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978-0-521-52085-0 - The Early Modern Ottomans: Remapping the Empire
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Introduction: Situating the early modern Ottoman world

Virginia H. Aksan and Daniel Goffman

Historical periodization is always problematic. In part, the difficulty exists because deciding when and why eras begin and end always privileges a particular period or civilization over others. A historian of Renaissance Italy, for example, may refer to the Dark Age that preceded this "rebirth" in order to emphasize the period's marvels of artistic and intellectual rediscovery and innovation. A historian of medieval Italy might object, however, because the periodization appears to belittle the world that he or she knows to be rich and fascinating. In other words, such a demarcation frequently demeans what came before. Periodization can also denigrate contemporaneous civilizations. A historian of the age of European expansion or imperialism, for example, may offer a picture of colonial America, Asia, or Africa that elides those continents' own histories and internal rhythms. Implicit in any such terms of periodization, in other words, are often suspect assessments about what preceded, what followed, and what characterized a particular time and place.

Furthermore, at least in the case of European expansion, historians have imposed the periodization of one place onto others. Such transfers are usually appropriated from Europe, and constitute a component of what is often referred to as a "Eurocentric" view of the world. The idea of the medieval, for example, originated in European historiography. It has, however, been routinely applied elsewhere. To envision a medieval Japan or a medieval Middle East is to begin our examination of those largely self-contained societies by looking for elements of European civilization within them, rather than examining them in their own terms and granting them their own periodizations and histories. Transplanting a word like "feudal" from Europe to the Middle Eastern or Japanese milieus is even more problematic, because the term describes not only a period but also a social and political structure that formed in a particular place and time. Whether such designations help us understand the distinctive worlds of Japan and

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the Middle East, or merely subsume the rich histories of these largely autonomous peoples under the more recently ascendant civilization of western Europe, remains an open question.

Similar issues of periodization vex Ottoman historiography. In this regard, the title of this book, *The Early Modern Ottomans: Remapping the Empire*, is representative. The period we are examining begins in about 1453, with the Ottoman conquest of the Byzantine Empire – when the Ottoman state began consciously to envision itself as a world-conquering empire – and ends in about 1839, with the establishment of the Tanzimat – when the Ottomans began consciously and deliberately to emulate the West. Historians typically refer to this era as the "early modern" or "premodern," designations that not only derive from western European historiography, but also are teleological in the sense that they privilege a concept and an era that we call the modern. In other words, this terminology may suggest that the principal reason to study the period between 1453 and 1839 is to examine the roots and development of the modern, western-inspired world. These are valid and fascinating reasons to study the Ottomans, but the scholar using such terminology runs the risk of condemning the period's intrinsic substance to a secondary position.

The idea of the modern is itself a western one. While it is a complicated concept, it is generally associated with the rise of the nation-state (as opposed to other ways to organize societies such as empires and city-states) and with the rise of individualism (as opposed to communal or other forms of identity). Both the nation-state and individualism, in turn, are associated with the West, as is the related concept of imperialism, and studies of the early modern or premodern Ottoman world often try to answer such questions as when and how "nations" (the Greek, the Armenian, the Bulgarian, the Turk, the Arab) emerged out of the Ottoman polity, whether and when an Ottoman sense of the individual materialized, and, most commonly, how much the Ottoman Empire was like other European states and societies, and the ways in which it differed from (read: was inferior to) them.

In various ways, the essays in *The Early Modern Ottomans* contribute to such discussions, as some of its contributors search for indications of a movement toward the "modern" in various aspects of the Ottoman Empire and others look for similarities (and differences) between it and the states and societies with which it shared Europe and the Mediterranean Sea. We include here explorations of traces of the individual in the cemeteries of Ottoman cities, in the possessions and economic activities of women in small Anatolian cities, and in the gardens of the Ottoman capital. We have evidence of Ottoman linkages with the European and Mediterranean

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worlds in the construction of physical and mental boundaries, the creation of new diplomacies, and the legitimization of rule; and we have indications of the creation of a new group consciousness in Ottoman society in the descriptions of Ottoman writers. The interest communities began to take in preserving a local sense of the past, the broad appeal to political ideology through the popularization of scholarly discourse, and the construction of a new conscripted army are also part of the Ottoman movement toward the "modern."

