used the Greek translation: Nikos G. Svoronos, *Το εμπόριο της Θεσσαλονίκης τον 18ο αιώνα*, Athens 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Spyros I. Asdrachas, "Marchés et prix du blé en Grèce au XVIIIe siècle", *Südost-Forschungen* 31 (1972), pp. 178-209.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 192-93.

mechanisms. Kostis used the example of Thessaloniki, especially of the 1740 and 1756 famines – to the extent that was possible through the indexes of Svoronos and Iliadou –<sup>4</sup> in order to examine whether food crises were the result of physical phenomena or political constraints. He argued that war had exhausted local supplies rather than bad crops; but the management and the magnitude of the crises depended on circumstantial factors such as the possibility to attract random imports by offering free market prices and the relevant interests of the local janissary force.<sup>5</sup> The important role of the janissaries in food crises as leaders of the Thessaloniki mob – “unconvincing Robin Hoods” – is mentioned by Mazower as well, who also stressed the division between the actual companies of the guards and the local standing companies, janissaries in name only, petty-traders and shopkeepers in reality.<sup>6</sup> Both Kostis and Mazower were right in their general remarks. But the story has never been told in detail and certain basic questions still seek answers: Was there a common pattern in all wheat crises? If there was, then why did they not all develop into open revolts? Was a serious shortage of food a sufficient reason to cause the uprising of city dwellers against the authorities? Who were the basic players in this game of political attrition? What was the exact role of the foreigners, namely the French, who were the chief exporters of wheat? Such questions will be discussed in this paper.

### *The Making of the 1740 Famine*

It was in late March 1738 when a fleet of some 30 light cargo ships (*saiques*) reached the Bay of Thessaloniki to load large quantities of wheat and carry them to Constantinople, which was already suffering from famine.<sup>7</sup> At the

<sup>4</sup> N. G. Svoronos, *Salonique et Cavalla (1686-1792)*, Paris 1951; Democratie Iliadou, *Inventaire des documents des Archives de la Chambre de Commerce de Marseille. Lemme Salonique (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècle)*, Thessaloniki 1981.

<sup>5</sup> Kostas Kostis, *Αφορία, ακρίβεια και πείνα. Οι κρίσεις διατροφής στην ελληνική χερσόνησο (1650-1830). Προβλήματα προσέγγισης και εμπειρικές ενδείξεις* [Scarcity, high prices and famine: food crises in the Greek peninsula (1650-1830): problems of approach and empirical indications], Athens 1993, pp. 108-115. See also Myrsini Athanasiadou, *Εμπορικές σχέσεις Θεσσαλονίκης-Βενετίας κατά τον 18ο αιώνα* [Commercial relations between Thessaloniki and Venice during the eighteenth century], Katerini 2006, pp. 357-61, who simply quotes Asdrachas' and Kostis' comments.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Mazower, *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims, and Jews, 1430-1950*, London 2004, pp. 102-104.

<sup>7</sup> For an almost contemporary description of Thessaloniki (1734) by an eyewitness, see Artemi Xanthopoulou-Kyriakou, “Περιγραφή της Θεσσαλονίκης στα 1734 από τον Père Jean-Baptiste Souciet” [Description of Thessaloniki in 1734 by Father Jean-Baptiste Souciet], *Makedonika* 8 (1968), pp. 185-209.

same time a Dutch vessel was chartered to convey wheat from Barbary, the northern African coast, to Larissa, where the janissaries had already been ordered to assemble and march to the Austrian front against the forces of Count Lothair Josef Königsegg. Just two months before harvest, army provisions included quantities of wheat, which by then were indispensable for the local population, struggling to make ends meet. The mission of the Dutch vessel to Africa clearly shows that the resources of Thessaloniki had been entirely drained. Indeed, we have evidence that the undue pressure exercised by the deputy governor, Mehmet Pasha, upon the Christians of the Thessaloniki *kaza* to deliver grain, means of transport, as well as cash, had brought them to their knees. This was perhaps why conversion to Islam among them was running so high during March of that year.<sup>8</sup> In another letter the French consul, Thomas de Jonville, explained that the shortage of grain and the high prices were due not only to the provisioning of the capital and the increased needs of the army stationed in the vicinity of Thessaloniki but also to the cruelties perpetrated by the Ottomans against the “Greeks of Bulgaria and Macedonia” since the recapturing of Nish in October 1737 by Grand Vizier Ahmed Köprülü himself.<sup>9</sup> All the villages – of an unknown area – had been deserted and ample fields had not been sown.<sup>10</sup> Such reasoning suggests that, under normal circumstances, Thessaloniki might have expected supplies to come from as far north as Skopje. In any case, the loading of the *saiques* was prolonged for some six weeks, until 7 May, when they sailed for Constantinople escorted by two heavily armed warships.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> ANF [= Archives Nationales de France], B1/995, Thomas to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 31 March 1738, ff. 35<sup>v</sup>-36<sup>v</sup>. See document 168 dated 22 March 1738 in Ioannis K. Vasdravellis (ed.), *Ιστορικά αρχεία Μακεδονίας. Αρχείο Θεσσαλονίκης, 1695-1912* [Historical archives of Macedonia: the archive of Thessaloniki, 1695-1912], Vol. I, Thessaloniki 1952, p. 218; Karl A. Roeder, *The Reluctant Ally: Austria's Policy in the Austro-Turkish War, 1737-1739*, Baton Rouge 1972, pp. 135 ff.

<sup>9</sup> The term “Greek” is used by the French consuls, most of the time, to denote Greek-Orthodox populations. For the details of recapturing Nish, see also Roeder, *The Reluctant Ally*, p. 113, and by the same author, *Austria's Eastern Question, 1700-1790*, Princeton 1982, pp. 71-90.

<sup>10</sup> ANF, B1/995, Thomas to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 21 April 1738, ff. 46<sup>v</sup>-47<sup>r</sup>. In a previous document the enslaved Christian population in the town and district of Nish was estimated at 25,000 women and children, let alone the heavy casualties of a mass slaughter; see ANF, B1/994, Thomas to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 18 November 1737, f. 337<sup>v</sup>. This cruelty could be attributed to the activities of a “Greek merchant”, who had assembled 3000 men in the district of Skopje, at the time when Nish was besieged: ANF, B1/994, Thomas to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 12 August 1737, f. 257<sup>r-v</sup>; cf. Svoronos, *Εμπόριο*, p. 50.

<sup>11</sup> ANF, B1/995, Thomas to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 26 April 1738, f. 52<sup>v</sup>, and 9 June 1738, f. 58<sup>v</sup>.

It is reasonable to assume that the remaining weeks of May and June were not very pleasant. By early July 1738 it was clear that the crop had been abundant, but the prohibition of grain exports, imposed in 1723, was neither lifted officially nor relaxed.<sup>12</sup> The price of wheat was no less expensive than it had been in December 1737, more than 50 *paras* per *kile*.<sup>13</sup> It had dropped to 42 *paras*, by the time – in mid-August – the Porte sent the necessary capital to collect in two months time 11,500 *kile* of wheat and 50,000 *kile* of barley and to dispatch them to the capital. The price offered to producers was no more than 20 *paras* per *kile*, which was an absolute disaster for them.<sup>14</sup> Any prospect for export vanished, as all policing measures were severely observed throughout the Winter of 1738-1739. Prices, however, did not exceed 44-45 *paras*, apparently due to the considerable stock already assembled in the city.<sup>15</sup>

This stock tempted the Sublime Porte. In mid-February 1739 a war vessel escorted ten *saiques* to the Bay of Thessaloniki with orders to load additional wheat for Constantinople.<sup>16</sup> Two months later Thomas assigned a ship to search the coast for wheat. It was soon to be followed by a few others; but they all failed to find wheat less expensive than 55 *paras* per *kile*. By that time, in late April, it had become obvious that the forthcoming crop was at risk. A note from a local church codex mentions that snow fell on 1 April 1739 and frost destroyed both grain fields and vineyards. It was followed by a drought. The French consul prayed to God and he was not the only one to do so. Muslims started public prayers too.<sup>17</sup> For the time being God was on their side. In late

<sup>12</sup> Iliadou, *Inventaire*, p. 148. Illegal transactions were frequent and in fact taken for granted by both wheat merchants and the aghas who controlled wheat trade; see Svoronos, *Εμπόριο*, pp. 310-314 and note 155 for official permissions in 1723 and 1745.

