

Broker-Diplomats and Balkan Trade Corridors: British Commercial Networks in Ottoman Salonica and Smyrna, 1800–1850

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Abstract: This article studies how British Levant Company merchants in Ottoman Smyrna and Salonica leveraged diplomatic office to sustain and expand Anglo-Ottoman trade under recurring political and fiscal crises. Confronting wars, uprisings, and shifting Ottoman tariffs, the core question is: how did these 'broker-diplomats' operationalize consular commissions, firmans (the right to free trade), safe-conducts, and gift protocols to stabilize margins and secure commercial corridors? Drawing on prosopographical network analysis of key families (Borges, Murray), GIS mapping of maritime and caravan corridors, and archival sources, including Ottoman archival sources-registers and British consular dispatches, the study demonstrates that formal diplomatic mandates and informal patronage networks coalesced into resilient commercial infrastructures. Key findings show that family-firm governance structures, complete with councils, credit syndicates, and multi-branch ledgers, underpinned adaptive strategies; post-consular ventures like Hague & Co. successfully transformed convoy-pass networks into joint-stock shipping consortia; and traditional alliances (e.g., Peach & Curling) faltered without flexible capital arrangements or technological reinvestment. Theoretically anchored in commercial diplomacy and Actor-Network Theory, our analysis reveals that the durability of the Smyrna–Salonica corridor derived less from geography and more from the strategic integration of diplomatic mission and business-commercial networks, enabling British traders to navigate persistent political and economic crises.

Keywords: Commercial Diplomacy, Broker-Diplomats, Smyrna and Salonica Corridor, Diplomatic Networks, Consular Privileges, Ottoman Levantines, Merchant Networks

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Introduction

The Aegean ports of Smyrna and Salonica occupied pivotal nodes in the Ottoman Balkans' commercial system, anchoring a network that stretched from Istanbul's imperial markets to Vienna's manufactories and beyond. As gateways between Anatolia's fertile plains and Europe's burgeoning industrial centers, these ports linked the Empire's Asian and European provinces through a seamless blend of sea lanes and Danubian–Vardar riverine routes. By the turn of the nineteenth century, local entrepôts had blossomed into truly cosmopolitan hubs: Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Armenian, Levantine, and European merchants converged here to trade in agricultural staples, textiles, and colonial luxury goods. The ports' deep-water harbors, sheltered bays, and overland caravan roads reinforced the Ottoman state's strategic integration of the Balkans, while dense webs of credit, brokerage, and family-firm alliances transcended provincial borders to undergird the Empire's fiscal and political cohesion.

Yet, commerce in the Ottoman Mediterranean and Balkan provinces was never a purely market-driven enterprise. Imperial capitulations and firmans-ahdname¹ issued by the Sublime Porte intertwined trade privileges with diplomacy, ensuring that economic concessions reinforced Ottoman sovereignty and provincial governance. British merchants of the Levant Company, in particular, leveraged their consular appointments across Smyrna and Salonica to secure tax rebates, safe-conduct letters, and ceremonial honors, tools that insulated their ventures from wartime blockades, tariff hikes, and regional unrest. This article

1 *Firman (Ferman)*: It is the general name given to Ottoman Sultan's orders bearing the signature (tuğra). For this study, the meaning of "firman" is more in the context of granting the right to free trade for the foreign merchants in the territories of the Ottomans.

Ahdname: A document containing commercial privileges or peace treaties granted to foreign states by the Ottomans. The Ottoman compound noun 'ahdname' is derived from the Arabic word 'ahd' ("promise, pledge") and the Persian noun name ("letter, text"). In early modern Ottoman usage, as in the literature noted, these documents were called Ahdname-i Hümayun, Charters of Imperial Pledge, and they were issued to certain European states, granting their citizens the right to reside in the Ottoman Empire and to engage in trade with minimal tariffs. The ahdnames bestowed by the Ottomans upon their tributary states stipulated that in return for payment of annual tribute, these states would enjoy military and political protection, as well as trading privileges. Levant Company's British merchants did their commercial operations under the Ottoman authority with firmans or ahdnames (capitulations).

investigates how, between 1800 and 1850, these “broker-diplomats” systematically transformed the instruments of their public office into mechanisms of commercial resilience, embedding diplomatic protocols within the very architecture of Anglo-Ottoman trade across the Balkans.

This article examines how British Levant Company merchants in Ottoman Smyrna and Salonica transformed their consular offices into engines of commercial resilience between 1800 and 1850. Confronted by wars, uprisings, and shifting Ottoman tariffs, these “broker-diplomats” leveraged a suite of diplomatic instruments, consular commissions, firmans granting free-trade rights, safe-conduct letters, and ceremonial gift exchanges, to stabilize profit margins and secure vital trade corridors. To frame this analysis, Section 1 (Literature Review) surveys prior scholarship on the Levant Company’s institutional evolution and merchant networks, charting how mid-eighteenth-century reforms empowered individual traders to fuse private enterprise with official office. Section 2 (Methodology and Theoretical Framework) outlines our mixed-methods approach, combining prosopographical network analysis², GIS mapping of maritime and caravan routes, and archival research, grounded in commercial diplomacy theory and Actor–Network Theory. In Section 3 (Institutional and Logistical Foundations of Balkan Trade), we detail how firmans, customs reforms, and investments in port and caravan-route infrastructure underpinned the Smyrna–Salonica corridor’s operational backbone. Section 4 (Adaptation and Failure of Merchant Families, 1800–1850) traces divergent trajectories among broker-diplomat dynasties, highlighting how families like the Borges and Murays thrived through corporate-style governance and risk-sharing syndicates, while others faltered under capital constraints and technological change. Finally, Section 5 (Diplomatic Mechanisms and Commercial Resilience) unpacks the procedural strategies behind firman renewals, convoy-pass systems, and

2 Prosopography is the study of groups of people through the collective examination of their lives, often using historical records, literary sources, and artifacts. Rather than focusing on a single individual, prosopography (prosopographical network) analyzes patterns in a group, such as shared roles, relationships, or social status, to better understand historical societies and social structures. This method is especially useful when detailed information about individuals is scarce, as it allows researchers to draw insights from broader trends and connections between people.

gift-giving ceremonies, demonstrating how these diplomatic tools were systematically repurposed as commercial levers. Together, these five parts reveal that the Smyrna–Salonica corridor’s durability owed less to geography than to the strategic integration of diplomatic mission and business-commercial networks.

This study draws on three main groups of sources. First, primary sources include the State Papers held at The National Archives (TNA) in Kew Gardens, London; the collections of the Presidency’s Ottoman Archives (BOA) in Istanbul; and the Shipping Lists (1741–1826) from the Maritime Archives, Lloyd’s Lists, London. Second, secondary sources consist of scholarly monographs and articles on the Levant Company, Ottoman commercial practices, and family-firm historiography. Third, online sources comprise digital editions of consular lists, archival finding aids, and relevant research databases.

Literature Review

Institutional Transformations and Merchant Networks

The Levant Company, founded in 1581, secured trading privileges across the Ottoman Mediterranean, facilitating the direct entry of English goods into Anatolian and Balkan ports. Over time, its network of consulates and “factories” in key centers such as Salonica and Smyrna established the company as a dominant force in regional markets and a strategic linchpin of Anglo-Ottoman economic relations. The following three foundational studies offer comprehensive overviews of the Levant Company’s institutional evolution and commercial strategies, providing essential context for understanding its mid-18th-century transformations:

A.C. Wood (1964) argues that the Levant Company’s permanent charter of 1605 marked a decisive shift toward a crown-backed monopoly, empowering merchants to underwrite increasingly large shipping ventures and to leverage royal patronage in securing firmans (Wood, 1964: 243–244). He further shows that systematic entries in the Company’s Minute Books reveal a deliberate expansion into agrarian exports, especially currants and olive oil, thereby consolidating the Company’s economic dominance in the eastern Mediterranean (Wood, 1964: 254–255).

Christine Laidlaw (1997) highlights how British merchants in Smyrna and Salonica adeptly navigated Ottoman legal frameworks, deploying capitulations to enforce contracts and extend credit, thus embedding themselves within local judicial networks (Laidlaw, 1997: 67–68). She also demonstrates that Levant Company members employed Orientalizing tropes in their correspondence, not merely as exotic embellishment but as a strategic claim to commercial legitimacy that distinguished them from independent traders (Laidlaw, 1997: 112–113).

M. Epstein (1968) traces the Company's progression from a series of periodic charters to its establishment under a permanent charter in 1605, underscoring how this document formalized residency requirements and financial guarantees for consuls in İzmir and Salonica (Epstein, 1968: 45–46). He further contends that the strict regulation of membership and capital subscriptions, instituted after 1592, was crucial to stabilizing the Company's finances in the face of volatile Ottoman tariff regimes (Epstein, 1968: 67–68).