As Edhem Eldem demonstrates, the deceased themselves can reveal an aspect of the Ottoman drift from the premodern toward this more modern vision of society. During the period 1700–1850, for example, one can see in inscriptions preserved on Ottoman gravestones in Istanbul and other urban centers conscious attempts on the part of individuals to claim distinctive personalities. One of the most dramatic of such indications was the association of the deceased with a prominent family member (whether that person be an uncle or a more distant relative) rather than with a relatively obscure father. Such inscriptions were a conscious effort to preserve the memory and individuality of the deceased through association with a visible and historically relevant individual rather than through a more humble parent.

In the early modern Ottoman Empire, as Leslie Peirce and Shirine Hamadeh show, the living as well as the dead, the female as well as the male, began to assert their individuality. In the private sphere, of course, women had long displayed their wealth and personalities. They even found ways to make themselves known (if not to display themselves openly) in the public arena, through servants and endowments (waqfs) and other forms of charity, by gathering in courtyards, through gossip, and by other means. In fact, the very ability of a woman to screen herself from the outside world connoted wealth and prestige. Thus, the less visible a woman was, the more wealth and power she was likely to possess.

Before the eighteenth century, however, Ottoman Muslim women worked to maintain their privacy whether they were wealthy or poor, urban or rural. In that century, not only did the private/public division begin to break down, at least in Istanbul and other major Ottoman cities, but also both men and women started to search for ways to distinguish themselves through their attire and their public personas. They found one outlet for this newfound individuality in the public gardens that characterized eighteenth-century urban life. Whereas in the seventeenth century the coffeehouse had defined sociable public space, in the eighteenth century imperial gardens and other spaces, newly opened to the public, joined, and to an extent replaced such establishments. In the new enthusiasm for safe leisure activities, the urban middle classes, especially women, began to

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frequent public gardens and fountains, to display themselves in finery there, and thereby to become increasingly visible in the public sphere.

As the definition of the public sphere shifted in Istanbul and other urban centers, so the Ottoman concept of community underwent strain, especially in provinces distant from the capital city. For example, Dina Khoury discusses how the period from the 1770s to the 1820s saw the emergence of a politico-theology in Arabia – Wahhabism – that not only challenged the theological underpinnings of Ottoman society, but also came to mount a considerable political threat. Wahhabism's association with a powerful family, the Sauds, provided this ideology with a political and very public dimension, and protagonists of this faith simultaneously argued for the exclusion of many Sunni Muslims from the Islamic community even as they sought to export their ideology to other Ottoman Arab lands. Aksan, Hamadeh and Eldem explore that same era as an incubator for tranformation in a changing global context.

Such episodes presaged the passage from early modern to modern. First of all, the rhetoric of exclusion in this and other doctrines represented a modernist challenge to the Ottoman polity as well as to other traditional Islamic states and societies, whose political and social systems not only assumed the inclusion of all Sunni Muslims, but also of non-Muslim "People of the Book." Those who belong to nation-states do not often define themselves as did the Wahhabis; nevertheless, a similar process of exclusion certainly plays a vital role in selecting who are allowed to become citizens and who are barred. In other words, the Wahhabis and others opened the door to expanded categories of exclusionary identities in the Islamic world. Furthermore, the Wahhabis' rhetorical appeal to the "masses" not only demanded a popularization and simplification of their message, but it also forced Ottoman theologians to respond in kind. The consequence was a popularization of theology that would help engender a multitude of political ideologies, both religious and secular.

Both transformations in Ottoman gardens and the Wahhabi revolt occurred during the period of global imperialism, a time when the economic, political, and cultural reach of the British, the French, and other European states was beginning to stretch across the globe. The articles in this volume make clear that, during this time, the Ottomans understood and participated in such innovations, as well as the military and political strategies and engagements that made them possible. For example, Virginia Aksan shows how the very meaning of rebellion changed in the early modern Ottoman world, from one that typically was little more than a confrontation between competing foci of authority, such as viziers and sultan, or janissaries and ulema, to one that, by the end of the eighteenth century, more resembled

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civil war. Such transforming tension forced a more modern "public" – such as that seen in gardens and in theological disputes – into the political sphere, most dramatically seen in the sharing-of-power agreement that provincial notables forced upon the sultan in 1808 and in largely futile attempts to construct a modern, conscription-based military.