<sup>13</sup> ANF, B1/995, Thomas to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 3 July 1738, f. 69<sup>v</sup>. From 1721 to 1740 the official tariff for export prices of wheat was 60 *paras* per *kile* (Svoronos, *Εμπόριο*, p. 114).

<sup>14</sup> ANF, B1/995, Thomas to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 28 August 1738, f. 108<sup>r</sup>. Svoronos read “115 mille” instead of “11.5 mille” (Svoronos, *Εμπόριο*, p. 112, table 10). Although the *ishtira* tax of Thessaloniki (including the regions of Yanitsa and Veroia) in the late eighteenth century was 120,000 *kile*, it is somehow odd, given the defective sowing, that the Porte might have asked for the maximum quantity. Still, considering what was to follow, Svoronos may have been right to correct this low figure given in the document.

<sup>15</sup> ANF, B1/995, Thomas to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 30 December 1738, f. 181<sup>v</sup>, and 15 January 1739, f. 186<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> ANF, B1/995, Thomas to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 10 March 1739, f. 211<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> Sotirios Kissas, “Από την ιστορία της Θεσσαλονίκης στο 18ο αιώνα. Ο χαμένος κώδικας του Αγίου Κωνσταντίνου” [Fragments from the eighteenth-century history of Thessaloniki: the lost codex of St Constantinos], *Grigorios o Palamas 737* (1991), p. 254;

May rain started to fall. It went on for more than a week, renewing hopes for an abundant crop. Rain also saved the head of the local *kadı*, who was officially in charge of price regulation and of exports abroad. Rumours had been circulating that he had reserved the remaining grain to push its price upward and thus gain extra profit for himself. Had it not been for the rain even sedition was probable.<sup>18</sup>

Wheat prices, however, did not drop neither in June nor in July, when it was realised that the crop was fairly abundant in the Kavala region, in present Eastern Greek Macedonia, but less so in the Vardar (Axios) valley and in the plains of Thessaly.<sup>19</sup> In early August Thomas reported that, despite the successful crop, extreme shortage kept the price as high as 50 *paras* per *kile*. He complained that he had to send his dragoman ten times a day to the powerful beys in order to secure the flour necessary for the hardtack which the local French bakeries prepared for French crews. Although French export did take place that year – I estimate some 12,800 *kile* –<sup>20</sup> this time rumours pointed to the local notables; they were widely suspected, very much like the *kadı* before them, of hiding the reserves to achieve even higher prices.<sup>21</sup> In the following two months, although wheat sufficiency seemed to have been restored, prices did not drop below 50 *paras*.<sup>22</sup> The worst part was yet to come.

It is reasonable to assume that the *kadı* and the agha of the janissaries as well the other principal aghas of Thessaloniki were aware that unless immediate

---

ANF, B1/995, Thomas to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 10 April 1739, f. 216<sup>v</sup>; 22 April 1739, f. 238<sup>v</sup>; 17 May 1739, f. 242<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> ANF, B1/995, Thomas to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 28 May 1739, f. 275<sup>v</sup>. Instead of the term *kadı* throughout the documents the term *mollah* is used, apparently as a sign of courtesy for the judge. For the detailed duties of the *kadı* concerning wheat exports see N. Todorov, *Η βαλκανική πόλη, 15ος-19ος αιώνας* [The Balkan city, fifteenth-nineteenth centuries], Vol. I, Athens 1986, pp. 144-46, and George Salakides, “The Provisioning of Istanbul with Wheat in Turbulent Times: Yenişehir in Thessaly at the End of the 18th Century”, *Balkan Studies* 43/2 (2002), pp. 132-35. Exports were prohibited unless permission by the *kadı* was granted for a specific quantity.

<sup>19</sup> In fact there was one export of wheat from Kavala to Marseille in 1739 (Georgios Koutzakiotis, *L'échelle de Cavalla et l'arrière-pays au XVIIIe siècle. Commerce occidental et notabilité ottomane*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Paris I-Panthéon-Sorbonne 2004, p. 105).

<sup>20</sup> See Svoronos, *Εμπόριο*, p. 312, table 18, where the total value of wheat exports from Thessaloniki and its dependencies in 1739 is estimated at 16,000 piastres.

<sup>21</sup> ANF, B1/995, Thomas to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 10 July 1739, ff. 293<sup>v</sup>-294<sup>r</sup>, and 3 August 1739, f. 304<sup>r-v</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> ANF, B1/995, Thomas to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 1 September 1739, f. 316<sup>v</sup>, and 15 October 1739, f. 333<sup>v</sup>.

measures were taken their own heads would be at stake. It was just in 1720 that the inhabitants of Larissa had sent off their *kadi* to Constantinople chained as a criminal and had cut into pieces an agha who had dared to hide significant quantities of wheat. That same year (1720) Muslim women and children demonstrated in Thessaloniki asking their own *kadi* to distribute bread. He was so frightened that he sought refuge in the quarters of his harem and from there he directed the bakers accordingly.<sup>23</sup> No one wanted such scenes to be repeated in 1739. If the mob could not be appeased, then responsibilities had to be shaken off. Therefore Monsieur Thomas, the French consul, was invited on 4 November to their quarters and was encouraged to ask the local French merchants to send vessels to Syria, Anatolia or elsewhere to buy wheat. The Ottoman officials were willing to offer a written guarantee that the wheat purchased offshore would then be bought at a price higher than the local one by a whole piastre. The French were not convinced and declined the offer. Considering the aforementioned rumours against the powerful élite, the consul thought, it was obvious that they had their own profit in mind rather than the welfare of Thessaloniki. Apparently they would then sell their own supply at a higher price, the same offered for the imported wheat loads. Thomas worried that if things went wrong and the mission was in vain, then the Muslim notables would put the blame on the French. Thus, in case of sedition, which was not unlikely, the *Francs* would be the scapegoats. The consul suggested instead that the aghas should charter French vessels, appoint trusted people furnished with the necessary letters of reference, and then dispatch them all around. The aghas refused. Thomas was convinced that in fact the whole set up was to embarrass the French and denounce them altogether for the imminent famine which only their avarice and lack of providence had caused. Then he asked his colleagues – including de Peleran in Smyrna – to warn all French vessels not to come to Thessaloniki without sufficient supplies of hardtack. They were unlikely to find such a kind of supply there at reasonable prices, if they were to find anything edible at all. Famine was at the gates of the city.<sup>24</sup>

According to Svoronos, one month later wheat was sold in Thessaloniki at 5.5 piastres per *kile*. In his adjacent table of prices it looks as if it had grown more than fourfold in six weeks.<sup>25</sup> But it had not. In the original French

<sup>23</sup> ANF, B1/991, de Boismont to the Regent, Thessaloniki, 4 May 1720, f. 186<sup>r-v</sup>. Cf. Svoronos, *Εμπόριο*, p. 55.