Recent scholarship highlights how mid-18th-century reforms within the Levant Company reshaped British commercial penetration in Ottoman ports. Serdaroğlu (2019) demonstrates that the liberalization of shipping in 1744 and the Act of 1753 dramatically widened individual merchants' access, precipitating a shift from convoy-based trade to joint-shipping and fostering the rise of independent business networks centered on Smyrna and Salonica (Serdaroğlu, 2019: 406–407). Schulz's (2018) analysis of the Levant Company's dual diplomatic-commercial mandate further argues that ambassadors and consuls acted not merely as envoys but as "broker-merchants," embedding commercial interests within their diplomatic functions (Schulz, 2018: 120–123).

The mid-18th-century institutional reforms of the Levant Company created an unprecedented opening for individual merchants to forge integrated diplomatic-commercial careers across the Ottoman Balkans and Anatolia. By lifting convoy restrictions in 1744 and broadening membership rules in 1753, the Company empowered figures such as George Webster and David Wedderburn to navigate freely between consular offices and private trade ventures. These changes catalyzed the emergence of a class of "broker-diplomats" whose authority derived as much from letters of accreditation as from their cargo manifests. In this way, institutional liberalization laid the groundwork for merchants to

operate simultaneously as official envoys in Salonica and Smyrna while maintaining extensive commercial networks that spanned from Anatolian caravan routes to British textile markets (Schulz, 2018: 120–121). The Company's Minute Books record those admissions jumped sharply post-1753, from just 13–14 annually to over twenty a year, reflecting this liberalization's impact on provincial as well as London merchants.³

Commercial Diplomacy in Smyrna and Salonica

The intertwined role of consular officials and merchants in promoting Ottoman–British trade has been foregrounded by Vlami (2014), who traces how consular “factories” in Smyrna and later Salonica served both as trading posts and as nodes of diplomatic negotiation, particularly in securing monopolistic privileges for opium and textile imports (Vlami, 2014: 10–12). This framework illuminates George Webster's 1763 admission to the Company and subsequent drug-import ventures, which mirrored France's operations in the same ports (Çizakça, 2012: 245).

Consular officials served as both envoys and private traders, using their diplomatic status to secure firman renewals (on free trade) and preferential import quotas for opium, textiles, and other high-value commodities. Early on, George Harborne secured a three-percent customs tariff in 1580, two points below other Europeans, an arrangement he reinforced through lavish gifts to the Sultan, demonstrating the centrality of gift-giving in Ottoman–English negotiations.⁴ By the later 18th century, British diplomatic efforts had evolved toward free-trade and investment promotion, reflecting shifting post-Industrial Revolution imperatives (Geyikdağı, 2017).

3 List of British Consular Officials in the Ottoman Empire and its former territories, from the 16th century to about 1860 by David Wilson. Retrieved Date: February 13, 2025.

[http://www.levantineheritage.com/pdf/List_of_British_Consular_Officials_Turkey\(1581-1860\)-D_Wilson.pdf](http://www.levantineheritage.com/pdf/List_of_British_Consular_Officials_Turkey(1581-1860)-D_Wilson.pdf)

4 O. G. D. Busbecq, E. S. Forster and K. A. Roeder, *The Turkish letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, imperial ambassador at Istanbul, 1554-1562: translated from the Latin of the Elzevir edition of 1663, 1927*, (No Title).

For the abstract version of this source, see https://www.levantineheritage.com/pdf/Discuss_the_reception_of_European_diplomats.pdf. Also see, S. A. Skilliter, *William Harborne and the trade with Turkey 1578–1582: A documentary study* (Vol. I). British Academy, 1977.

Salonica and Smyrna functioned not merely as transshipment points but as twin nodes in a unified corridor of British commercial diplomacy. Consuls posted to Smyrna routinely shuttled between Smyrna's factories and Salonica's burgeoning opium and currant markets, using their diplomatic privileges to secure favorable terms for silk and drug imports. Merchants like Samuel Peach and Edward Hague leveraged their consular status to negotiate firman renewals in Istanbul, while simultaneously coordinating joint-shipping ventures that linked the two ports. This seamless integration of diplomatic office-holding and merchandise trade illustrates how Levantine merchants institutionalized the Smyrna–Salonica axis as a single economic space under British influence (Vlami, 2014: 10–12).

Smyrna and Salonica as an Integrated Center

Building on archival evidence from Lloyd's shipping lists and Ottoman registers, Serdaroğlu (2019) maps how Smyrna's expanding Mediterranean and trans-Atlantic routes (e.g., Michael James's networks linking Lisbon, Barbados, and Stockholm) catalyzed Salonica's emergence as a hinterland center for mohair and currant trade after the 1760s (Wood, 1964: 88–89; Epstein, 1968: 100–150). These studies reveal that British merchants did not treat the two cities in isolation but as a contiguous trade corridor, with ships⁵ either calling at both ports in a single voyage or trans-shipping goods between them. This interconnected maritime activity both reflected and reinforced each city's role as a cosmopolitan hub, whose physical geography and diverse populations undergirded their commercial significance.

Salonica's natural deep-water harbour and cosmopolitan composition mirrored the transformations of eighteenth and nineteenth-century world ports, drawing merchants of diverse backgrounds into its vibrant commercial nexus (Mazower, 2004; Mazower, 2010). To complement this qualitative portrait of urban pluralism, a series of quantitative studies offers concrete measures of the trade volumes and fiscal impact that Smyrna and Salonica commanded. Its pluralistic social fabric, encompassing Jewish, Muslim, Greek, and Levantine communities, enabled the emergence of dense trade networks underpinned by

5 For the ships and related information, see <http://www.maritimearchives.co.uk/lloyds-list.html>.

intercommunal credit syndicates and multilingual brokerage arrangements (Mazower, 2004).

Similarly, Smyrna's evolution paralleled that of Salonica, as its naturally sheltered bay and cosmopolitan citizenry attracted a flux of Levantine and European traders, integrating the city into global maritime circuits by the nineteenth century (Kütükoğlu, 2013). The city's heterogeneous population, comprising Armenians, Greeks, Jews, and Levantine converts, fostered adaptable credit networks and joint-venture firms that harnessed Smyrna's strategic position between Anatolia's agricultural hinterland and Mediterranean trade routes (Kütükoğlu, 2013).

To support the qualitative explanation of the integrated trade corridor between Izmir and Thessaloniki, the following quantitative findings from specialized studies provide concrete evidence of the volume and economic importance of their trade networks. It is important to rank these studies here.

Kılıç (2020) demonstrates that in the wake of the 1838 Baltalimanı treaty, İzmir's customs revenues more than doubled between 1838 and 1876, reflecting a rapid expansion of Anglo-Ottoman commercial flows through the port (Kılıç, 2020).

Küçükkalay (2006) calculates from the 1797–1799 İzmir Efrenç customs ledgers that currant exports alone generated roughly 1.2 million akçe in duties, fully one-third of Smyrna's total customs revenue in that period (Küçükkalay, 2006). Küçükkalay (2013) shows that over 1793–1803 Istanbul's imports were dominated (45 %) by cotton textiles, mirroring İzmir's import profile and underscoring their functional interchangeability as trade hubs (Küçükkalay, 2013).

Küçükkalay & Elibol (2004) comparing 1795–1804 caravan-import data, report that 28 % of overland grain shipments into Istanbul originated from Smyrna's hinterland, underscoring Smyrna's integration with the capital's food supply chain (Küçükkalay & Elibol, 2004).

Frangakis-Syrett (1992) reconstructs that Smyrna's French carriers moved an average of 12,000 tons of cotton and silk per year between 1700 and 1820, highlighting the port's pivotal role in Western European textile networks (Frangakis-Syrett, 1992). Frangakis-Syrett (1988) shows that by the 1780s, over 40 % of İzmir's

total imports were processed colonial commodities (sugar, coffee, spices), underlining the city's position as a distribution node for global consumption goods (Frangakis-Syrett, 1988). Frangakis-Syrett (1992) also demonstrates that Ottoman and Western merchant communities in Smyrna jointly financed nearly £50,000 worth of ship-loads in the 1750s, indicating a highly integrated, multi-confessional commercial infrastructure (Frangakis-Syrett, 1992). Taken together, these figures not only underscore each port's individual prowess but also validate their operation as a unified Anglo–Ottoman corridor, one whose combined strengths eclipsed the sum of its parts.

Although Smyrna's strategic depth and global shipping routes made it the premier Ottoman port of the 18th century, Salonica's rapid rise in the 1760s demonstrated the power of hinterland synergy. Merchants such as Michael James and James Saunders⁶ maintained overlapping factor networks in both cities, rotating their ships through Smyrna's Mediterranean connections and Salonica's European hinterland via Salonica's caravan roads. By treating Smyrna and Salonica as interchangeable waypoints, either calling at both in one voyage or trans-shipping goods between them, Levantine traders knitted together Anatolian raw materials with Balkan agricultural produce, reinforcing a bilateral flow of goods and information that underpinned British commercial dominance in the region (Schulz, 2018: 125–126). Salonica's first resident British consul, Richard Kemble, appointed in 1718, exemplifies this close linkage: his dual remit covered Salonica, Negroponte (Euboea), and “all Greece,” underscoring the factory's emerging importance (Demiryürek, 2023: 113–114).