Gardens, fountains, coffeehouses, and other public spaces were common in major cities throughout eighteenth-century Europe, as were their habitués; the popularization of religion and politics also occurred in other parts of the European subcontinent; and governments in Britain, France, Prussia, and elsewhere were also collaborating with various elites and building conscription armies. Although all these trends are components of modernity and find their complements elsewhere in Europe, they represent only three of the many ways in which the early modern Ottoman polity resembled other European states and societies. The Ottoman Empire certainly differed from other European states – most dramatically in its roots in central Asia, in its Altaic and Uralic language, and in its Islamic heritage. Nevertheless, as this volume confirms, the early modern Ottoman world and the rest of Europe also shared much – such as the Mediterranean Sea, a seaborne and land-based commercial network, peoples who moved back and forth across the continent, and similar visions of their roles in the world.

As Palmira Brummett convincingly argues, early modern mapmakers, both western European and Ottoman, manifestly expose characteristics of this shared world. Their maps also chart a world that diverges markedly from our own. On these maps, boundaries are often distorted, space is reorganized, and historical times and civilizations are conflated or severed in ways that to us seem illogical or fantastic. It would be a mistake to dismiss the makers of such maps as careless or uninformed, however. Rather, the maps that they produced often precisely indicate state policy, provide manifest justifications for governments and societies, and impart insight into the precise *mentalité* of the period. For example, the conflation of the worlds of ancient Greece and Rome or biblical Palestine and the contemporary world on the same map might provide a justification for state policy or an attempt to legitimize the existence of a particular state, Ottoman as well as Venetian or French. Meanwhile, the mutability of borders common to maps produced throughout the Eurasian world did not always indicate uncertainty, but were in fact a type of polemic, either against another polity or as a manifestation of the desire or intention to expand. Such patterns (and the accounts of travelers exhibit similar patterns) may today seem an alien way of thinking, but they manifested a shared zeitgeist for the entire early modern Christian and Islamic Eurasian world.

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In short, maps often served to legitimize the Ottoman and other European states, justify their policies, or suggest ways for them to expand or claim territory. Such guiding principles, as well as the manner in which strategy was formed and acted upon, displayed another kind of similarity between these states. Gábor Ágoston and Molly Greene convincingly demonstrate how, on both the land and the sea, in the sixteenth century the Ottomans joined the Habsburgs in developing a "Grand Strategy." Under the sultan Süleyman (r. 1520–66) and the emperor Charles V (1530–56), the implementation of such a strategy made the two Mediterranean empires appear to mirror each other and served to draw the Ottomans into the world of European politics and ideology. This perspective shows how pragmatic the Ottomans were, makes us see that the empire behaved in ways similar to other states, and leads us to look for rational decision-making in the Ottoman world.

It is a common misconception that the Ottomans were fanatical, both in their religious beliefs and in the sense that they based decisions upon ideology rather than expediency. Ágoston suggests that, in fact, this empire gathered intelligence just as effectively and judiciously as did other European states as it sought to make prudent and rational choices. Domestically, it did so through the use of janissaries, *çavuşes* (messengers, heralds), the archiving of materials, and the survey of lands; internationally, it relied upon client states (such as Dubrovnik and even Venice and France), frontier beys and other administrators, ambassadors in Istanbul and consuls in other Ottoman cities, and espionage networks. Other European states likewise had such mechanisms to collect information. In addition, however, the distinctive structure of Ottoman society gave the state an advantage over its western European rivals. Unlike those more homogeneous societies, which kept the religiously dissimilar either at the fringes of society or completely outside of it, the Ottomans could advantangeously utilize the commercial and cultural diasporas of the various communities that were integral to their domains for political and economic purposes. The large communities of Armenians, Greeks, Jews, and others resident in the empire enjoyed strong connections with family members and compatriots living in various European cities. The Ottomans relied upon these communities not only for the import and export of commodities; they also benefited from their military, political, and technological intelligence.