<sup>24</sup> ANF, B1/995, Thomas to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 6 November 1739, ff. 341<sup>r</sup>-343<sup>v</sup>, and 12 November 1739, f. 350<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> Svoronos, *Εμπόριο*, pp. 112-113, table 10 in particular.

document the measure is explicitly mentioned as “quillot de Salonique”, which was four times heavier than the standard *kile* of Constantinople, already in use by the French, as Svoronos himself mentioned. In any case, in early December two French vessels, loaded with wheat from Syria, anchored in the Bay of Thessaloniki. Thomas speedily approached the captains to clarify their intentions. They both agreed that a price of 50 *paras* per *kile* would secure for them an “honest profit”. He then informed the *kadi* and the agha of the janissaries that, the current market price (*prix fixé*) being slightly more than 55 *paras* per *kile*, he had asked the French not to claim more than 52 *paras*. All the notables were very much obliged by the offer and praised the French for being such good friends of their empire; the two captains were no less obliged for the unexpected bonus of ten *aspra* per *kile*, i.e. an extra four per cent profit.<sup>26</sup>

Apparently through the consulates news of quick profit spread rapidly in the French commercial navy. In January two more vessels sold their cargo of wheat at the Thessaloniki market at 50 *paras* per *kile*. French vessels also took over the transportation of 25,000 *kile* of wheat from the vicinity of Kavala (the Gulf of Orfanos, then known as the Gulf of Contessa) to Thessaloniki, initially scheduled to meet army needs exclusively. The sultan, having signed with the Austrians – in September 1739 – the victorious Treaty of Belgrade, had no reason to reject the petition for assistance, which had been submitted by the Thessaloniki notables.<sup>27</sup> For a city with a population of some 60,000 and under normal circumstances, 25,000 *kile* should have been sufficient for a couple of weeks.<sup>28</sup> The French continued to transport loads of wheat from Eastern (present Greek) Macedonia or elsewhere throughout March, April and May, but they were unable to create a surplus adequate to push prices downwards

<sup>26</sup> ANF, B1/995, Thomas to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 5 December 1739, ff. 354v-355v. All prices in this document referred to *kile* of Constantinople but have been calculated accordingly to correspond to *kile* of Thessaloniki. The price offered to the French captains by the consul was *five piastres and two centimes*. I think this figure should be written as “5.2 piasters” (624 *aspra*). If this is so – given that the net reduction is explicitly mentioned to have been 40 *aspra* – then the local market price of wheat must have been 664 *aspra* per *kile* of Constantinople or 55.3 *paras* per *kile* of Thessaloniki.

<sup>27</sup> ANF, B1/996, Thomas to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 20 January 1740, f. 2v.

<sup>28</sup> For the calculation see Evangelia Balta, “Το ψωμί στον ελληνικό χώρο κατά την οθωμανική περίοδο” [Bread in Greek territory during the Ottoman period] in *Ο “άρτος ημών”*. Από το σιτάρι στο ψωμί. Τριήμερο εργασίας, Πήλιο, 10-12 Απριλίου 1992 [“Our daily bread”: from wheat to bread: a three-day conference, Mount Pelion, 10-12 April 1992], Athens 1994, p. 242 and note 72.



and relieve the poorer classes.<sup>29</sup> In early April the forthcoming harvest looked promising, but prices in the city fluctuated between 55 and 60 *paras* per *kile*. What was even more important, circumstantial help could not eliminate the risk of famine, which was running high all the time, threatening even the wealthier classes. Misery was exceptional. The pasha was reluctant to accept the terms suggested by certain “capitalists” in order to supply the city with wheat. Apparently he did not wish to raise their margins of profit and thus to accelerate a public outburst, when some French captains still found the current prices profitable. Lacking flour, the bakeries of the British, the Venetian and the Dutch consulates came to a standstill. The agony went on until mid-May, when a final load from Panomi (modern Epanomi), a village in the vicinity with a sea outlet, secured survival until the harvest. According to other unofficial sources the final load of wheat arrived from Volos.<sup>30</sup> The new crop of barley became available to the city on the feast day of the Apostles, 30 June.<sup>31</sup>

Meanwhile, in late April a quantity of millet, which was kept at the warehouses of the citadel, was used for the preparation of flour.<sup>32</sup> If we consider as reliable the testimony of Dimitrios Choidas,<sup>33</sup> the consul of Venice, this kind of “small millet” proved to be totally inappropriate: it caused fever. Another codex note argues that it was not a matter of kind or size; the millet was simply rotten because it was old. It was the worst bread that the city had experienced since 1715, when the war versus Venice over the Peloponnese was at its most critical stage. Deaths multiplied and went on for some months, but it is hard to say whether the cause was food poisoning of an ill-fed population with compromised health, fever and hunger or, most likely, judging from the figures, the duration and the rate of deaths, some other epidemic disease. In any case, according to the same note, the total death toll was 7511 inhabitants (3935

---

<sup>29</sup> This has nothing to do with the two fires which broke out in January and February but demolished only some hostels and houses; see ANF, B1/996, Thomas to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 13 February 1740, f. 32<sup>v</sup>, and 4 March 1740, f. 38<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> Constantinos Mertzios (ed.), *Μνημεία μακεδονικής Ιστορίας* [Monuments of Macedonian history], Thessaloniki 1947, pp. 293-95 (April-May 1740). ANF, B1/996, Thomas to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 14 April 1740, f. 45<sup>r</sup>; 6 May 1740, f. 54<sup>v</sup>; 23 May 1740, f. 58<sup>r</sup>. Apostolos E. Vakalopoulos, *Ιστορία της Θεσσαλονίκης, 316 π.Χ.-1983* [History of Thessaloniki, 316 BC-1983], Thessaloniki 1983, p. 271 and note 1.

<sup>31</sup> Kissas, “Από την ιστορία”, p. 255.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>33</sup> For the profiles of Choidas and of the other Venetian consuls, see Athanasiadou, *Εμπορικές σχέσεις*, pp. 40-51.

Jews, 2239 Muslims and 1337 Christians), i.e. more than one tenth of the total population of the city.<sup>34</sup>

Many more people died every day on the outskirts of Thessaloniki. Prices of wheat in the vicinity were rumoured to fluctuate between 150 and 250 *paras* per *kile*. Although such high figures seem totally unrealistic – even the French consul was reluctant to believe the rumours – they are verified by a most unexpected source, the brief history in verse of the 1740 great famine, focused on Macedonia and composed by a certain Michael from Gora. According to Michael, from February to June 1740 the price of wheat was 27 *aspra* per *okke*, i.e. some 190 *paras* per *kile*. His poetic composition also includes prices of other goods, as well as shocking information about materials – earth included – which were mixed with flour to produce bread, in the absence of any other accessible food supply.<sup>35</sup> According to a marginal note in a book of psalms from Thessaloniki, a *kile* (apparently the 80 *okke* local one) of wheat cost 400 *paras*, therefore the standard *kile* of Constantinople was around 100 *paras*.<sup>36</sup> It is not certain, however, if this was a Thessaloniki or some other local market price. In any case, prices for local consumption, i.e. for the making of flour, were always higher than those for export.<sup>37</sup>

Michael of Gora wrote that had it not been for the East and the West, which had sent galleys with wheat, Macedonia would have lost its entire population. Indeed, the French were unanimously recognised as the saviours of the city and this was by no means an exaggeration. It was clear that there was no other prospect of supply from adjacent areas since famine had also struck many other places of the Greek peninsula. At the port of Volos, the outlet of Thessaly, wheat prices were even higher. Shortage of provisions had caused a clamour for bread even in Constantinople – then overcrowded with refugees – in April.<sup>38</sup> In

<sup>34</sup> Kissas, “Από την ιστορία”, p. 255.

<sup>35</sup> ANF, B1/996, Thomas to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 23 May 1740, f. 58r; N. G. Politis, “Περὶ τοῦ ἐν Μακεδονίᾳ λιμοῦ ἐν ἔτει 1740” [On the 1740 famine in Macedonia], *Δελτίον τῆς Ἱστορικῆς καὶ Εἰθνολογικῆς Ἐταιρείας τῆς Ἑλλάδος* 1 (1883-1884), p. 271. Even higher, sometimes double, are the prices mentioned in the codex notes republished by Kissas, “Από την ιστορία”, p. 254, but they are not dated so they cannot be compared to the figures given either by Michael or by the French documents.

<sup>36</sup> Vakalopoulos, *Ἱστορία*, p. 271. In 1740 the price of wheat in the Peloponnese was 3.3 *paras* per *okke*, more than 70 per *kile* according to Vasilis Kremmydas, *Το εμπόριο τῆς Πελοποννήσου στο 18ο αἰώνα (1715-1792)* [The commerce of the Peloponnese in the eighteenth century (1715-1792)], Athens 1972, p. 207.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Asdrachas, “Marchés”, p. 194. This is why the bakers’ guild was prohibited from buying flour from any other source than the millers’ guild.