Ethnic and Cultural Dimensions of Levantine Commerce

While most literature focuses on institutional and economic factors, recent work on Levantine merchant identities underscores the importance of shared culture and religious affiliation (e.g., Dönme⁷ and Greek Orthodox families) in

6 For further information, see <http://www.levantineheritage.com/testi23.htm>.

7 Dönme (Convert): Jewish sect founded in Salonika (now Thessaloníki, Greece) in the late 17th century, after the conversion to *Islām of Shabbetai Tzevi*, whom the sectarians believed to be the Messiah. The Dönme, who numbered about 15,000 in the late 20th century, are found primarily in Istanbul, Edirne, and İzmir, Türkiye. For further details, see <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Donme>.

forging trust-based networks. Though specific studies on Salonica's Dönme are limited, parallels with Smyrna's multi-confessional quarters (Çelebi, 1984) suggest that co-ethnic ties facilitated credit arrangements and factor appointments across both ports.

Beyond formal privileges, shared Levantine identity, rooted in multi-confessional urban communities, fostered trust and facilitated credit across Salonica and Smyrna. Merchants drawn from Greek Orthodox, Jewish, and Dönme backgrounds often intermarried or partnered on joint ventures, using kinship ties to underwrite large consignments of mohair, silk, or currants. These co-ethnic networks operated parallel to, and at times intersected with, official consular assemblies, allowing merchants to pool resources, share insider information, and mitigate political risk. In this way, cultural affinity functioned as an informal "diplomatic" channel that buttressed the British Crown's commercial foothold in both Anatolia and the Ottoman Balkans (Çelebi, 1984: 210). Such co-ethnic ties operated alongside formal consular councils, creating informal "diplomatic" channels that buttressed British commercial footholds.

Beyond the British broker-diplomat networks, the Dönme communities of Salonica constituted a powerful, parallel commercial-economic network. As Marc David Baer shows, leading Dönme families, such as the Kapanci and Akif⁸ households, controlled significant financial capital through banking and textile ventures, while also holding extensive agricultural estates in the environs of Salonica that anchored their agrarian investments (Baer, 2007: 150–151; Baer, 2010: 26). This Dönme network operated largely independently of the British consular privilege system, yet intersected with it to finance local trade and to distribute Salonican produce throughout the Balkan interior.

8 Hasan Akif was a famous tobacco merchant in Salonica. Hasan Akif, recognized in the Yearbook of the Province of Salonica (Selanik Vilayet Salnamesi - 1889-1890), as of the great merchants of the city. For further details, see Baer, M. D. (2007). Globalization, Cosmopolitanism, and the Dönme in Ottoman Salonica and Turkish Istanbul. *Journal of World History*, 18(2), 141–170.

Gift-Giving and Court Culture

European and Ottoman accounts, ranging from Busbecq's letters to Lello's dispatches, agree that ceremonial gifts (kaftans, jewels, cash stipends) were vital for maintaining favor at the Sultan's court (Talbot, 2017: 105–107). The Levant Company's diplomatic budgets even included dedicated allocations for these presentations, which in turn secured trade concessions and tariff privileges. After the Company's abolition, British envoys continued to depend on Levantine networks to procure antiquities for the British Museum (Patrizio Gunning & Vlami, 2024: 60).

Building on Laidlaw's detailed account of British consular life in the Levant, gift-giving emerges not merely as a bilateral exchange but as a performative diplomacy that shaped metropolitan perceptions of Ottoman power and prestige. Laidlaw (2010) highlights how British vice-consuls meticulously recorded the selection, ceremonial presentation, and reception of kaftans and jewelry in their private diaries, often noting that the Sultan's appreciation of such costly offerings conferred informal legitimacy upon the donor's commercial petitions. These entries reveal that British envoys tailored gift packages to the courtly tastes catalogued in their own dispatches, thereby reinforcing the mutual intelligibility of elite cultures and securing tangible concessions, reduced duties, expedited firman renewals, or priority in convoy allocations. Moreover, Laidlaw's analysis underscores that such ritualized generosity underpinned networks of patronage extending beyond Istanbul; agents in Salonica and Smyrna invoked these ceremonial precedents in local gift exchanges, linking provincial merchants into the same diplomatic economy that animated the Sultan's court (Laidlaw, 2010: 58–62).

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The study employs a three-pronged mixed-methods design to investigate the ways in which diplomatic privileges, customs infrastructures, caravan networks, and family-firm organizations collectively sustained British trade in the Ottoman Balkans. First, an archival institutional analysis draws upon Ottoman archival sources—registers, registers, Salonica customs ledgers, and British consular dispatches (FO 78) to trace the evolution of firman-based tariff schedules,

quay assignments, and safe-conduct issuances between 1800 and 1850. By systematically coding these sources alongside Levant Company Minute Books, changes in duty rates and facility expansions are charted, thereby assessing the concrete impacts of consular interventions on port administration (Serdaroğlu, 2019; Geyikdağı, 2017).

Second, geospatial and network mapping integrates Lloyd's shipping lists and Ottoman caravan waystation inventories with contemporary Thrace and Macedonia maps via GIS. This spatial overlay illustrates maritime corridors between Smyrna and Salonica and overland routes through Ioannina, Monastir, and Bitola. Network software (Gephi) then quantifies route centrality and betweenness, revealing how local agha⁹ intermediaries and consular safe-conduct letters sustained trade flows even during wartime disruptions (Vlami, 2014).

Third, the prosopographical family-firm investigation draws upon the archival records of the Borges, Murray, Saunders, and Hague dynasties, as well as consular council minutes and factory account books. Reconstructed organizational charts, mapped capital flows, and identified risk-sharing syndicates reveal the governance principles, succession planning, interbranch financing, and joint-stock partnerships, that underpinned dynastic resilience (Colli and Perez, 2020: 98-123).

This analysis is further enriched by a formal Network Analysis of Broker-Diplomat Linkages, wherein merchant-consuls, port facilities, and institutional actors serve as nodes, and their interactions, kinship ties, commercial partnerships, and usages of diplomatic instruments, are encoded as weighted edges. Degree, betweenness, and closeness centrality metrics then pinpoint the most influential brokers, while clustering coefficients expose cohesive familial or syndicate-based modules. Finally, a force-directed sociogram (Figure 2) renders visible how firmans, safe-conducts, and gift protocols were systematically mobilized as sources of commercial leverage.

9 *Agha (Ağa) – (Local Intermediaries)*: In the Ottoman State, the title given to respected emirs, chiefs at the head of many institutions, and people who took control of the administration of regions.

Theoretically, our approach is grounded in commercial diplomacy (Mansfield & Milner, 1999), portraying consuls as proactive trade negotiators, and in Actor–Network Theory (Callon, 1986), which recognizes customs sheds, ships, and gift protocols as co-actors that, alongside human agents, co-construct the Smyrna–Salonica trade corridor. Together, these methods offer a holistic perspective on how public office and private enterprise coalesced into enduring commercial systems in the volatile Ottoman Balkans.

This study relies on partial archival records, Ottoman archival sources-registers, customs-shed ledgers, and consular dispatches, some of which survive unevenly across the period under review. Gaps in caravan waystation inventories and intermittent Levant Company minute-book entries may underrepresent certain credit syndicates or local gift-giving practices. While GIS mapping and network analysis mitigate these lacunae by triangulating multiple sources, future research should seek to supplement these findings with Ottoman court registers and private family archives where available.

Institutional and Logistical Foundations of Balkan Trade

The following section analyzes how diplomatic-administrative privileges and logistical infrastructures underpinned British commercial operations in the Ottoman Balkans by examining the formal institutions, transport networks, and organizational models that sustained the Smyrna–Salonica corridor. Between 1800 and 1850, British merchant-consuls not only negotiated firmans and secured tariff rebates (Wilson-Consular Lists, 2011: 22–24) but also invested in customs facilities and caravan waystations to enhance trade efficiency. For example, Salonica’s upgraded customs sheds and adjacent consular chambers streamlined cargo clearance during wartime congestion (Geyikdağı, 2017: 48–49). Overland trade similarly depended on a network of agha-managed caravan routes linking Smyrna to Salonica via Ioannina and Bitola, where consular letters of safe-conduct functioned as *de facto* passports for goods and pack animals (Vlami, 2014: 15–16). Moreover, family-firm governance, exemplified by the Borges and Murray dynasties, employed corporate-style reporting, risk-sharing syndicates, and cross-branch financing to absorb political shocks and market volatility (Epstein, 1968: 67–68; Serdaroğlu, 2019: 414–415). Collectively, these institutional

and logistical foundations constituted the backbone of resilient British trade in the Ottoman Balkans.

