

The politics of households in Ottoman Egypt

The rise of the Qazdağlıs

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Introduction

This is the story of the rise of the Qazdağlı household. To the extent that this household is familiar to readers outside the tiny circle of scholars of pre-nineteenth-century Ottoman Egypt, it is known chiefly as the group headed by the famous ‘Ali Bey, the former military slave (*mamlūk*) who in the late 1760s dared to assert Egypt’s autonomy in defiance of the Ottoman sultan. Alternatively, the household attracts notice as the party of predominantly Georgian mamluks whom Bonaparte found holding sway in Egypt at the time of his invasion in 1798. The prevalence of a regime of military slaves from the Caucasus region naturally evokes the Mamluk sultanate, which ruled Egypt before the Ottoman conquest in 1517. Thus it seems almost automatic, even to experts on the subject, to depict the regime over which the Qazdağlıs presided as a reversion to the usages of the Mamluk sultanate.

Yet the Qazdağlı household was founded by a Janissary officer toward the middle of the seventeenth century. Thus, what is missing from the foregoing appraisal of the household is an appreciation of the context within which the household emerged and developed in the century preceding ‘Ali Bey’s hegemony. This context is, in the first place, an Ottoman context, for the character of the Ottoman Empire’s administration and Egypt’s place within it underwent telling changes during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The Qazdağlıs, furthermore, participated in a provincial Ottoman military culture whose transformations prepared the ground for the Georgian preponderance of the late eighteenth century.

I attempt here to provide a sense of this context by analyzing the Qazdağlıs’ evolution within the framework of Ottoman decentralization and the emergence of an empire-wide military and administrative culture based on households. Both the redirection of the empire’s priorities and the composition and functions of households provide critical keys to understanding the course that the Qazdağlı bloc followed. But in order to place the Qazdağlıs squarely within this context, we must first place Egypt in the context of the Ottoman Empire during these critical centuries.