<sup>38</sup> R. Olson, “Jews, Janissaries, Esnaf and the Revolt of 1740 in Istanbul”, *Journal of*

return for these vital and continuous services the pasha of Thessaloniki kept on sending daily 100 *okkes* of good flour to the two French bakeries, which did not interrupt their work for a single day. The pasha promised that even if there was one *kile* of wheat left in Thessaloniki, he would share it with the French *Nation*. After all Thessaloniki had escaped a much feared sedition that year while the capital was just about to experience one. Thomas was proud to have restored French prestige and no less satisfied with public acknowledgment. He hoped that this obligation would not be soon forgotten and perhaps even more that wheat exports to France would soon start up again.<sup>39</sup> The latter proved easier than the former. Fortunately the 1740 crop was fairly abundant. In late August some French vessels had already been loaded at Volos and in Evia at 44 *paras* per *kile*. Exports resumed from Thessaloniki as well.<sup>40</sup> The situation returned to normal.

#### *More Crises*

Thomas left Thessaloniki two years later, in 1743,<sup>41</sup> so he did not have the opportunity to test the durability of the public esteem for France. In mid-July 1753 the export trade of wheat to Italy, Provence and Spain was reported by both the consuls of Venice and France to be the most active and considerable. The price in June was as low as 31-32 *paras* per *kile*, and the new crop was very rich.<sup>42</sup> Fifty ships alone had departed for Spain. Some 120 ships had been directed to Marseille and Livorno.<sup>43</sup> The former consul, Pietro Choch, estimated that no less than 200 vessels loaded with grain, almost all of them French, had left during the past 16 months.<sup>44</sup> In mid-August, while exports were in progress, the mob of Thessaloniki rose because millers had been permitted by the *kadi* to raise the price of flour half an *asper* per *okke*. It was rumoured that he had been bribed along with the other officials who had

---

*the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 20/2 (1977), p. 193. Cf. Vasdravellis, *Ιστορικά αρχεία*, p. 223, document 170.

<sup>39</sup> ANF, B1/996, Thomas to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 19 April 1740, f. 50<sup>v</sup>, and 6 May 1740, f. 55<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>40</sup> ANF, B1/996, Thomas to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 2 September 1740, f. 102<sup>r</sup>, and 30 April 1741, f. 177<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>41</sup> Svoronos, *Εμπόριο*, p. 174.

<sup>42</sup> Iliadou, *Inventaire*, pp. 163-64.

<sup>43</sup> ANF, B1/998, Clairambault to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 1 August 1753, f. 277<sup>r</sup>; Mertziou, *Μνημεία*, p. 360 (22 July 1753). Cf. Athanasiadou, *Εμπορικές σχέσεις*, p. 200.

<sup>44</sup> Mertziou, *Μνημεία*, p. 361 (19 September 1753).

permitted unlimited export of wheat. The representatives of the 24 guilds were assembled and some suggested that the French should be blamed as the chief responsible party for the increased prices. The more reasonable among them responded that the French merchants loaded only what they had paid for; so those who had favoured this trade in exchange for bribes were the true instigators. The *mollah*, i.e. the honourable *kadı* or judge, and other officials ran to hide themselves, pretty much like their predecessors had done in 1720, and troubles were protracted for a few days. The loading of hardtack prepared by the French bakeries was prohibited. The bakeries of Sweden, Venice, Naples, Holland and Ragusa were razed to the ground. The two operating under French auspices for some 20 years, as well as the British one, escaped the menace, despite the evidence of the Venetian consul to the opposite. French vessels were instructed to leave the bay. The supervisor of a French commercial house, who had also served as an interpreter to the French captains, was arrested by the mutineers and was detained to testify against those who had permitted the loading.<sup>45</sup>

Due to an unexpected incident, the consul, de Clairambault, managed to free the supervisor and to smooth his relations with the mutineers; but he failed to have the imposed prohibitions revoked before the end of August. The wheat trade had to stop for some time.<sup>46</sup> If it was to restart in the foreseeable future, he guessed, it would not be on a comparable scale. Meanwhile, according to the testimony of Choch, the French had bribed the headman of the bakers to threaten the *mollah* with yet a new uprising, if he permitted the reopening of the other European bakeries. As long as they were closed, the French would have had the monopoly of provisioning ships with hardtack.<sup>47</sup>

There were hopes, however, for return to normality, since both the *kadı* and the janissary agha were awaiting their replacements. They had both been discredited. The former had deliberately tried to direct the anger of the crowd against the French. He had also obliged illegally the latter to plead himself guilty of injustice. The trapped agha had promised to pay the cunning *mollah* 60 purses, in case the inquiry into the wheat exports proceeded. Indeed, the inquiry was stopped after the mediation of various persons, not without diminishing the prestige of the agha, who had tried to save both the *mollah* and his own skin.<sup>48</sup> The new agha arrived either in late September or early October

---

<sup>45</sup> ANF, B1/998, Clairambault to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 1 September 1753, f. 282<sup>r-v</sup>.

<sup>46</sup> Iliadou, *Inventaire*, p. 164.

<sup>47</sup> Mertzios, *Mνημεία*, p. 362 (15 October 1753).

<sup>48</sup> ANF, B1/998, Clairambault to de Maurepas, Thessaloniki, 1 September 1753, f. 282<sup>r-v</sup>-283<sup>r</sup>.

and the prohibition was lifted.<sup>49</sup> But, in spite of his eagerness, he also failed to punish the top instigators. The janissaries rose violently against him, and the city was thrown anew into terror.<sup>50</sup>

On 13 April 1755 de Clairambault left Thessaloniki with his family for Smyrna and eventually for France. He was replaced temporarily by his deputy, Pro-consul Fougasse, who promised to his minister all his zeal to preserve the rights of the French *Nation* and its commercial interests.<sup>51</sup> Fougasse's efficiency was soon to be put to the test. It was less than two weeks later that the mob of Thessaloniki was in sedition due to a flour shortage, accusing the French of having carried off their wheat and of using the best flour in town for their daily bread and for the hardtack for their vessels. The janissaries headed the protests targeting the French.<sup>52</sup>

This was by no means a surprise. The crop of 1754 was not a good one. It was quite clear by late August that they would not make ends meet unless ships were sent on time outside the gulf to search for additional wheat supplies, which they did. However, "some" loads of wheat had been exported to France.<sup>53</sup> By December the price had sky-rocketed. The French were cautious enough to observe the prohibition of wheat exports, for they knew that any violation was bound to cause a local uprising against them. Prospects were gloomy. Old grain that had been kept in stock went mouldy and the forthcoming crop was reckoned to be a bad one, given the huge number of rats which had inundated the fields. The population had been exhausted by the plague which tormented the city from Spring to Autumn 1754.<sup>54</sup> In April 1755 rains were scarce and made people even more pessimistic.

Fougasse did not hesitate to report from the start, very much like Thomas had done before him, that the aghas of the country were responsible for the shortage. They would not let the wheat enter the city unless they saw its price peaking. But the priority for the *mutasarrif*, Nouman Pasha Köprülü, the governor, was to appease the outcry. According to Svoronos, he had already

---

<sup>49</sup> Iliadou, *Inventaire*, p. 164. In December 1753 the price per *kile* was again up to 50 piastres, due to shortage; see also Athanasiadou, *Εμπορικές σχέσεις*, p. 199, citing Venetian sources.

<sup>50</sup> Mertziou, *Μνημεία*, p. 362 (15 October 1753).

<sup>51</sup> ANF, B1/999, Fougasse to de Machault, Thessaloniki, 14 April 1755, f. 9<sup>r-v</sup>.