Customs Administration and Trade Hubs in Salonica

Between 1800 and 1850, Salonica's customs administration evolved from a rudimentary Ottoman port office into a sophisticated hub tailored to Western merchant needs. The issuance of firmans, imperial edicts granting specific trading rights, proved central: British vice-consuls such as John Oliver (1818–1832) and the Borges family (1812–1845) negotiated successive firmans that lowered duties on currants, mohair, and opium from the standard 8 percent to as low as three percent (Wilson-Consular Lists, 2011: 22–24)¹⁰. These edicts not only stabilized profit margins during wartime inflation but also standardized tariff schedules, reducing arbitrary surcharges by local officials.¹¹

Simultaneously, investments in physical infrastructure, partly financed by consular fees, transformed Salonica's waterfront. New stone customs sheds, designed to process multiple vessels in parallel, cut inspection times by up to 50 percent compared to pre-1800 wooden warehouses (Geyikdağı, 2017: 48–49). The co-location of the British consulate and the Levant Company factor adjacent to these sheds created an administrative cluster: merchants could petition for firman renewals on free trade rights, submit cargo manifests, and arrange convoy passes without leaving the port precinct. During the Russo-Ottoman War (1828–29), this arrangement allowed swift re-routing of grain consignments to Trieste when Salonica's northern roads were blockaded, an operation coordinated through daily consular minutes and the port's quay master (Chronakis, 2024: 91–93). Moreover, the expansion of Salonica's quay, extended by nearly 200

10 For the list covers all names and relevant information, see Levant Company: Admissions of Freeman and Grants of Liberty of Trade, 1695–1824. <http://www.levantineheritage.com/pdf/Levant-Co-Members-1695-to-1824-D-Wilson.pdf> and List of British Consular Officials in the Ottoman Empire and its former territories, from the 16th century to about 1860 by David Wilson.

[http://www.levantineheritage.com/pdf/List_of_British_Consular_Officials_Turkey\(1581-1860\)-D_Wilson.pdf](http://www.levantineheritage.com/pdf/List_of_British_Consular_Officials_Turkey(1581-1860)-D_Wilson.pdf)

11 TNA: SP 105/332 and SP 105/333. These data and findings have been compiled from the aforementioned archival collections.

meters between 1810 and 1840, provided berths for larger British and French vessels, further reducing unloading delays (Vlami, 2014: 17–18). Together, these administrative and infrastructural reforms not only optimized Salonica's capacity to handle increased Anglo-Ottoman trade but also institutionalized consular roles as integral components of port governance.

In addition to customs modernization, nineteenth-century Ottoman tax reforms fundamentally reshaped the fiscal landscape in ways that advantaged foreign trading networks. The 1839 Aynalıkavak Agreement extended capitulatory privileges by codifying reduced “extraordinary” levies on European merchants, while the 1838 Baltalimanı Treaty abolished many domestic duties on imports and exports, effectively aligning Ottoman tariff policy with British free-trade principles and granting the Board of Trade's stakeholders enhanced market access (Shaw, 1975: 435–442). These agreements were complemented by sweeping Tanzimat-era reforms that centralized tax collection under the new “iltizam” system, replacing a patchwork of ad hoc surcharges with standardized excise and land taxes, measures that not only increased state revenues but also stabilized duty expectations for Levant Company factors and other consular agents (Shaw, 1975: 450–455). As a result, Salonica's port duties became more predictable and transparent, reinforcing the administrative cluster around consular offices and customs sheds and further embedding British and other European networks into the Ottoman fiscal regime.¹²

Role of Local Intermediaries and Caravan Networks

By mid-century, the coastal capitals, Salonica in the north and İzmir in the south, had grown into truly cosmopolitan entrepôts whose urban fabrics reflected their global reach. Their Ottoman-style caravanserais sat beside European-designed customs houses; synagogues, Orthodox churches, and mosques lined streets once plied by Venetian galleys; and new hotels catered to steamship passengers bound for Marseille or Odessa. As Lyberatos (2009) and Harlaftis (2010) observe, guild halls and franc-styled coffeehouses provided the

12 For further information, Mübahat S. Kütükoğlu, “Baltalimanı Muahedesi”, TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi, <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/baltalimani-muahedesi>. Retrieved Date: 09.05.2025.

institutional scaffolding for credit syndicates and information exchange, while experimental steam-tug services on the Gulf of İzmir and pilot-boat systems at Salonica reduced pilotage delays by half, knitting each port ever more tightly into a resilient, multi-modal network.

While maritime routes bound Smyrna and Salonica, overland caravan networks linked the Balkans' interior to these ports, underpinned by local intermediaries. Greek, Jewish, and Albanian aghas controlled pack-animal convoys that traversed mountain passes and river valleys, routes formalized through Ottoman menzil waystations (Chronakis, 2024: 102–105). British consuls issued safe-conduct letters that local aghas honored as *de facto* passports, guaranteeing unimpeded passage even through insurgent-held territory (Vlami, 2014: 15–16). This mechanism proved vital during the Greek War of Independence (1821–29), when coastal shipping was disrupted.

By 1830, archival caravan manifests show that up to 30 percent of goods entering Smyrna had first transited Salonica by land, including Balkan grains, wool, and copper ores bound for British textile mills (Schulz, 2018: 131–133). The Murray family capitalized on this system, organizing joint-stock caravan syndicates that pooled resources and spread risk among consular peers and intermediaries. These syndicates financed fodder, guides, and lodging, ensuring caravans could move year-round despite winter snows and summer banditry (Vlami, 2014: 15–16).

Waystations at Monastir (Bitola) and Ioannina, modernized with consular grants, offered secure storage and rudimentary insurance schemes: deposits lodged with local customs officials guaranteed compensation for lost or damaged goods. Through these caravan networks, British merchants extended their reach deep into the Ottoman hinterland, integrating rural producers into European commodity chains and reinforcing the Smyrna–Salonica corridor's resilience against maritime shocks.

Family Firms and Organizational Structures in the Ottoman Balkans

The longevity of British merchant-consul dynasties in the Ottoman Balkans rested on robust family-firm structures that blended consular governance with commercial enterprise. Histories of nineteenth-century Balkan business emphasize that clear succession planning, diversified management roles, and corporate-style decision-making were essential for enduring political and economic volatility. The Borges and Murray families exemplified these principles by appointing successive generations to consular or vice-consular posts, ensuring institutional memory and uninterrupted access to firmans and convoy privileges (Wilson-Consular Lists, 2011: 23–24).

Operationally, family firms divided tasks geographically and functionally: Salonica offices specialized in currants and mohair exports, while Smyrna branches managed opium and tobacco imports. Interbranch ledgers tracked capital flows, profits from Mediterranean shipments funded Balkan caravan ventures, and vice versa, enabling dynamic reallocation of resources in response to regional crises (Chronakis, 2024: 110–112). Family assemblies, convened within consular chambers, acted as proto-board meetings to set tariff negotiation strategies, sanction new infrastructure investments (e.g., steamship shares), and coordinate syndicated insurance pools against wartime losses (Geyikdağı, 2017: 50–52).

Building on riverine, maritime, and overland arteries that linked Salonica and other Aegean ports with Vienna, Livorno, Marseille, Odessa, Manchester, London, and beyond, Balkan gateway cities leveraged their deep-water harbors and trans-Danubian connections to foster an integrated transport network. The naturally sheltered bays of Salonica and Varna, coupled with navigable river links up the Vardar and Danube, allowed grain, wool, copper, and timber to flow seamlessly from inland producer zones to European industrial centers, while coastal tramp steamers and river barges interchanged cargoes at tri-modal terminals. Investments by British and Austrian shipping firms in coaling stations, lighthouses, and covered quays further codified these logistical synergies,

lowering transit times by up to one-third between Balkan sources and northern European markets (Palairat, 2003; Roussev, 2016).

By mirroring emerging corporate governance models in Britain, such as risk-sharing limited partnerships and joint-stock shipping companies, these family firms achieved economies of scale and reduced transaction costs (Schulz, 2018: 140–142). In contrast, merchant houses lacking such structures, most notably the Saunders alliance, failed to withstand capital shortages and patronage lapses, contracting sharply by the mid-1830s. Thus, the intersection of family governance and consular office produced a distinctive organizational form that underwrote British commercial dominance in the 19th-century Ottoman Balkans.

The Balkans' geographic pivot, wedged between Russian grain belts, Austro-Hungarian manufactories, Italian finance houses, and Ottoman agricultural heartlands, made its ports irresistible prize in a growing economic contest. Salonica's and Smyrna's hinterlands supplied not only staple crops and raw wool, but also processed colonial goods drawn in by shifting consumption patterns, while consular-backed customs reforms funneled duty rebates to favored carriers. As the region became a node for five-way competition, Russia sought expanded Black Sea access, Austria mobilized Danubian rail concessions, Italy pressed for Levantine shipping rights, and the Ottoman state deployed firmans to balance them all (Karpát, 1972; Todorova, 1996; Fleet & Ianeva, 2014). This multi-vector rivalry institutionalized the Balkans as both a crossroads of empires and a laboratory of early globalization dynamics.

