THE PLACE BEYOND THE COAST:

A SPATIO-POLITICAL HISTORY OF MOUNT LEBANON'S INTERIOR

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Figure 1

A particular characteristic of the Lebanese territory is its geographic and topographic organization in linear strips of varying widths parallel to the Mediterranean coast. The coast, the Mount Lebanon range, the Beqaa Valley, and the Anti-Lebanon range: each form a geographic entity distinct not only in its natural features, but also, as this paper argues, in its historical social, political, and economic modes of governance.

Within the contemporary borders of the Lebanese state, we only consider these geographic bodies of the territory as separate to the extent that they straddle multiple districts of administration, and sometimes belong to more than one governorate. The following paper is an attempt to investigate this ambiguous relationship between these distinct geographic and administrative entities of the Lebanese territory, concentrating on the series of landscapes, inter-rural areas, and undefined natural sites that straddle Mount Lebanon, yet seem to fall outside its legible governance. However, to understand the contemporary nature of the territory, it is necessary to reconsider its history, if only to recognize what has been rejected and what has remained from the past (Jackson, 2000).

The history of these distinct geographic entities, read through an analysis of the political and economic processes that have articulated their relationship—within the long succession of empires and colonial forces that have controlled the region—is one of enduring conflict and dependence. What emerges then is a complex reality of a territory of connected parts, within which the future of one part can only be conceived through a reconsideration of the territory as a whole. The linear topographic composition of the Lebanese territory has historically resulted in patterns of settlement and inhabitation that are both longitudinal and transversal. Coastal cities have developed on the north-south axis along the Mediterranean border, while villages have grown east of this final land frontier, along transversal routes. These routes traverse and intersect all four fundamental elements of the Lebanese topography and geographic landscape: They begin at the coast, travel up Mount Lebanon's chain of mountains, cross over its ridges down into the Beqaa Valley, and continue onto Anti-Lebanon's slopes, often extending into the Syrian hinterland. Their history is hinted at by the many artifacts and material traces left by the succession of civilizations that have used them. From Phoenician temples and Aramaic shrines to Roman aqueducts, bridges, and associated urban sites, a first layer of ruins highlights and evidences the importance of these routes from the earliest times. Connecting Jounieh to the Beqaa, through Faqra, Afqa to Baalbeck, through Niha, Beirut to Broumana, through Zbaydeh, and Bickfaya to Zahleh, through Jabal el Knaiseh, these routes and the landmarks that dot them recount the narrative of the territory as a network, within the larger empires to which it belonged. They also allude to particular relationships between the entities or regions they have historically connected.

For example, within the Phoenician civilization's trade history, these routes developed as primary facilitators of the circulation of goods for commercial purposes. Used to transport wine from its place of production in the Beqaa Valley to the coastal cities for its export, they embodied a specific rapport of commercial necessity between the valley and the coast. Meanwhile the mountain stood in the background, or rather middle ground, as a through-passage. In Roman times, these roads acquired a different dimension. As manifested in Cicero's treatise "De Oficiis", Roman civilization's economic focus and human aim was agrarian life: "Of all the occupations by which gain is secured, none is better than agriculture, none more profitable, none more delightful, none more becoming to a free man" (Cicero, 1913: 150-151). This denoted a very specific relationship of man to nature, where nature was not only conceived of as a means to an economic end, but also as the basis of a moral and good life in itself. Roman trade arose out of the need to deliver the necessities grown from the land and distribute them across the Empire, not primarily for economic gain but within an intrinsic notion of subsistence, tied to the land.

Figure 2

Within this history, Mount Lebanon's role was twofold: It continued to act as a passageway, connecting the Beqaa, now the granary of the Romans, to the coast; yet it also acquired a productive identity in itself, as the pastoral setting for Roman agrarian life. This dichotomy between nature as a means for a subsistence economy, and nature as a tool for commercial economy, has continued to define both the nature of the mountain itself, and its relationship to the other geographic entities that surround it. It is embodied in the physicality of these roads, which have persistently mediated and articulated this defining relationship.

In contradistinction to these enduring roads and network lie the landscapes of non-urbanity and unfettered nature that these very roads traverse: the ridges of Mount Lebanon, the lines on the map that define districts, the physical areas that lie beyond the legality of villages, on either side. Here, a different type of landscape emerges: After the last village's signs of life have disappeared, and the agricultural terraces have turned into arid wilderness, before the descent into the Beqaa or the coast, and the beginnings of a new village's signs of existence, a vast seemingly untouched nature unfurls. The ridges of Mount Lebanon, although cartographically represented as simple lines, are in fact often vast plateaus, of varying flatness, aridity, and ruggedness. This thickness of Mount Lebanon's heights is hard to define; its boundaries are blurred, its nature likewise often disrupted, despite its ostensible abandonment.