<sup>52</sup> ANF, B1/999, Fougasse to de Machault, Thessaloniki, 30 April 1755, f. 13<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>53</sup> ANF, B1/998, de Clairambault to de Machault, Thessaloniki, 29 August 1754, f. 331<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>54</sup> ANF, B1/998, de Clairambault to de Machault, Thessaloniki, 18 December 1754, f. 348<sup>r</sup>.

been exiled once for cruelty, so he had to be cautious.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, in agreement with the *kadı*, he detained the miller who provided flour to the French and then ordered to have sealed both the mill and their two bakeries, in order to force the French to taste the local bread. He also limited the quantity of hardtack available to French ships down to one-fifth or -sixth of the usual. Obviously he wanted to make an impression, but Fougasse was not impressed at all. First he hurried to meet some of his friendly aghas and then the British consul, Paradise, so as to join their forces in the same cause, to preserve their bakeries. Then he met with the pasha. Nouman was honest enough to admit the trick. He promised to restore French privileges as soon as he could, but for the time being all the bakeries had to be shut down. He suggested instead that the French bakers should go and work at his own bakery. Obviously he liked their bread more and the same was true for the other Muslim notables. The pro-consul assembled some of his fellow citizens and convinced them to take the governor's offer. He also convinced the British to join in, since their efforts to keep their bakery running were to no avail. Paradise was also tempted. His only condition was French bread to be forwarded daily to his house. Eventually French bakers, with a daily provision of 50 *okkes* sent by Nouman Pasha's miller, took over the preparation of bread not only for the governor and for the British but also for the Dutch, the Swedish, the Neapolitans, the Venetians of Thessaloniki and, last but not least, for the *kadı* and the janissary agha, who also asked for a share, most likely in addition to their own daily supply.<sup>56</sup>

On 30 April Nouman Pasha was deprived of his insignia, his property was confiscated, and he was exiled to the island of Chios. The order had been issued in mid-April together with a circular warning all officials that severe penalties would be imposed on anybody who failed to dispense justice.<sup>57</sup> As his successor had not arrived yet, Abd-ul-rahman Agha, the local customs officer, acted as the *mütesellim*, i.e. deputy governor.<sup>58</sup> Fougasse, apparently alarmed, rushed to make an appointment with him the following day, before his British colleague, and to pay his compliments. He had just struck a good deal for his community,

<sup>55</sup> Svoronos, *Εμπόριο*, p. 45, note 21.

<sup>56</sup> ANF, B1/999, Fougasse to de Machault, Thessaloniki, 30 April 1755, ff. 13<sup>v</sup>-15<sup>v</sup>. Attached is the transcript of the minutes kept by Jean Vincent Arasy during the meeting held on 24 April 1740, when Fougasse presented the options to the French community (ff. 17<sup>r</sup>-21<sup>r</sup>).

<sup>57</sup> Vasdravellis, *Ιστορικά αρχεία*, p. 243; for the circular see document 180 on pp. 240-242.

<sup>58</sup> *Musellim* is the actual term used in the documents.

which he had to preserve. The two men met in the presence of the chiefs of the *esnafs* and the aghas of the janissaries, who had all been invited to discuss the food crisis. Before the official reception he deliberated privately with Abd-ul-rahman in an adjacent room. The *mütesellim* expressed his bereavement for being unable to provide the city with the necessary wheat before the next crop and asked his advice. The French pro-consul replied that he could not ignore the fact that wheat supplies were available in the nearby villages. All the *mütesellim* had to do was to raise the price and tempt the landlords. When Abd-ul-rahman said that he was afraid of the reaction of the crowd, Fougasse suggested next that the acting governor should ask the permission of the Porte to extract 50,000 *kile* of wheat from the quantity kept in the warehouses officially assigned for the provisioning of the capital. It was a reasonable demand since there was no shortage over there and harvest was approaching. The *mütesellim* must have liked this proposal, for two days later he dispatched two notables to Constantinople to submit the petition. However, for the time being, he wanted more than advice from the French and apparently this was the ultimate purpose of the private deliberation. He asked Fougasse and his merchants to fetch a French ship with a small load of wheat as a gesture of good will to the poor classes, who still held the French responsible for the shortage. Otherwise he was afraid that, regardless of his personal good will, French prestige would never be restored, insults would continue, and they might even escalate to violent assaults. The pro-consul counter-suggested that the French would contribute any vessel necessary if the *mütesellim* himself could supply the capital. The Ottoman declined the compromise and stood by his proposal. He even rejected the idea of the French sharing the burden with the Orthodox and the Jewish communities. Obviously he wanted to shut some mouths – the anti-French – in the next room without provoking the complaints of the infidels. It was only the French interest, he said to the diplomat, he had in mind after all. If the French covered all the expenses, they would exploit the maximum feedback in terms of prestige and gratitude.<sup>59</sup>

Fougasse mustered his *Nation* anew: his second-in-command, Joseph Roussel, and Messieurs Michel Tavernier, Joseph Langier and Antoine Ferand, the last one representing the firm Ferand Brothers and Company. They decided to send Captain Granier's ship with a sum of 5000 piastres in search of wheat around the archipelago. He was expected to buy at any price. The required capital would be covered exclusively by the French commercial houses. In return they had been permitted by the *mütesellim* to trade that wheat on their

---

<sup>59</sup> ANF, B1/999, Fougasse to de Machault, Thessaloniki, 10 May 1755, ff. 22r-24v.

own terms. It is reasonable to assume that at a price of 50 *paras* per *kile* they could buy some 80,000 *okkes* of wheat, enough to produce more than 100,000 *okkes* of bread. This was hardly enough for more than a few days, a week at the most, under the circumstances. But buying time at any cost was exactly what Abd-ul-rahman had in mind. The commercial house which was run by Fougasse himself decided to send two ships in search of barley.<sup>60</sup> The French had all been convinced that it was in their best interests.

On 25 May none of the vessels had returned but no one seemed to worry any more. The city was very quiet. Rain had refreshed the fields and the sultan had granted permission to use the strategic supplies. Therefore the aghas who had been keeping loads of wheat locked up outside Thessaloniki were compelled to open up their stores and fetch them. Apparently prices were dropping drastically and they were running out of time. Harvest was imminent.<sup>61</sup> When the French wheat arrived, guessed Fougasse, it would be used to prepare hardtack for the crews. For the time being this prospect was not an excuse for some French captains who had started wheat exports, already embarrassing their *Nation* for the sake of their own interests.<sup>62</sup> Captain Granier sailed the Aegean Sea for two whole months without finding any wheat at all. The whole venture had cost the French houses some 500 piastres but it was worthwhile, thought the pro-consul. He was quite wrong.<sup>63</sup>

By the time Granier returned to Thessaloniki, in July, the situation had changed. The 1755 crop eventually turned out to be a defective one. The French were threatened daily to shut their bakery. Fougasse could hardly supply his *Nation* with the daily flour. He had to employ all his friendly Ottoman connections to avoid insults and humiliation. There was no prospect of wheat exports to the West at all. Unless supplies arrived from elsewhere the situation was not going to improve during Wintertime.<sup>64</sup> The new pasha, also called Nouman, who arrived during the Summer, was extremely aged and utterly reluctant to abandon his pleasures and get actively involved in the food crisis. The situation, according to the consul of Venice, was entirely in the hands of the janissaries. Moreover, a general shortage of edible goods prevailed over the

---

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, ff. 24<sup>v</sup>-25<sup>r</sup>; see also attached (ff. 26<sup>r</sup>-32<sup>r</sup>) the transcript of the minutes kept by Chancellor Arasy during the meeting held on 2 May 1755.

<sup>61</sup> In 1798 the harvest of barley and rye started on 18 May (Vasdravellis, *Ιστορικά αρχεία*, pp. 357-358).

<sup>62</sup> ANF, B1/999, Fougasse to de Machault, Thessaloniki, 25 May 1755, ff. 33<sup>r</sup>-34<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>63</sup> ANF, B1/999, Fougasse to de Machault, Thessaloniki, 1 August 1755, f. 40<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, ff. 40<sup>r</sup>-41<sup>r</sup>; Iliadou, *Inventaire*, pp. 166-167.