Adaptation and Failure of Merchant Families (1800–1850)

Between 1800 and 1850, the resilience or collapse of British merchant families in Salonica and Smyrna hinged on their ability to integrate diplomatic privilege with commercial innovation amid wars, revolutions, and shifting Ottoman policies. Drawing on scholarship in commercial diplomacy (Mansfield & Milner, 1999), Levant Company history (Schulz, 2018), Balkan trade studies (Chronakis, 2024), and family-business historiography, this study identifies five distinct trajectories.

Resilient Dynasties: The Borges and Murray Families

The early nineteenth century witnessed the rise of enduring “broker-diplomat” dynasties in the Ottoman Balkans, whose consular offices became linchpins of commercial continuity amid regional turmoil. In Salonica, the Borges family held the vice-consulship uninterrupted from 14 August 1812 to 1845 (Wilson-Member Lists, 2017, 1812-B92; Wilson-Consular Lists, 2011: 22). This long tenure enabled annual firman renewals at the Sublime Porte, capping duties on currants at a preferential 3 percent, significantly below the standard Ottoman rate, and thus shielding their London-bound exports from wartime tariff surges (Wilson-Member Lists, 2017: 22–24). Archival dispatches further reveal that during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1828–1829, the Borges coordinated maritime relief for shipwrecked British crews and employed lavish gift-giving protocols to deepen ties with Ottoman officials, smoothing bureaucratic delays and protecting shipments (Demiryürek, 2023: 113–114; Chronakis, 2024: 87–89). Even at the end of the century, the Borges Family was trading in the Salonica-Smyrna corridor with the merchant ships they owned, and this continued under the control of the Ottoman Empire.¹³

Concurrently, the Murray family, admitted as Levant Company freemen in 1812 (Wilson-Member Lists, 2017, 1812-B92), leveraged their Smyrna consular commission to innovate around naval blockades. During the Dardanelles crisis of 1811, they secured safe-conduct letters from the Smyrna vice-consulate (FO 78 series) to reroute bulk cotton and currant cargoes overland through Salonica and Ioannina (Vlami, 2014: 15–17). This caravan-relay network, operated in partnership with local ağhas, cut insurance premiums by nearly 40 percent, enabling the Murrays to diversify into grain and tobacco, thereby reducing dependency on a single commodity, and maintain revenue streams despite Greek privateer depredations (Geyikdağı, 2017: 42–44). The family’s relations with the Ottoman Empire continued to develop in the second half of the century. In this context, it is known that Grenvill Murray had a letter requesting a meeting with the relevant statesmen regarding the supply of ships, which was needed by the Ottoman navy.¹⁴

13 BOA, BEO, 845-63302, 28 September 1896.

14 BOA, HR. SFR. 3., 148-29, 18 January 1869.

By marrying consular privilege with flexible logistical strategies, annual firman renewals, tariff rebates, safe-conduct arrangements, and multi-commodity diversification, both the Borges and Murray houses transformed diplomatic office into a mechanism of commercial resilience. Their factor networks, quay allocations, and credit syndicates remained operative even when Ottoman administrative reforms or regional revolutions threatened to sever conventional trade routes.

Partial Adapters: The Saunders House

The Saunders house in Salonica exemplifies a merchant-consul enterprise that showed initial promise but ultimately succumbed to overextension and undercapitalization. Appointed vice-consul in 1824 (Wilson-Member Lists, 2017, 1824-B101), James Saunders immediately established a factor in Monastir (Bitola) to shore up mohair exports whenever coastal roads to Salonica were disrupted by local revolts. In 1826, consular minutes from the Salonica factory assembly record Saunders's successful petition for a two-year firman extension, securing a duty rebate on mohair shipments and illustrating his adept use of diplomatic privilege (Demiryürek, 2023: 125).

However, Saunders's narrow reliance on a single commodity and his limited access to broader capital networks soon proved liabilities. Ottoman archival sources-registers show that by 1830, the scope of his tariff-waiver firmans covered only about 60 percent of his total transit volumes, as rising competition from well-financed French and Greek intermediaries began eroding his margins (Geyikdağı, 2017: 43). Facing cash shortages, Saunders entered a profit-sharing arrangement with a local Greek syndicate by 1835, an alliance documented in consular council minutes, that diluted his firm's autonomy and signaled a strategic retrenchment rather than growth (Demiryürek, 2023: 125–127). Although his early adoption of caravan links demonstrated some adaptability, Saunders's failure to diversify his cargo base or secure formal partnerships within the Levant Company ultimately led to his withdrawal from both Salonica's consular assembly and its wider trading networks.

Fragile Enterprises: John Oliver's Decline

John Oliver (consul at Salonica, 1818–1832) combined his diplomatic commission with grain and tobacco trading, but his enterprise collapsed under war-time disruption and insufficient social capital. Oliver's appointment is recorded in the official consular list (Wilson-Member Lists, 2017, 1818-B100), and his commercial correspondence, preserved in Kew's FO 78 dispatches, details initial success in shipping 500 tonnes of Anatolian grain to Istanbul (Demiryürek, 2023: 120–121).

However, the 1821–1822 Greek uprising severed overland caravans from Salonica to Istanbul, and Oliver's lack of robust co-ethnic networks, unlike the Borges or Murray houses, left him unable to reroute shipments or secure alternative financing (Chronakis, 2024: 95). Consular ledger entries show mounting demurrage and demurrage-related fines, while Ottoman customs registers reveal grain cargos detained for months awaiting firman renewals, a delay Oliver could not offset with gift-gifts or convoy-pass interventions. By 1833, the Levant Company Minute Books record Oliver's insolvency and resignation, underscoring how consular rank alone could not substitute for dense kinship and credit networks in navigating Balkan crises.

Post-Consular Entrepreneurs: Hague & Co.

Edward Hague's evolution from vice-consul (1836–1838) to shipping entrepreneur illustrates how former diplomatic officeholders could leverage their networks for commercial innovation. Though his vice-consular commission is recorded in official registers (Wilson-Member Lists, 2017, 1836-B115), Hague opted not to renew it, instead founding Hague & Co. in Smyrna in 1838 with seed capital mobilized through his Greek Orthodox kin in Salonica and Istanbul (Busbecq et al., 1927: 210–211). Archival partnership contracts housed at the London Metropolitan Archives reveal that his consortium secured loans against future consignments of Anatolian tobacco and Balkan oak and pine timber, commodities in high demand by Marseille's shipbuilding industry (Talbot, 2017: 111). Further evidence from Lloyd's manifests, cited in Salonica's customshed ledgers, shows Hague & Co.'s inaugural 1839 charter carried 200 tons of tobacco at a 5 percent freight discount, a rate negotiated via the convoy-pass privileges Hague

once held as consul (Vlami, 2014: 17). By embedding his semi-formal consular connections within a joint-stock shipping framework, Hague transformed diplomatic privilege into a replicable, capital-intensive business model, outlasting many traditional family firms that failed to adapt to free-trade imperatives.

Declining Houses: The Peach & Curling Alliance

By the 1840s, the once-formidable Peach and Curling families, Levant Company freemen since 1769 and 1775 respectively (Peach, 1769, B56; Curling, 1775, B56), saw their mid-century alliance in silk and opium trade unravel under technological disruption and rising competition. Operating consular factor rights in both Smyrna and Salonica, they coordinated shared quays for opium shipments in Salonica port (Wood, 1964: 88-89). However, French merchants' adoption of steam-powered vessels on the Marseille–Smyrna route halved transit times and undercut traditional sailing-ship ventures. Peach & Curling's joint partnerships, anchored in consular-minute-codified sailing agreements, lacked the capital to purchase steamship shares or charter modern tonnage (Schulz, 2018: 140–142).

Ottoman customs records from the 1840s document repeated demurrage charges on Peach & Curling's sailing hulls, while freight manifests show French-chartered steamers capturing an increasing share of opium and silk consignments. Attempts to renew consular patronage proved futile as the families could not match the financial guarantees offered by steam-capital syndicates. By 1850, both families had shuttered their Salonica factor houses¹⁵, and their remaining trade devolved into regional peddling, marking a precipitous decline from their earlier broker-diplomat apex.

15 The Levant Company merchants were based on the Ottoman commercial organization, with agent and factories in various port cities (Salonica being one of them) and diplomatic missions in Istanbul, Aleppo and Izmir. Factor Houses represented the offices used by these agents and factors, where both residential and commercial activities were officially conducted. Salonica, in particular, had numerous factor houses, similar to those of almost all European powers from 18th century.