However, within this deceptively "untouched" landscape, it is still possible to read signs of human life and control. For example, the extensive arid landscape of junipers

Figure 3

along the s that bridge Akkar and Hermel, Aaqoura and Baalbek, and other villages along the northern section, displays subtle traces of a used pastoral landscape. The constant gap at the base of the junipers reveals the passage of herd animals that feed on the lower foliage of the trees, as far as they can reach. Elsewhere, half-visible remains of ordered stones reveal earlier terracing, traces of a perished agrarian landscape. An extensive infrastructural armature also appears, sometimes in

Figure 4

unexpected wilderness. Thin water channels trickling through thick arid slopes, inconspicuous pipes running across the most natural-looking plains, and small ponds that seem unconnected to much else reveal a third dimension of Mount Lebanon's summits: their history and geological nature as containers of the region's humidity and rains (Chevallier, 1968: 88). Through the narrative constructed by these artifacts, the ridges of Mount Lebanon appear as intrinsic sites of an agrarian economy, albeit one that seems to be set in an impending trajectory of oblivion.

Recalling the recent history of the Lebanese territory, it is easy to attribute this decline to the challenges that have subsisted since the civil war; the persistent centralizsation of the economy in the capital, Beirut; repeated rural exoduses and intra-national migratory movements; and unbridled and uncontrollable urbanization harnessed by an all-consuming neo-liberal economy. Within this reality, it would be hard to imagine a future for the mountain, beyond it being subsumed by the city. However, a closer investigation of its past reveals the more complex nature of this dependency.

In fact, as revealed by its status in Phoenician and Roman times, Mount Lebanon was never considered the primary agricultural land of the territory defined by modern-day Lebanon. Its ruggedness, aridity, and steep slopes made it less desirable than its neighbors, the coast and the valley; its land was only arable in narrow terraces, and then could only successfully nurture fruit trees (Chevallier, 1968: 88). For this reason, from the seventh to the nineteenth century, it evolved mainly into a monoculture centered on sericulture, the growing of mulberry trees for the production of silk cocoons (Firro, 1990: 151). By the mid-1800s, 80% of the arable land of Mount Lebanon was covered in mulberry trees (Firro, 1990: 152) The silk economy was governed locally by powerful families of Muqataa'jis, acting as intermediaries between the farmers, the Beiruti merchants, the French buyers, and the Ottoman Porte, through the logic of fiscal management (Van Leeuwen, 1991: 602). Fiscal control allowed the Porte to retain authority of the semi-autonomous Mount Lebanon region, as the inaccessibility of the terrain precluded military control (Van Leeuwen, 1991: 603). This administrative logic was inscribed in the territory and reinforced by the geographic nature of the land. The mountain's inhabitants produced silk to be sold in order to purchase their own means of subsistence, necessarily imported from the valley, which itself fell under the jurisdiction of the Vilayet of Damascus. The silk itself could only be sold through the coastal cities, initially in the ports of Tripoli but eventually mainly through the port of Beirut. Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, Mount Lebanon's economy was completely integrated into the western economy via Beirut, as its production continued to be primarily shaped, harnessed, and exploited by the French (Firro, 1990: 166). Although the scope of this paper precludes a deeper analysis of this history, what transpires through these broadly sketched lines is a tri-fold structure of dependency unfolding through the long history of the Ottoman Empire, within which the mountain gradually lost its autonomy and means of survival. This dependency was formalized by the Ottomans' control of access to the valley and its subsistence crops, on the one hand, and the complete reliance on French silk demand for economic gain—embodied in the link to Beirut's port—on the other. Once these two opposing powers, which held the mountain's fragile balance in place, were pitted against each other, the mountain lost both its access to subsistence and its means of economic output. It was this precarious condition of dual dependency that ultimately led to the great famine that ravaged Mount Lebanon in the years of the First World War, and to its final collapse as an economically autonomous region of agrarian production.

Figure 5

Since this traumatic culmination of its longest stretch of historical productivity, the mountain has struggled to regain an independent 'raison d'être'. Although the mulberry trees were uprooted and replaced by citrus, apples, and olive trees in the twentieth century, the pre-modern conditions that gave rise to the mountain's economic importance were never revived. Nor can we today conceive of a desired future within which such conditions would arise again. Beirut's unequivocal demise as the primary merchant port-city of the Middle East, on the one hand, and the current crisis of the Syrian interior on the other, preclude the possibility of re-imagining the future of the mountain within a renewed agrarian economy. However, what has emerged through the historic analysis presented in this paper is that the geographic, topographic, and physical nature of the mountain has consistently resulted in a necessary dependence on its neighbors, and particularly the coast. The questions to be raised, then, are two-fold: First, how do we reconceive this relationship of the mountain to Beirut, and the cities of the coast? Can we consider a future for the mountain within which it reclaims an autonomous productive identity, or is it only through rethinking a productive future for the city that its own can be reclaimed? And second, if this productivity precludes the return to an agrarian mode, as one that necessitates a continued dependence, which other mode can exist for the mountain and its landscape? Within today's neo-liberal present, what value can the mountain still claim, beyond its potential as a commodity? Is the landscape in the twenty-first century to become only an image, a "natural" background to the staging of an "authentic" lifestyle, a consumable site for the new archaic?

Figure 6

FIGURES

Figure 1. Jurd Hermel, 2015

Figure 2. Aqoura, 2016

Figure 3. Knaiseh, 2016

Figure 4. Faraya, 2015

Figure 5. Denniye 1, 2015

Figure 6. Denniye 2, 2015

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