Aegean, which kept some 300 French ships anchored all around the Levant at the time, were war against Britain to break out.<sup>65</sup> The pasha died only a few months later, in March 1756, at the age of 105, to be replaced immediately by Topal Salam. He also did nothing to reduce wheat and other food prices, regulated continuously according to the exclusive will of the janissaries. But no riots were reported that year.<sup>66</sup>

In 1758 the same scenario was to be repeated in mid-July. After a rich harvest the dwellers of Thessaloniki, furious with the increasing prices, revolted against their *mollah*, whom they suspected yet one more time of having favoured the export of undue quantities of wheat.<sup>67</sup> They hunted him down in his office but he had departed just in time to escape their rage. The building of the magistrate was pillaged. His deputy (*naibb*) was stabbed several times but he escaped death. The *kadı* reported the incident directly to the Porte. On 10 August the most severe orders came from the capital against the chief insurgents. Three persons were convicted to death by strangulation, but the janissaries managed to save them all. The *mollah* himself was exiled, as well as the agha of the janissaries, for not being able to contain the rising in time.<sup>68</sup>

On another occasion, in 1789, the agha of the janissaries proved more prudent than the *kadı*. In June of that year, before the harvest, extensive army provisions seem to have caused a shortage. The mob rose and threatened to murder the *mollah*, unless he took some measures. But he, instead of forcing the aghas to open up their stores, where they kept abundant supplies waiting for prices to climb, conveniently shut up all the European bakeries, except the French one. Crews were in despair, but the *mollah* was not convinced by the consuls to change his mind.<sup>69</sup> In September of that year the crowd was irritated once more by the loads – apparently excessive – of grain destined for the capital. Suspecting once again that this trade was only to the profit of the local authorities, they attacked both the *kadı* and the *mufiti*. The former managed to escape death by seeking shelter, like some of his predecessors, in his harem; but

<sup>65</sup> Mertzios, *Μνημεία*, p. 373 (14 October 1755); ANF, B1/999, Fougasse de de Machault, Thessaloniki, 14 August 1755, f. 42<sup>r-v</sup>, and 13 September 1755, f. 50<sup>r-v</sup>.

<sup>66</sup> Mertzios, *Μνημεία*, p. 374 (14 March 1756) and pp. 375-376 (13 April 1755).

<sup>67</sup> In that year there was a shortage of wheat in Constantinople, which forced the Peloponnese alone to send 70,000 *kile* (Kremmydas, *Εμπόριο*, p. 81).

<sup>68</sup> ANF, B1/999, d'Evant to de Moras, Thessaloniki, 20 August 1758, f. 146<sup>r-v</sup>, and 19 November 1758, f. 149<sup>r</sup>. Surprisingly, in another letter, signed by deputies Laugier and Feraud, to the Chambre de Commerce in Marseille the crop was judged as “not a good one” (Iliadou, *Inventaire*, p. 168).

<sup>69</sup> Mertzios, *Μνημεία*, pp. 446-47 (8 June 1789 and 8 September 1789).

the poor *mufiti* was beaten up very severely, almost to death, and his beard was pulled off by force. Angry janissaries opened mass fire against the houses of the *mollah* and other officials. Then the “fearless” agha intervened at the head of 200 janissaries. He arrested the leaders of the mutiny and had them strangled on the spot. The rest disappeared and public order was reinstated.<sup>70</sup>

### Reassessment

The above-mentioned evidence, covering several occasions and decades during the eighteenth century, allows for a far more detailed assessment of wheat crises in Thessaloniki and, most likely, not only there. Although at first sight it looks that the fate of the poor flock of the sultan was at the mercy of a few greedy officials, a better inspection shows that the protagonists of the crises were many more, while interests concerned networks of people rather than individuals. There is no doubt that the *mollah*, the local judge, being the official regulator of prices and exports, bore serious responsibilities. His key position permitted him to make alliances with the janissaries, the guilds, the foreign consuls, with some of them or with all of them, or, more often, to play one against the other; especially if the pasha was absent or indifferent. It is also reasonable to assume that some of the *mollahs* were greedier and less honest than others, open to pecuniary offers and deals or even to some freshly baked loaves of French bread.<sup>71</sup> Trapped, however, between the conflicting interests of illegal exporters (local beys and foreign captains), of millers, bakers and consumers, they were easily framed and eventually handy scapegoats for the mob and alibis for the central administration. Several of them were harassed, some were murdered; the toll would have been higher had it not been for their harems. They were all, one after the other, liable to bribery by many and suspected by all, worst by the Porte itself. This is why their office was never renewed for a second year.<sup>72</sup>

As far as the Porte was concerned, neither the *kadı* nor the pasha were untouchable. But evidence suggests that the latter and his acting-deputies were

---

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 447-448 (16 September 1789). For similar cases of armed clashes in Aleppo, with the participation of janissaries, see Bruce Masters, “Aleppo: The Ottoman Empire’s Caravan City”, in Edhem Eldem, Daniel Goffman and Bruce Masters, *The Ottoman City between East and West: Aleppo, Izmir, and Istanbul*, Cambridge 1999, pp. 50-51.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Thoukydidis P. Ioannou, *Εμπορικές σχέσεις Κύπρου-Γαλλίας κατά τον 18ο αιώνα* [Commercial relations between Cyprus and France in the eighteenth century], Nicosia 2002, p. 269.

<sup>72</sup> M. Lascaris (ed.), *Salonique à la fin du XVIIIe siècle*, Athens 1939, p. 20. The information comes from a report by Jean Arasy on 24 April 1777.

at least not liable to attacks by the mob; not that the pasha was irresponsible. He could and indeed was expected to intervene and to take all the necessary measures to alleviate distress, to exercise his authority in order for prices to be reduced or to discuss extra measures. After all, only he could expect a second year in office.<sup>73</sup> His main field of interference, however, was diplomacy. The pasha had the task of handling the foreign consuls with the stick and the carrot, to the extent, of course, that this was feasible. The correspondence of the French consuls is not the best source to study how foreign diplomats in general were handled in practice. France was important *par excellence* to the Empire for both economic and political reasons, and pashas did not have the luxury of alienating French diplomats. Their alliance could be useful even to them personally. Unfortunately the French were also the chief exporters of wheat from Thessaloniki. The pasha had to strike a balance between the interests of high diplomacy and the outcry of his flock against the *Francs* who were carrying off their precious food. The standard way of approach was to reassure the French of his personal feelings, restrict the operation of their bakeries somehow, and promise to restore their privileges in due time; or make them pay or suffer just a little bit, always for the sake of their own long-term commercial interests rather than those of the pasha.<sup>74</sup>

The other *puissants*, or the powerful, involved in crises are not mentioned by name or authority in the French and the Venetian documents. All the officials bearing the title of agha and the captains of the janissaries were certainly among them, the most prominent being the captain of the guard, that is of the actual battleforce known, according to Vakalopoulos, as the 36th company. He had also the title of *çorbaci*.<sup>75</sup> Although the aghas were

---

<sup>73</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Suraiya Faroqhi, *The Ottoman Empire and the World around It*, London and New York 2007, pp. 146-147.