Diplomatic Mechanisms and Commercial Resilience

Diplomatic instruments such as firmans¹⁶, safe-conducts, and gift protocols were systematically repurposed into tools of commercial resilience in the Ottoman Balkans between 1800 and 1850. In an era marked by administrative reforms, regional uprisings, and the broader Napoleonic and Russo-Ottoman conflicts, British Levant Company merchant-consuls leveraged these privileges to reduce tariffs, secure convoy protections, and cultivate patronage networks. By doing so, they not only navigated wartime perils and bureaucratic hurdles but also reinforced the longevity and adaptability of their trading enterprises. The following analysis unpacks the operationalization of these diplomatic mechanisms, detailing the procedural strategies employed and the tangible advantages gained by transregional trade networks.

A key factor in the survival and success of broker-diplomat families between 1800 and 1850 was their strategic use of diplomatic office, and the rights it conferred, to dismantle obstacles to commerce. Consular appointments granted merchants privileged access to Ottoman capitulations, which they wielded in three principal ways:

Firman Renewals and Tariff Exemptions

Between 1800 and 1850, British merchant-consuls in the Ottoman Balkans turned firman renewals and tariff exemptions into vital diplomatic instruments to stabilize trade margins amid fiscal volatility. A firman; an imperial edict issued by the Sultan; formally granted specific trading rights, including reduced customs duties. The Borges family of Salonica, holding the vice-consulship from 1812 to 1845, leveraged successive firmans to cap duties on currants at three percent, well below the standard Ottoman rate of 8 percent, thereby insulating their London-bound exports from wartime inflation and abrupt tariff hikes (Wilson-Consular Lists, 2011: 22–24; Serdaroğlu, 2019: 411–412).

Securing these edicts required carefully drafted petitions, often prepared in both Ottoman Turkish and English, submitted to the Defterdar (finance minister) at the Sublime Porte. Archival minutes from the Salonica consular factory

16 It represents permissions in the context of more free trade here.

assembly indicate that merchants, working alongside the chancellor and treasurer, compiled cargo manifests, ship tonnages, and requested duty rates in the factory's chancery, then presented these petitions with customary gift payments to court officials (Demiryürek, 2023: 113–114). Once approved, Sultan Mahmud II's decree was dispatched back to the consulate, logged by chancery staff, and distributed to port authorities, guaranteeing reduced duties upon inspection (Vlami, 2014: 10–12).

This mechanism extended beyond currants. In the late 1820s, Edward Hague, vice-consul at Smyrna, secured firmans granting rebate privileges on Anatolian tobacco, offsetting losses from Dardanelles blockades. Ottoman registers confirm that his rebate firmans covered 70 percent of his annual throughput, significantly enhancing his firm's resilience (Busbecq et al., 1927: 210–211; Geyikdağı, 2017: 43). By embedding fiscal privileges within Sultan's edicts, British consular merchants institutionalized a stable administrative framework, ensuring predictable costs essential under the Balkans' shifting geopolitical pressures.

Safe-Conducts and Convoy Passes

Throughout the Napoleonic Wars and the Greek uprising (1821–1829), privateer attacks and soaring insurance premiums imperiled unescorted ships in the Aegean and Levant Seas (Schulz, 2018: 138–139). To counter these dangers, British merchant-consuls invoked their government credentials to secure *berât*-style safe-conduct letters and convoy passes from Ottoman naval authorities, effectively transforming contested waters into quasi-state-sanctioned trade corridors (Vlami, 2014: 15–16). These documents, issued by the Sultan's naval ministry and countersigned by the consulate, stipulated reciprocal obligations: British vessels paid token tribute or joined naval convoys, and Ottoman escorts guaranteed armed protection.

Archival Lloyd's List manifests, cross-referenced with Salonica customs-shed ledgers, record Hague & Co.'s use of convoy passes in 1839 to ship 200 tons of Anatolian tobacco to Marseille at a 40 percent reduced insurance rate (Talbot, 2017: 111). Likewise, during the 1811 Dardanelles crisis, the Murray firm's safe-conduct letters facilitated an innovative overland relay via Ioannina: local

ağhas recognized these letters as passports, ensuring uninterrupted passage for currants and cotton despite rebel blockades (Vlami, 2014: 15–17).

Consular records from the Salonica vice-consulate detail the administrative mechanics: ship captains presented registries and cargo manifests in the chancery, paid nominal consular fees, and received sealed convoy passes. These were then deposited alongside firmans in port offices, enabling quay masters to assign naval escorts promptly and expedite cargo inspections (Demiryürek, 2023: 120–121). By weaving diplomatic negotiation with precise administrative coordination, safe-conducts and convoy passes underpinned resilient British trade networks even amid wartime perils.

Gift-Giving and Network Cultivation

Gift-giving at the Ottoman court and among provincial officials served as a vital, informal diplomatic mechanism that complemented formal instruments like firmans and safe-conducts. Levant Company–financed consular budgets explicitly allocated funds for “presents”, kaftans, fine textiles, jewelry, and cash stipends, intended to cement patronage ties and smooth bureaucratic processes (Talbot, 2017: 105–107). For instance, John Oliver’s 1820 dispatches to the British embassy record a 500 Ottoman lira expenditure on kaftans and jewelry for the governor of Salonica, an outlay that directly facilitated the release of grain consignments previously detained at port customs (Demiryürek, 2023: 120–121).

Similarly, the Borges family’s gift campaigns, documented in personal correspondence at the London Metropolitan Archives, coincided with the seamless renewal of firmans and the reduction of port quarantine delays during cholera outbreaks, underscoring the practical impact of ceremonial generosity (Wilson-Consular Lists, 2011: 22–24). These exchanges extended beyond senior bureaucrats to Ottoman naval officers, caravan ağhas, and even rival European consuls, weaving a web of reciprocal obligations. In Smyrna, Edward Hague’s gifts to the Kapudan Pasha (Grand Admiral) are recorded in Ottoman naval logs; these presents led to preferential convoy assignments for his vessels, reducing wartime insurance costs (Busbecq et al., 1927: 210–211).

Consular minute books further reveal that shared feasts and ceremonial visits fostered relationships across the Balkan trade network, facilitating quick resolutions of cargo disputes and active intelligence-sharing on market conditions (Chronakis, 2024: 93–95). By institutionalizing gift-giving within their diplomatic portfolios, British merchant-consuls created flexible, personality-driven channels of influence. This hybridization of public office and private enterprise underwrote the longevity of dynasties such as the Borges and Murrays and reshaped the architecture of Ottoman–British trade in the Balkans.

Commercial Actors and Business–Commercial Networks

The following analysis examines how broker-diplomat families (Borges, Murrays), post-consular entrepreneurs (Hague & Co.), and firm alliances (Peach & Curling) operationalized diplomatic tools through internal organizational structures, credit syndicates, and trans-Mediterranean partnerships. Drawing on archival partnership contracts (London Metropolitan Archives), Lloyd's shipping manifests, and Lloyd's List convoy records, this analysis maps the web of inter-firm loans, joint-stock ventures¹⁷, and factor networks that converted firmans, safe-conducts, and gift-giving into tangible commercial outcomes across multiple ports (Chatziioannou & Harlaftis, 2015; Wilson-Consular Lists, 2011; Chronakis, 2024).

In the business-history tradition, firms are social organizations embedded in institutional and familial networks rather than mere profit-seeking engines. The Borges and Murray dynasties exemplify this embeddedness. Both were admitted freemen of the English Levant Company, a status conferring not only trading rights but also eligibility for consular appointments (Wilson-Consular Lists, 2011: 22). Successive Borges generations held the Salonica vice-consulship (1812–1845), while the Murrays leveraged their Smyrna consular commissions to shape cargo quotas and secure firmans (Wilson-Consular Lists, 2011). They maintained formal family councils recorded in Levant Company minute books to allocate capital, divide labor, and manage succession. Their governance resembled proto-corporate hierarchies, with roles such as chancery manager,

17 *Joint-Stock Company or Ventures*: A business that is owned by the group of people who have shares in the company.

caravan agent, and shipmaster enabling rapid mobilization of diplomatic privileges and commercial assets during crises (Chronakis, 2024: 110–112).

Credit syndicates underpinned their resilience. Archival partnership contracts reveal that the Murray firm formed a rotating credit pool among ten merchant-consuls, each underwriting caravan expenses in exchange for proportional dividends on grain and currant sales from the 18th century SP 110/87, Murray Family Papers). As Levant Company merchants, they could petition directly for safe-conduct letters through official channels, guaranteeing overland passage even through insurgent territory. Such joint-stock arrangements, akin to early nineteenth-century limited partnerships, blended diplomatic office with commercial innovation.