Diplomatic envoys constitute the front line of any government's communications with another state. Consequently, diplomacy both generates intelligence and is particularly dependent upon the accurate intelligence of others. The early modern Ottomans were no exception. As Daniel

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Goffman argues, contrary to popular perceptions, not only were they fully engaged in early modern European diplomacy, they participated in the invention of those systems. Borders and frontiers in the Ottoman eastern Mediterranean were porous, shadowy, and uncertain. As Molly Greene demonstrates, when a merchant (or a naval or piratical) vessel sailed across those seas and even anchored in the many ports that dotted their shoreline, its captain could never be certain about which state would claim what right over him, his passengers, and his cargo. In addition, the rapid Ottoman expansion into southeastern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries made relationships between states and peoples even more ambiguous (an ambiguity that maps and travelers' accounts fully reflect). It was in this environment that the Ottomans and other European states developed new rights and obligations in their dealings with each other, such as the establishment of permanent ambassadorships and consulships, extraterritoriality, and the so-called capitulatory regime. In other words, Ottoman civilization was not the static and enervated entity often portrayed in western narratives, sluggishly reacting to vigorous European states and societies. The Ottomans not only participated in the early modern European world; they also helped to construct it. The early modern Ottoman Empire was so aggressive and innovative, in fact, that it was often other European states that seemed listless and fixed.

Such explorations into the roots of modernity in the early modern Ottoman world and attempts to compare the Ottoman state and society with other contemporaneous ones certainly are instructive and fruitful. Nevertheless, the historian's job is not only to use the past to explain the present; it is also to comprehend a particular time and place on its own terms. In other words, it is not enough simply to reach back into the Ottoman past in order to draw out antecedents and precedents to the modern, the imperial, the nation, or the individual. Indeed, doing so distorts the time and place being studied by overemphasizing certain aspects of that world and dismissing others. English–Ottoman relations constitute a notable example of the consequence of such skewed examinations. The English sense of superiority, baldly displayed in the imperialism of the second British Empire, often is ahistorically imposed upon early modern Anglo-Ottoman relations. In fact, the English were very much the supplicants. Vanished elements of Ottoman civilization may seem insignificant to us today, the mere debris of history. Without them, however, the period and place lose their sense of historical distinctiveness.

The authors of the chapters in this volume are sensitive to such issues, and address them in a variety of ways. First, each possesses a profound familiarity

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with the sources (principally Ottoman) upon which they base their narratives and arguments. Such an anchor is essential to make sense of that history. Nevertheless, it is too often lacking in historical (and literary) scholarship. The fact that Italians, Englishmen, Frenchmen, and other Europeans visited, studied, and wrote about the Ottoman Empire has both enriched the field and handicapped it. Such sources are enlightening because historians and literary scholars have mined them for rich insight into European perspectives on the East. They are restrictive, however, because these same investigators have often written their accounts exclusively from such sources, which has led to exterior historiography and criticism, that is, work that examines the Ottoman world only through the eyes of often rather ignorant and even hostile foreigners. Consequently, stereotypes, uncalled-for censure, and a distorted understanding of Ottoman civilization have too often slipped into such scholarship. The authors in this volume sometimes use these same western-based sources; but in every case they weigh them against others generated by the Ottomans themselves. In other words, they are fully engaged with the early modern Ottoman world, and are able to view the empire from within as well as without.

Second, these authors understand that the early modern Ottoman state and society possessed their own independent narrative, which consisted of much more than a search for modernity, a comparison with other European countries, or a competition with the "West." These essays demonstrate how fully early modern Ottoman civilization in its own way marked its borders, both on the land and on the sea. It used particular rhetorical constructs and chose certain words to describe its relations with its many peoples and the world around it, including its negotiations with other states and civilizations. Reforms in Ottoman political, military, and monetary structures were not mere responses to outside threats; they had their own internal logic and rhythms. The ways in which Ottomans imagined themselves and organized their society – most clearly reflected in their writings – were distinctive and developed in fascinating ways. The Ottoman legal system, for instance, while certainly based in Islamic law, took on its own characteristics and distinguished itself from the systems of other Islamic states.

Both Palmira Brummett's and Gábor Ágoston's texts quickly reveal how wrong it is to associate the Ottoman Empire exclusively with either western or Islamic methods of marking borders. The Ottomans portrayed themselves and designated their borders in a number of different ways, some of which were their own inventions. The sultan's long title, as a case in point, was intended not only to intimidate; it also helped define Ottoman margins as well as those areas in which the state desired to be unbounded. Similarly,

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Ottoman attitudes toward the sea (and especially the Mediterranean) were neither fixed nor unrestrained; rather, they were variegated, and dependent upon routes, methods of naval warfare, and ideology.