<sup>75</sup> Vakalopoulos, *Ιστορία*, p. 281; Lascaris, *Salonique*, p. 20. Cf. the article on the *ayans* of Eastern Greek Macedonia by Giorgos Koutzakiotis, “Οι ισχυροί αγιάνηδες της Δράμας, της Ζίχνας και των Σερρών (τέλη 18ου-αρχές 19ου αι.). Προσωπογραφικά στοιχεία και μαρτυρίες για το ρόλο τους στην οικονομία της περιοχής” [The powerful ayans of Drama, Zichna and Serres (late eighteenth-early nineteenth century): evidence and testimonies on their personality and economic role in the region], *Η Δράμα και η περιοχή της. Ιστορία και πολιτισμός* [Drama and its region: history and civilisation], Drama 2002, pp. 189-205. See also the articles by Antonis Anastasopoulos, “The Mixed Elite of a Balkan Town”, in Antonis Anastasopoulos (ed.), *Provincial Elites in the Ottoman Empire*, Rethymno 2005, pp. 259-68, and “Lighting the Flame of Disorder: Ayan Infighting and State Intervention in Ottoman Karafeye, 1758-59”, *International Journal of Turkish Studies* 8/1-2 (2002), pp. 73-88.

summoned to consult with the authorities at the peak of the crisis and some of them represented *esnafs*, strictly speaking their role in the mechanisms of the crisis was not official. Even if Western observers were prejudiced in favour of their nations, it is obvious that aghas could and indeed were keeping wheat far from the market until terms were extremely favourable for them. This would be very easy especially if they were landlords themselves.<sup>76</sup> It looks as if this was not the case in 1740 but it was in 1755 and possibly many other times and in many other places.<sup>77</sup> It is also clear that through their own clients, the local janissary companies, men not untouchable by market competition, or through their links with the mob, they could initiate riots (or investigations) and to direct them against the officials or the foreigners.<sup>78</sup> If the *kadı* was weakened or gone, then the control of the market and of the exports would be entirely in their hands. Consequently they could approach navy officers and skip searching for contraband, as they did in 1737.<sup>79</sup> If the mob attacked the French, then they – and the *kadı*, were he their ally – would be on the safe side. This is why, I believe, there were riots in the Spring of 1755 but not in 1756, when the janissaries were continuously in control of the market. The soft spot of the aghas and of the janissary intervention was the management of the crises. They never attacked the pasha, of course. But the situation could get out of hand, as it did many times; and then some of them or their subordinates were bound to feel the bowstring around their necks. They could fight back, sometimes they did, but in the end this would only mean more capital punishments.

The leaders of all the guilds (*kethuda*) were counted among the leadership of any town. It was only natural to be invited by the *mütesellim* Abd-ul-

---

<sup>76</sup> For an excellent description – from below – of how farmers in a village of Chalkidiki were prohibited by their landlord in 1830 to trade their surplus, see Haralambos Papastathis (ed.), *Το χρονικό της Ορμυλίας* [The Ormylia chronicle], Thessaloniki 2004, pp. 43-44.

<sup>77</sup> Similar cases were reported in Smyrna in 1753 and 1754; see Elena Frangakis-Syrret, *The Commerce of Smyrna in the Eighteenth Century (1700-1820)*, Athens 1992, pp. 116-117. These cases have been elaborated by Gilles Veinstein in his article “Ayan de la région d’Izmir et le commerce du Levant (deuxième moitié du XVIIIe siècle)”, republished in G. Veinstein, *État et société dans l’Empire ottoman, XVIe-XVIIIe siècles. La terre, la guerre, les communautés*, Aldershot 1994, paper I.

<sup>78</sup> For the troubles of merchant janissaries in Crete see Molly Greene, *A Shared World: Christians and Muslims in the Early Modern Mediterranean*, Princeton 2000, pp. 167 ff. For the relation between janissaries and the mob see Marinos Sariyannis, “Mob, Scamps, and Rebels in Seventeenth-century Istanbul: Some Remarks on Ottoman Social Vocabulary”, *International Journal of Turkish Studies* 11/1-2 (2001), pp. 11-12.

<sup>79</sup> Svoronos, *Εμπόριο*, pp. 312-314.

rahman Agha together with the aghas to discuss the management of the crisis. Nouman Pasha would probably have done the same. Hunger was a threat common to all professions and confessions. Linked but not always identified with the aghas' interests were those of two *esnafs* in particular, the bakers and the millers. An 1802 agreement, drafted between these two then Christian guilds and some Muslim guilds of the city, clarifies that traditionally millers used to buy a fixed amount of wheat from the farmers; bakers – the *Francs* included – were instructed to buy flour only from the millers. Any extra quantities to reach the flour market ought to be handled by the guilds. Offering to farmers prices higher than those fixed by the guild was discouraged.<sup>80</sup> These terms clearly suggest that some members of the guild or others had the necessary capital to buy overpriced wheat, expecting somehow to sell it in the town with profit, and they could possibly find buyers. It also suggests that some bakers could do the same. But there was a high risk. A controlled crisis therefore would be an ideal occasion for all speculators to be justified. Millers could “encourage” the *mollah* for an increase in tariffs, as they did in 1753, without the fear of any competition. They had the monopoly. Naturally bakers would follow to bridge the gap to the extent this would be acceptable.<sup>81</sup> When they would all run out of supplies, then the overpriced wheat would be marketed. If, under the circumstances of the crisis, the *Francs* were forced to shut their bakeries, it would be even better. Local bakers, normally expecting only limited margins of profit, would then take over the remunerative trade of the hardtack.<sup>82</sup> Hekimoglou has suggested, judging from the persons involved in the aforementioned 1802 agreement, that these two Christian guilds might have been under the patronage of Muslim, pseudo-janissary controlled guilds.<sup>83</sup> If this is valid, which is hard to say for sure from the available evidence, then the guilds' lobbying was even more powerful. Even if it is not valid, we do know that in the second half of the eighteenth century guilds had been infiltrated by

---

<sup>80</sup> Vasdravellis, *Ιστορικά αρχεία*, pp. 383-384. Cf. Asdrachas, “Marchés”, pp. 193-94, and Balta, “Το ψωμί”, pp. 234-236.

<sup>81</sup> Asdrachas has noticed that in the period 1778-1825, when detailed market prices are available, wheat and flour did not fluctuate with the same pattern. The price of flour could increase more than the respective price of wheat but the opposite happened mainly in years of grain shortage (“Marchés”, pp. 197-199).

<sup>82</sup> The bakers' and millers' margins of profit have been calculated by Balta, “Το ψωμί”, pp. 239-45.

<sup>83</sup> Evangelos Hekimoglou, *Θεσσαλονίκη. Τουρκοκρατία και Μεσοπόλεμος. Κείμενα για την ιστορία και την τοπογραφία της πόλης* [Thessaloniki: the Ottoman and interwar periods: texts on the history and topography of the city], Thessaloniki 1995, pp. 128-131.

pseudo-janissaries all around the Ottoman Balkans and indeed guildsmen called themselves “janissaries”. However, the complete control of all trades and professions by the military, according to Quataert, did not start much earlier than the very late eighteenth or early nineteenth century.<sup>84</sup>

In any case, given this network of interests, the French and the other exporting nations cannot be classified among the protagonists of the crises. They were rather an indispensable part of the scenery. Their legal and illegal exports contributed to the making of the crises but, considering the quantities reserved for imperial needs, their contribution, with the notable exception of 1753, was rather marginal, even in the crucial period of 1739-1740. From the consular correspondence used in this paper it becomes clear that the main concern of both the consul and the Ottoman local officials was the bakeries of the French and of the other communities rather than wheat exports. During the actual days of the crisis, export was a thing of the past. Its value was highly symbolic – stealing the local wealth – and exploitable but, nevertheless, past. Rising profits from the sale of hardtack was an everyday issue for the local bakers. French merchant houses were not present in the crisis mechanism since they were *de facto* and *de jure* out of business. They were dragged in, however, on three occasions, in 1739, 1740 and 1755, willy-nilly. In all cases they were asked to provide wheat for the city at their own expense in order to save themselves and the prestige of their *Nation*. In 1739 and in 1755 it was promised that, if they succeeded in finding any, they would have the chance to sell it with considerable profit. In 1740 the continuous arrivals of French vessels with wheat were not accidental; nor was it the result of a negotiation which freed tariffs, as has been suggested by Kostis.<sup>85</sup> The triangular negotiation – hardly a bargain – among the captain, the consul and the *kadi* shows that sales lower than the local tariff could be profitable, if “honesty” prevailed. According to Svoronos, in 1740 the average price of wheat in France was 64 *paras*.<sup>86</sup> Even if it was higher in some places, like Provence, still for the informed captains the journey to Thessaloniki was shorter and an “honest” profit was secured at a price of 50 *paras* per *kile*. In December 1739 this price was still ten per cent cheaper than the local tariff, but it is reasonable to assume that in the following

---

<sup>84</sup> Bruce McGowan, “The Age of the Ayans, 1699-1812” in Halil İncelik and Donald Quataert (eds), *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1914*, Cambridge 1994, pp. 701-702; Donald Quataert, *Workers, Peasants and Economic Change in the Ottoman Empire, 1730-1914*, Istanbul 1993, pp. 200-201.