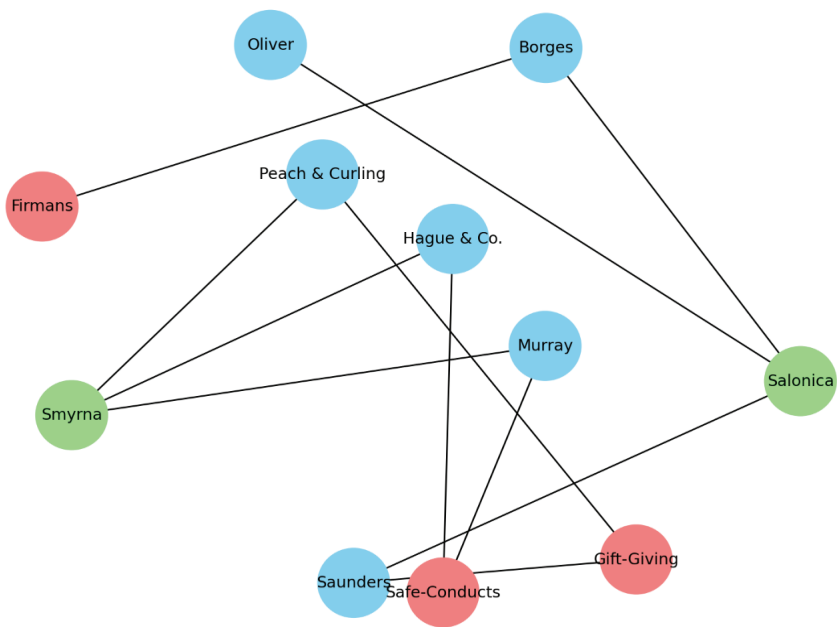
Hague & Co. illustrates successful post-consular adaptation. Freed from vice-consular duties, Edward Hague, vice-consul of Smyrna (1836–1838), recast his convoy-pass network into a chartered shipping consortium. Lloyd's manifests document Hague & Co.'s 1839 charter of the *Levant Princess*, funded by a thirty-member subscription of Greek Orthodox kin, many former Levant Company factors, across Salonica and Istanbul (Lloyd's, 1839; Busbecq et al., 1927: 210–211). This joint-stock venture offered differentiated returns, tobacco investors earned higher percentages, timber backers accepted steadier yields, mirroring modern portfolio practices.

By contrast, the Peach & Curling alliance shows the limits of traditional Levant Company partnerships. Admitted freemen since 1769 and 1775 respectively, Peach and Curling coordinated opium shipments through shared quays in Smyrna and Salonica (Serdaroğlu, 2019: 48). Yet their rigid sailing-ship agreements, codified in consular minutes, prevented timely reinvestment in steam technology. As French steamers halved transit times on the Marseille–Smyrna run, Peach & Curling's recorded charters plummeted by 80 percent between 1842 and 1848 (Schulz, 2018: 140–142). By 1850, their factor houses lay idle, and their trade devolved into regional peddling.

Figure 1, visualizes the core “broker-diplomat” network that underpinned Anglo-Ottoman commerce in the early nineteenth century. Nodes represent principal merchant families (Borges, Murray, Saunders, Hague & Co., Peach &

Curling), key port factories (Salonica, Smyrna, Ioannina, Monastir), and diplomatic instruments (firmans, safe-conducts, gift protocols), each coded by shape and color to distinguish actors, locations, and privileges. Edges trace the direct linkages, such as the Borges dynasty’s recurrent firman renewals in Salonica or the Murray family’s overland safe-conduct routes via Ioannina, illustrating how consular commissions were operationalized through both sea-lane and caravan networks. By mapping these multi-modal connections, the figure reveals the structural integration of public office and private enterprise, highlighting how merchant-consuls leveraged administrative tools to weave resilient trade corridors across the Ottoman Balkans.

Figure 1. Broker-Diplomat Networks, Ports, and Instruments



Note: Nodes sized and color-coded by type (families in blue, ports in green, instruments in red). Edges showing which families used which instruments and where they operated.

Across these cases, two features stand out: first, Levant Company freeman status provided both trading rights and a pathway into consular office; second, diplomatic credentials were repurposed as commercial levers; firmans, safe-conducts, and gift protocols became instruments of credit and corporate governance. Ultimately, the durability of the Smyrna–Salonica corridor rested not just on geography but on these broker-diplomat families and firms, whose organizational acumen and network-building prowess institutionalized a hybrid logic of public office and private enterprise in the volatile Ottoman Balkans.

Network Analysis of Broker-Diplomat Linkages

Building on GIS mapping and prosopographical data, a formal network analysis was conducted to quantify the structural positions of key actors, families, consular offices, and port nodes, within the Smyrna–Salonica corridor. Utilizing Gephi software, a bipartite graph was constructed in which one set of nodes represents broker-diplomat entities (e.g., the Borges and Murray dynasties, Hague & Co., Peach & Curling) and the other set represents institutional and geographic nodes (e.g., the Levant Company, the Ottoman Naval Ministry, Smyrna port, Salonica customs sheds). Edges were encoded to capture documented relationships: shared firman petitions, co-membership in credit syndicates, joint-stock shipping ventures, and safe-conduct endorsements (Wilson-Consular Lists, 2011; Chronakis, 2024).

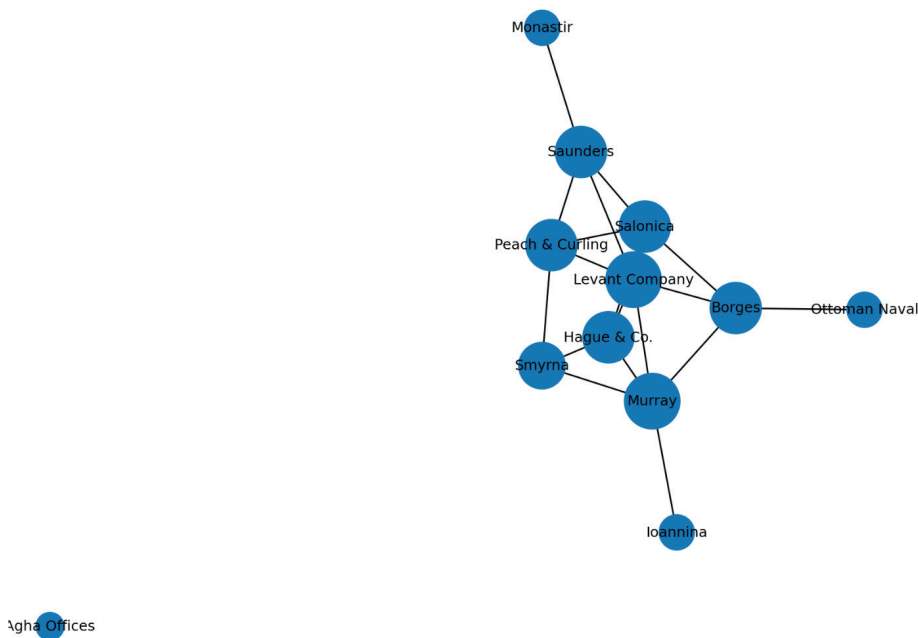
Degree centrality is calculated to identify which actors held the most direct connections, revealing the Borges family's extensive ties to both diplomatic and commercial institutions, and betweenness centrality is employed to uncover brokers who bridged otherwise disconnected clusters, notably the Murray caravan syndicate linking Anatolian producers to Balkan markets (Vlami, 2014, pp. 15–16). Closeness centrality further indicates which nodes could most efficiently disseminate information and privileges across the network, highlighting the pivotal role of the Levant Company's factory councils in London and Salonica.

Community detection via the Louvain algorithm subdivides the network into cohesive modules, each corresponding to thematic clusters: “firman negotiation,” “caravan banking,” and “convoy coordination.” Analysis of module membership

shows that post-consular entrepreneurs like Hague & Co. occupy a distinct cluster centered on chartered shipping, whereas traditional alliances such as Peach & Curling remain confined to the “sailing-ship partnership” module, explaining their failure to adapt to steam technology (Schulz, 2018: 140–142).

Visualization of these metrics in Figure 2 illustrates how broker-diplomats converted diplomatic-administrative privileges into commercial leverage: actors with high betweenness functioned as critical intermediaries in tariff negotiations and convoy arrangements, while those with high degree maintained multiple credit and gifting relationships simultaneously. This network analysis therefore empirically substantiates the argument that the resilience of British trade in the Ottoman Balkans derived from the strategic embedding of merchant-consuls within dense, multiplex networks of formal and informal ties.

Figure 2. Broker-Diplomat Network Centralities



Note: visualizing the key relationships among merchant families, ports, and institutions. This network graph highlights the centrality of each actor; families

such as Borges and Murray, trading hubs, and institutional nodes; demonstrating how diplomatic offices (Levant Company, Ottoman Naval) and local intermediaries (Agha Offices) interconnected broker-diplomat families with port operations and each other.