Several of these essays provide an important service in their careful examination of various fundamental Ottoman terms and expressions. Investigating the too often ignored cultural specificity of language helps to problematize the meanings of "subject" and "foreigner" in the Ottoman world. These investigations also suggest that incautious translations into English can lead to analyses that fundamentally distort Ottoman institutions and transformations. Dragomans (those who were responsible for translating and easing communication between Ottoman and foreign statesmen and merchants) seem to have realized far more thoroughly than many present-day scholars that contemporaneous French or English understandings of Ottoman terms are misleading; any attempt to extract the Ottoman language from its culture must be undertaken with great care in order to avoid considerable confusion and misinterpretation.

Our uneven grasp of the Ottoman language is a critical component of our incomplete awareness of the internal dynamics of Ottoman civilization. Sometimes misapprehensions appear in our readings of Ottoman texts, such as the "advice to kings" (*nasihatname*) literature. Historians have interpreted these influential writings, largely produced in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Istanbul, as direct appeals to the sultan, as comments on the rise and fall of civilizations, and as accurate observations of Ottoman decline. They have usually accepted them pretty much at face value, with little attempt to deconstruct them or situate them in the civilization and the milieu that produced them. Douglas Howard's close examination of these sources, however, reveals that their audiences and their agendas were diverse and that they constituted a literary genre that was anything but transparent. Their authors presented a complicated and deliberately deceptive literary style; the genre developed as direct contact with the sultan became difficult and the written word became more important in communications with him; and its audience more and more became not the sultan but the state bureaucracy that represented him. Writers in the genre assumed a "prophetic" voice as they sought sovereign authenticity and a definition of what the Ottoman state was and should become.

The *nasihatnames*, then, did not exist in a vacuum: Ottoman politics and society shaped their form, substance, and audience. Such is the case with other Ottoman writings as well. For example, beginning in the mid sixteenth century the early modern Ottoman government solicited, sponsored, and endorsed official histories of the Ottoman state and dynasty, and historians

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have often accepted such writings as authoritative accounts of Ottoman history. Baki Tezcan's essay demonstrates that, in fact, such histories projected a particular agenda that not all Ottomans (and at times not even the sultan) embraced. In fact, it seems that in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries most members of the Ottoman elite ignored the sultan's official histories, specifically because many Ottoman elites did not share the dynast's particular view of Ottoman history. It was not until the late seventeenth century, when other prominent families began to wrest control of Ottoman policy away from the imperial family, that the official historiography not only became widely disseminated, but also began to attain exclusive control over the Ottomans' imaginings of their own past. The articles in this book help us avoid misreadings of these and other Ottoman writings, and consequent misconstructions of the Ottoman state and society.

Both the *nasihatname*s and Ottoman histories constituted *conscious* presentations of Ottoman life, institutions, and history. This empire, though, generated a body of writings that had other purposes, such as cadastral surveys meant to count people, land, and wealth; religious polemics meant to convince the reader of one or another set of beliefs; imperial rescripts meant to act on the government's policy; and Islamic court records meant to reflect the judgments of municipal judges (kadis). Historians have made use of such records, to be sure. Nevertheless, we have spent no more time exploring what they meant to the Ottomans than we have spent investigating why Ottomans wrote *nasihatname*s and why they commissioned histories of the dynasty.

The records of Ottoman legal courts constitute one of our most important sources on that world. Such courts had long been an important feature of Islamic states. Nevertheless, as Najwa Al-Qattan insists, it is a mistake to imagine that the Ottomans blindly accepted the legal system of their predecessors. In at least three fundamental ways, they adapted it to the specific needs of their empire. First, they turned kadis into servants of the state, which simultaneously removed them from many local influences and helped regularize Islamic law within the realm. Second, they "territorialized" shari'a law: that is, the state narrowed it in the sense that the law now focused exclusively on Ottoman territories even as the state expanded it to include non-Muslims as well as Muslims. This innovation created a legal (and, in the sense that individuals could there openly communicate across gendered and religious lines, even a public) space in which religious affiliation became less relevant. Third, such courts began preserving the judgments of kadis, which both enhanced the authority of that official and provided a historical memory within a particular court; in other words, a kadi now could refer to his predecessors in a particular place in constructing his own decisions.

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