

Introduction

In a famous work called the *Sublime Ethics*, or *Ablâk-ı Alâî*, the Ottoman moralist Kınâlizâde Ali Çelebi (d. 1571) counted two different kinds of ignorance: simple and compound. While the first type means simply not to know something, which itself is not overly blameworthy, the second is more pernicious. Compound ignorance is twofold in that a person does not know a thing, but wrongly thinks that he does; it is a vice because he is ignorant of his own ignorance.¹

There is something about biography that lends itself to ignorance. A biographer on one hand has the impossible task of evoking a past life, in many cases one far from his own in time, gender, mentality, and culture, and lived in a complex web of social relations. There can be no total biography, just as there can be no total history. It goes without saying that major and minor gaps will remain no matter how carefully one reconstructs a subject's upbringing, career, opinions, and wider socio-cultural context. Sources, subjective experience, and the distance of time pose barriers that no one can fully overcome. At the same time, biographers run the risk of feeling too close to subjects as they dispel their initial ignorance – they risk trading simple for compound vices and trusting too much in the limited scope of their knowledge. We of course have no idea how Kınâlizâde might have solved the problem of biography. Very probably, however, he would have first advised us to know what we know, know what we do not know, and admit to our simple ignorance. It is only by grappling with these limits that a biographer can avoid more

¹ KINÂLIZÂDE, 170–174. See also Gottfried Hagen, “The Order of Knowledge, the Knowledge of Order: Intellectual Life,” in *The Cambridge History of Turkey* (Cambridge, 2013), 2: 407.

2 Introduction

serious pitfalls and begin to write an honest, if incomplete and imperfect, account of his subject.

In this study – a biography of the eighteenth-century Ottoman historian, courtier, and intellectual Ahmed Vâsif Efendi (ca. 1735–1806) – I have taken Kınâlîzâde’s wisdom as a guide and solace. Indeed, his words hold doubly true for Middle Eastern lives. Whether from a cultural reticence, a “principled forgetfulness,” or a different valuation of the life lived, Middle Eastern societies before the nineteenth century left much less in the way of biographical material than did their European counterparts. This is not to say that we lack sources, even first-person narrative. Literate early modern Ottomans wrote travel accounts as well as diaries and anthologies on poets, scribes, and scholars; some wrote embassy reports and poetry; and still others left autobiographical fragments, *curricula vitae* of a sort to describe an intellectual career. Rich as these sources are, though, they do not offer the level or type of detail to which European historians are used. Ottomans had no tradition of memoir or confessional autobiography, for example. While private letters survive, these, like their poetry and biographical writing, tend to eschew subjectivity for the language of moral trope and metaphor. The sources set parameters, then: by and large, we know Ottomans as public and professional figures, with little inkling of family, friendships, or personality, and still less of inner life. The would-be Ottoman biographer must thus make creative use of sources, follow archival trails, mine contemporary European accounts, and read his subject’s own writings with care, patience, and a readiness to either admit defeat or speculate.²

It is perhaps little wonder that Ottoman historians rarely produce biography, so great is the bother and so meager are the rewards. Even so, it is a loss to the field. Biography gives our knowledge a human cast, or what Cornell Fleischer once likened to putting flesh on a skeleton: “not only bones, but organs, veins, emotions, rhythms.”³ While Fleischer took the sixteenth century as his period rather than the eighteenth, as told through the life of Mustafa Âli of Gallipoli, the reader will see that

² The problem of biography in Middle East and Ottoman history is by no means new. See Virginia Aksan, “The Question of Writing Premodern Biographies of the Middle East,” in *Auto/Biography and the Construction of Identity and Community in the Middle East*, ed. Mary Ann Fay (New York, 2001), 191–200; Martin Kramer, ed., *Middle Eastern Lives: The Practice of Biography and Self-Narrative* (Syracuse, 1991); and İlber Ortaylı, “Türk Tarihçiliğinde Biyografi İnşası ve Biyografik Malzeme Sorunsalı,” in *Osmanlı’dan Cumhuriyet’e Problemler, Araştırmalar, Tartışmalar* (Istanbul, 1998), 56–63.

³ Cornell H. Fleischer, *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire: The Historian Mustafa Âli, 1541–1600* (Princeton, 1986), 4.

I agree with his sentiment. How is it that thirty years later, we still know so little about the Ottomans? Why is Ottoman cultural and mental life still such a mystery to us? Our subject Ahmed Vâsîf served for nearly forty years in the imperial chancery and as court historian (*vekâyi'niüvis*), fought in two wars, went to Russia and Spain, wrote on poetry, ethics, politics, and printing, and left a vast history. Perhaps the greatest mind of his era, he lived at the same time as giants of the European Enlightenment like Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and Joseph Haydn (1732–1809). How is it that we know so much less about his world, its rhythms, and its intellectual pulses? This book aims to evoke the human side of Vâsîf's world, an empire on the cusp of modernity, and to explore the life of an Ottoman thinker while dispelling our ignorance of a key juncture in that empire's history. Vâsîf is in this way both a subject and vessel for wider study. Through his life and writings, we can enter the cultural and intellectual ferment of his day, grasp his experiences, and see his world as a Muslim gentleman saw it; we can trace the career of an individual while sketching a panorama of élite Ottoman society at a time of great upheaval – the eighteenth century.