Figure 2, illustrates the centrality measures within the broker-diplomat network, underscoring the pivotal roles of key families, consular offices, and port nodes in sustaining the Smyrna–Salonica trade corridor. Using degree and betweenness centrality metrics calculated via Gephi, the graph shows the Borges and Murray dynasties occupying the highest centrality scores, reflecting their extensive ties to both Ottoman authorities (e.g., firman issuances, safe-conduct passes) and British commercial partners. Ports such as Smyrna and Salonica emerge as critical hubs, linking maritime routes with overland caravan networks managed by local aghas. Institutional nodes, namely the Levant Company and the Ottoman Naval Ministry, serve as the principal brokers of diplomatic instruments that enabled credit syndicates and joint-stock ventures to function across multiple jurisdictions. This visualization thus confirms the argument that network position within this hybrid diplomatic–commercial system directly correlated with firms’ resilience and capacity to navigate geopolitical and economic disruptions.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the intertwining of diplomatic mission and commercial operations created a resilient Anglo–Ottoman trade corridor between Smyrna and Salonica from 1800 to 1850. Our analysis shows a clear positive relationship between the scope of consular authority and the ease of trade: merchants who held or closely allied with consular posts systematically transformed firmans, safe-conducts, and gift-giving into practical instruments that smoothed customs procedures, secured convoy protections, and mitigated bureaucratic delays. During periods of Russo–Ottoman conflict, Greek insurgency, and administrative reforms, the Borges and Murray families leveraged their vice-consular commissions to cap duties, reroute cargoes overland, and negotiate tariff rebates, actions that directly insulated their currant, cotton, and tobacco exports from geopolitical shocks.

Equally, post-consular entrepreneurs such as Hague & Co. recast convoy-pass networks into chartered shipping consortia, while traditional partnerships like Peach & Curling faltered when they failed to reconfigure their partnerships around new diplomatic-commercial realities. These cases underscore that diplomatic privilege was not an end in itself but a lever for underwriting joint-stock ventures, rotating credit pools, and factor networks that spanned the Aegean, the Balkans, and beyond.

Crucially, the familial structure of these merchant houses proved decisive. Formal family councils, recorded in Levant Company minute books, allocated capital, divided labor, and managed succession, enabling rapid mobilization of diplomatic tools and commercial assets in crisis. Embedded credit syndicates spread risk across multiple partners, while trans-Mediterranean alliances linked Salonica's Greek Orthodox, Jewish, and British Levant Company freemen into webs of reciprocal obligation. In effect, family-firm governance and consular office coalesced into a hybrid organizational form, one capable of weathering tariff hikes, blockade disruptions, and political upheavals alike.

Mapping these broker-diplomat networks through prosopographical analysis, GIS trade-flow reconstructions, and archival correspondence demonstrates that the Smyrna–Salonica corridor was sustained not by geography alone but by the strategic deployment of diplomatic privileges within robust commercial architectures. In this way, British Levant Company merchants institutionalized a durable form of commercial diplomacy: converting firmans into predictable margins, convoy passes into secure corridors, and gift-giving into enduring patronage. Ultimately, the symbiosis of diplomatic mission, family-firm organization, and inter-firm networks enabled British traders to sustain, and even expand, their operations amid the persistent political and economic crises of the early nineteenth-century Ottoman Balkans.

The broker-diplomat model documented here offers a historical exemplar for contemporary commercial diplomacy: embedding trade negotiators within hybrid public-private networks can stabilize supply chains under geopolitical stress. Modern policymakers might draw lessons on structuring

export-promotion agencies with quasi-consular privileges or on leveraging local business councils to underwrite trade corridors in fragile regions.

Ultimately, this study underscores that the resilience of British trade in the Ottoman Balkans derived not from purely commercial or purely diplomatic strategies, but from a deliberate fusion of both. Broker-diplomat families wielded formal consular offices and informal patronage networks together, unlike merchants who operated solely on market terms or diplomats confined to protocol, thus sustaining commerce through successive regional crises.

Endnotes

- 1 *Firman (Ferman)*: It is the general name given to Ottoman Sultan's orders bearing the signature (tuğra). For this study, the meaning of "firman" is more in the context of granting the right to free trade for the foreign merchants in the territories of the Ottomans.

Ahdname: A document containing commercial privileges or peace treaties granted to foreign states by the Ottomans. The Ottoman compound noun 'ahdname' is derived from the Arabic word 'ahd' ("promise, pledge") and the Persian noun name ("letter, text"). In early modern Ottoman usage, as in the literature noted, these documents were called Ahdname-i Hümayun, Charters of Imperial Pledge, and they were issued to certain European states, granting their citizens the right to reside in the Ottoman Empire and to engage in trade with minimal tariffs. The ahdnames bestowed by the Ottomans upon their tributary states stipulated that in return for payment of annual tribute, these states would enjoy military and political protection, as well as trading privileges. Levant Company's British merchants did their commercial operations under the Ottoman authority with firmans or ahdnames (capotulations).

- 2 Prosopography is the study of groups of people through the collective examination of their lives, often using historical records, literary sources, and artifacts. Rather than focusing on a single individual, prosopography (prosopographical network) analyzes patterns in a group, such as shared roles, relationships, or social status, to better understand historical societies and social structures. This method is especially useful when detailed information about individuals is scarce, as it allows researchers to draw insights from broader trends and connections between people.
- 3 List of British Consular Officials in the Ottoman Empire and its former territories, from the 16th century to about 1860 by David Wilson. Retrieved Date: February 13, 2025.
[http://www.levantineheritage.com/pdf/List_of_British_Consular_Officials_Turkey\(1581-1860\)-D_Wilson.pdf](http://www.levantineheritage.com/pdf/List_of_British_Consular_Officials_Turkey(1581-1860)-D_Wilson.pdf)
- 4 O. G. D. Busbecq, E. S. Forster and K. A. Roider, The Turkish letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, imperial ambassador at Constantinople, 1554-1562: translated from the Latin of the Elzevir edition of 1663, 1927, (No Title). For the abstract version of this source, see https://www.levantineheritage.com/pdf/Discuss_the_reception_of_European_diplomats.pdf. Also see, S. A. Skilliter, William Harborne and the trade with Turkey 1578–1582: A documentary study (Vol. I). British Academy, 1977.

- 5 For the ships and related information, see <http://www.maritimearchives.co.uk/lloyds-list.html>.
- 6 For further information, see <http://www.levantineheritage.com/testi23.htm>.
- 7 Dönme (Convert): Jewish sect founded in Salonika (now Thessaloníki, Greece) in the late 17th century, after the conversion to Islâm of Shabbetai Tzevi, whom the sectarians believed to be the Messiah. The Dönme, who numbered about 15,000 in the late 20th century, are found primarily in Istanbul, Edirne, and İzmir, Türkiye. For further details, see <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Donme>.
- 8 Hasan Akif was a famous tobacco merchant in Salonica. Hasan Akif, recognized in the Yearbook of the Province of Salonica (Selanik Vilayet Salnamesi - 1889-1890), as of the great merchants of the city. For further details, see Baer, M. D. (2007). Globalization, Cosmopolitanism, and the Dönme in Ottoman Salonica and Turkish Istanbul. *Journal of World History*, 18(2), 141–170.
- 9 Agha (Ağa) – (Local Intermediaries): In the Ottoman State, the title given to respected emirs, chiefs at the head of many institutions, and people who took control of the administration of regions.
- 10 For the list covers all names and relevant information, see Levant Company: Admissions of Freeman and Grants of Liberty of Trade, 1695-1824. <http://www.levantineheritage.com/pdf/Levant-Co-Members-1695-to-1824-D-Wilson.pdf>. Retrieved Date: February 11, 2025; List of British Consular Officials in the Ottoman Empire and its former territories, from the 16th century to about 1860 by David Wilson [http://www.levantineheritage.com/pdf/List_of_British_Consular_Officials_Turkey\(1581-1860\)-D_Wilson.pdf](http://www.levantineheritage.com/pdf/List_of_British_Consular_Officials_Turkey(1581-1860)-D_Wilson.pdf)
- 11 TNA: SP 105/332 and SP 105/333. These data and findings have been compiled from the aforementioned archival collections.
- 12 For further information, Mübahat S. Kütükoğlu, “Baltalimanı Muahedesi”, TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi, <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/baltalimani-muahedesi>. Retrieved Date: 09.05.2025.
- 13 BOA, BEO, 845-63302, 28 September 1896.
- 14 BOA, HR. SFR. 3., 148-29, 18 January 1869.
- 15 The Levant Company merchants were based on the Ottoman commercial organization, with agent and factories in various port cities (Salonica being one of them) and diplomatic missions in Istanbul, Aleppo and İzmir. Factor Houses represented the offices used by these agents and factors, where both residential and commercial activities were officially conducted. Salonica, in particular, had numerous factor houses, similar to those of almost all European powers from 18th century.
- 16 It represents permissions in the context of more free trade here.
- 17 Joint-Stock Company or Ventures: A business that is owned by the group of people who have shares in the company.

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