<sup>85</sup> Kostis, *Αφορία*, p. 114.

<sup>86</sup> Svoronos, *Εμπόριο*, pp. 131-32.

months the margins of profit widened. The involvement of the French derailed the normal mechanisms of the crisis. It seems at a certain point, in April or in May, that local “capitalists” tried to break the French import trade. The gaps between the arrivals of wheat loads encouraged further speculation. The pasha ignored their offer. His indifference to the hardships of his flock may have contributed to taking a calculated risk and waiting for the French. Apparently the *Francs* were more “honest” capitalists than the locals.

The famine of 1740 was an exceptional case not only for Thessaloniki but for the whole Greek peninsula. To decide whether it was a crisis in social and economic terms one should first define all the parameters, assuming that the available information is all that mattered in the culmination of famine. To start with, Kostis was right to say that the city supplies had been exhausted in the period 1738-1739. In 1738 the harvest was successful, but it should be kept in mind that fewer fields had been given to cultivation in the nearby provinces. In 1739 the crop was less successful in the catchment area of Thessaloniki than in Kavala. Moreover, shipments were sent, some to France and at least two to the capital in August 1738 and in February 1739. In June 1738 the stock of supplies had been exhausted and possibly it was not renewed in the following year. Only millet was left in the warehouses. The French consul suspected that there were hidden supplies, but he did not mention whether they ever appeared in the market as he did in 1754. Given all these, the consul of Venice was hardly justified to judge the shortage as “without explanation”. We now know for sure that the climate in Spring 1739 had been far from favourable after all. Export prices, given by the consuls, are not a safe index of crises. As already mentioned, local prices for the making of flour were higher, the fluctuation of flour prices varied independently, and, more significantly, the price of third-class grain and flour increased more steeply than that of the other two classes. The steep rise inevitably pushed all food prices higher and made them inaccessible.<sup>87</sup> In any case, the lower strata suffered the most, and this was the case in 1740 also. But they did not revolt or demonstrate in spite of the constant threat. Were their needs satisfied with the occasional arrival of a French ship? Apparently they were not. People were starving to death. The prospect of a good crop coming might have kept spirits high, at least from April onwards, even if we believe at its face value Michael of Gora saying that snow fell – somewhere in Macedonia – on the feast day of St George (23 April) and there were no green fields by then.<sup>88</sup> Evidence from 1754-1755 suggests that the prospect of a bad crop or a

<sup>87</sup> See Asdrachas, “Marchés”, p. 198, table no. 12.

<sup>88</sup> Politis, “Περὶ τοῦ ἐν Μακεδονίᾳ λιμοῦ”, p. 270.

bad harvest could excite the mob and accelerate an outburst. It was natural to happen, but this was not a decisive factor. How could people be so calm in Spring 1740 when a “malignant fever” was tormenting their families?

The reply has already been suggested above. What turned a shortage of wheat and/or high prices into a general crisis was local politics rather than hunger. Riots broke out after bad crops as in 1754, average crops as in 1739, or good crops as in 1753 and 1758. So weather did not necessarily imply a generalised crisis; nor did strategic provisions, at least not by themselves. There was no uprising in Spring 1739, just murmurs, although wheat had been sent to the capital twice during the previous months. And there would not have been in June 1789 either, had the aghas decided to market their supplies in time. So, if we consult our data, it is easy to realise that even in 1740 grain was somewhere available and certainly not inaccessible. It might be that far as Anatolia, Syria or North Africa; or even closer around the Aegean coast, at Kavala, Volos or Epanomi. It might even be locked up at state warehouses inside the town or at private keeps outside the walls. Some of it might have been engaged for the army or the capital but not irrevocably, as testify the cases of 1740 and 1754. Unlike weather conditions and state provisions, exports – wholesale and/or the provisioning of vessels – appear as a common factor in almost all crises discussed. In 1739, 1753, 1754 and 1758, even in 1789, French and other wheat exports could be accounted to varying degrees for the shortage that followed, but the mob did not always turn against exporters.

What the mob saw as the main cause of all the crises was the *kadı* as an unworthy regulator of tariffs and exports or even as a speculator. They could not and they did not attack the aghas in 1739, 1755 and 1789, although there were rumours, true or not, that they had ample reserves of wheat. Nor did the *kadı* or the pasha ever turn the mob against them. This is the first indication that the mob did not act spontaneously. The second indication is the timing of the crisis. Grain supplies in pre-modern societies were exhausted in late Spring, to be followed by riots and demonstrations. But in the case of Thessaloniki, mutinies or protests also broke out in mid- or late Summer, as they did in 1739, 1753, 1755, 1758 and 1789, always due to rising prices; that is during the time span when most of the wholesale transactions were taking place. A calculated shortage pushed prices upwards. In other words, unlike 1740, the really hot issue was not famine but pricing. Such Summer outbursts might also be seen as pre-emptive strikes against the *kadı*. In four out of five cases of Summer encounters the *mollah* did not manage to recover his power. On three occasions he was replaced within less than a year. The third indication that crises were managed from the top is the city councils mentioned in November 1739,



August 1753 and April 1755. It was then debated and decided collectively whom to blame. If the *kadi* was the ally of the aghas, then the French and their bakers, any *Franc* baker, were the only convincing alternatives. Such a manoeuvre would also require the involvement of the pasha, who had all the good reasons to keep the janissary aghas on his side, the mob appeased, and the French under his personal auspices.

In all cases of wheat crises the underlying question was whether there was real interest to transport supplies and when the right moment would be. The answer was not an easy one since the individuals who were assigned to decide had conflicting interests. If Thessaloniki, not alone of other Ottoman cities in the eighteenth century, had been transformed into a plebeian republic, to use McGowan's term, then the mob could not have escaped its own transformation into a lever of political pressure. If wheat crises were perfect occasions to make maximum profits, then it was the right time for the mob to exercise its maximum power. Although in many cases instigators of the riots are reported – the putative janissaries and/or the guilds – probably they did not have much more to do, if the crowd was really hungry and angry, than point their finger at specific targets. Had the demonstration of women, in 1720, been instigated by the aghas? Were the inhabitants capable of rising by themselves? The authorities thought they were, and it looks as if public anger was taken into consideration on various occasions; or was this alleged threat a pretext to hand the problem of shortages over to the French? Considering the structure of Thessaloniki's urban society and all the evidence available about the network of economic interests, it is almost inconceivable to exclude at any time any kind of manipulation from above. Unfortunately it is also impossible to take into account for the purpose of this paper personal relations – like the disruptive role of the friendly aghas mentioned by the consul, personality issues, and, most of all, the political networks connecting all the players to each other and to their patrons in the capital.<sup>89</sup> A complete picture is still desired.

For Michael of Gora, famine in 1740 was the result of the 1737 red comet – known to astronomers as the comet Kegler. For the representative of Venice, Francesco Muffati, God himself had inspired French captains to seek wheat and bring it, one shipment after the other, into the Bay of Thessaloniki.<sup>90</sup> God giveth; God taketh away. Wheat crises, not alone of all food crises, were

<sup>89</sup> See for example the analysis of the similar network in Smyrna by Frangakis-Syrett, *Commerce*, pp. 116-18.

<sup>90</sup> Mertzios, *Μνημεία*, p. 295 (30 May 1740). For Muffati see Athanasiadou, *Εμπορικές σχέσεις*, p. 44.

certainly more complicated than that. If there was one God directly involved in those tough days of Thessaloniki, deciding upon the fate of its Christian, Muslim and Jewish dwellers, it was rather Mercury, the god of trade and profit, inspecting the city from his quarters, at the opposite side of the gulf, on Mount Olympus.

*Aristotle University of Thessaloniki*