Reviewed by L.S. Schilcher

This is a monumental work. In it we have the raw material left behind by a contemporary observer of more than a decade of Syrian realities in the mid-19th century. The material has been transcribed, sorted and intelligently presented and interpreted. It is a phenomenal achievement given that the material was so scattered, in a variety of scripts and languages, and very often barely legible. The author has excavated both private and public archives, repeating the exercise again when so much more became available after the reunification of Germany.

This observer was Johann Gottfried Wetzstein, a European, but neither French nor British. Alone this fact makes the work significant. How much Syrian history has been written on the basis of colonial archives! But here we have a voice from Germany, itself a not yet integrated Empire, and an ingénue in the rivalry among European powers. Consul Wetzstein was fluent in Arabic and intent on being integrated into the local elite. He had to report regularly to his superiors in Istanbul. Yet, he had himself to cope with local economic, social, and political conditions in order to support himself and his family.

The book first devotes considerable attention to the development of Prussian foreign policy in the Ottoman Empire, its consular structure and interests, its protected persons and local employees, and the expenses of these operations. Next, Consul Wetzstein's fascinating contemporary observations are presented: These deal with Damascene commerce, the city's caravan trade, and its market place, and German efforts in trade.

Nestled within the presentation is a 57-page chapter dealing with the events in Damascus of 1860. Wetzstein was present in Damascus during the massacres of Christians. He was intimate with many of the city's notables and had alert local informants, and there is a 10-column index of names on pgs. 380-384. It cannot be overlooked that Huhn is viscerally and intellectually conflicted in her presentation of

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1 Johan Gottfried Wetzstein (1815-1905) was the first Prussian Consul in Damascus. He was posted there from 1849 to 1861. In addition to representing the political interests of Prussia he was obliged to promote the trade between Syria and Prussia as well as with other German states of the Customs Union. From the outset Wetzstein refused payment for his work. With that, however, he greatly underestimated the expenses of a European life-style in the Orient. Consequently, he purchased two fallow villages with the goal of improving his desolate financial situation. The enterprise failed in the end due to political circumstances. After his return to Berlin in 1862 he continued as a professor at the Friedrich-William University, and he taught courses on the culture and customs of the contemporary Palestinians at the Jewish Academy. He also made himself available with advice and actions to the Prussian foreign office. It is very fortunate that the legacy of J.G. Wetzstein was discovered in 1980 and opened to public view. There were chiefly his articles, which had appeared in scholarly journals concerning the Ottoman province of Syria but also a vast number of letters and files of rare Arabic documents relevant to the province of Damascus in the 19th century. Nothing of this value had ever been found. Wetzstein also collected valuable Arabic manuscripts, which are now preserved in university libraries in Berlin, Leipzig and Tuebingen, an invaluable source for studies of the Middle East. His collected writings and official correspondence reveal the difficulties of Prussian representation in this region and demonstrate how complicated and oppressive the life of this Consul in Damascus was.
Wetzstein's treatment and interpretation of these events. It is this chapter, which will initially attract the most interest and is also likely to be the most controversial. Perhaps, in the interests of a wider audience, at least this chapter should be translated into English.

But the historical interest will extend beyond this chapter. It is astonishing that this European decided to invest in local agriculture to support himself. He purchased local villages! With his extensive records of that enterprise, as organized here, we have a unique contemporary window into the struggles between city and hinterland, local and export traders, new capital and traditional banking, and Ottoman tax collectors and villagers. It is a far more concrete view of local realities than that provided by Arabic biographical dictionaries or European travellers' reports. Nor is it presented in the formulaic texts of the Ottoman court records. And Wetzstein was not just an observer like the other Consuls, he was an active participant.

The contribution made by this book to sources and contemporary interpretations is immense. The next step will be to integrate this material into the historical discourse. No study on 19th century Ottoman Syria would be comprehensive without an intimate knowledge of the contents of this book.

Linda Schatkowski is an independent scholar. She is retired and she was the founder and former president of the Syrian Studies Association.