While we need not pause long, it may be useful first to say a few words about the Ottoman world in Vâsîf's lifetime. By the early 1700s, the empire was already ancient. Its rule in Anatolia, the Balkans, and the Arab lands of Egypt, Syria, and North Africa went back some four hundred years and, to members of the ruling Muslim élite, rested on the virtues of a dynasty that God had blessed over all others. The Ottoman Empire arose in the wake of the Mongol invasions. Led by semi-nomadic Oğuz Turks, and a line descended from a figure named Osman, the Ottomans began as plunderers, freebooters, and self-styled warriors for the faith or *ghâzis* on the Byzantine frontier in northwest Anatolia. The enterprise took on a more organized aspect in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as the band, buoyed by success, gained followers and pushed into Thrace and the Balkans and seized neighboring Christian lands for Islam. By the sixteenth century, the Ottomans ruled a full-fledged empire – crowned by Mehmed II's 1453 capture of Constantinople (present-day Istanbul), as well as by his grandson Selim I's conquest of the Levant, Egypt, and the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina. The Ottomans were a feared power. To the English historian Richard Knolles in 1603, they were the “terror of the world.” Yet the conquest empire soon passed. Its vast reaches needed consolidation and, from the reign of Süleyman I (1520–1566), it turned its energies inward and slowly, if painfully, joined the ranks of early modern states. The realm

4 Introduction

changed so fundamentally during the seventeenth century that one scholar has called it a “second empire.”⁴ Sultans reigned but no longer ruled, trading military leadership for the role of figurehead and leaving power in the hands of great households and a developed scribal bureaucracy. Ottoman expansion ground to a halt with the 1683 siege of Vienna and a final closure of the frontier in the ensuing Treaty of Karlowitz (1699). The empire’s power structure was also greatly altered. Where the conquest empire had been centralized in Istanbul, the bureaucratic empire of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries more closely resembled a loosely spun web. Élites grew in number and spread deeper into the provinces, helped in part by the rise of tax-farming and the 1695 grant of lifetime freehold (*malikâne*), but the fabric wore thin overall. The empire in 1700 was more interconnected, but more decentralized, stronger in spots but weaker as a whole than its earlier incarnation.

To discern this polity’s human side requires a closer look at those with a stake in government. Who made decisions? Who ruled the empire? Traditionally, Ottoman society was split into two groups: Muslim and non-Muslim taxpaying subjects (called the “flock” or *re’âyâ*) and a ruling élite (*askerî*) who, in theory, protected the “flock,” paid no taxes, and served one of three distinct but not exclusive career paths. Religious scholars (*ilmiyye*), or “Men of Learning,” were the bookmen who staffed the empire’s courts and schools, its judges, jurists, teachers, and upholders of law. Soldiers (*seyfiyye*), or “Men of the Sword,” held military rank. These were commanders, governors, viziers, and members of the realm’s once crack infantry corps, the Janissaries, who by now had taken up trade, but still enjoyed nominal military status. Scribes (*kalemiyye*), or “Men of the Pen,” meanwhile, the last career line to form, managed the empire’s day-to-day affairs, kept bureaucratic records, and held chancery and treasury posts in the capital or provinces. Taken together, Ottoman political thinkers held that these groups formed a fixed “world order,” a timeless, divinely-ordained hierarchy, the divisions of which each group had to respect for society to function and in which the élite acted as a linchpin. They were the “glue” that held the régime together.

It was to this latter group of élites that Vâsîf and his peers belonged. Soldier, scholar, or scribe, they were educated in the Islamic classics, shared a system of loyalties and beliefs, and knew up to three languages, Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, in addition to local dialects. The Ottoman

⁴ Baki Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge, 2010).

élite ruled by consensus, not only representing the royal household and administration, but also other interest groups aligned with Istanbul. Outwardly, we know much about these men. We can often discover their names, trace their careers from office to office in archives or chronicles, and sometimes make out personal networks, factions, and enmities. We also know that the eighteenth-century élite was larger and more diffuse than before and extended far into the hinterlands. In Vâsîf's day, Ottoman powerbrokers included dynasts, scribes, tax-farmers, merchants, Janissaries, and local magnates. Yet realities were far from the ideal. Ottomans kept up the fiction of a military empire – indeed, the whole government joined the army on campaign – but in the eighteenth century, scribes held a decisive balance of power. In the 1700s, the bureaucracy grew larger and more powerful, especially the chancery and its head, the chief scribe, or *reisülküttâb*, who oversaw the realm's increasingly vital foreign affairs. So too did it yield a number of Grand Viziers, like Halil Hamid Paşa (d. 1785), who jumped career lines in striking though not always smooth transitions to “Men of the Sword.” By contrast, scholars and military men faced increasing alienation and made it hard to sustain a governing consensus. The eighteenth century is thus in many ways this story: “a hundred-year struggle of the Ottoman dynasty and its affiliated households to preserve the old order.”⁵

Educated Ottomans also felt a deep sense of historical and political mission. For them, the empire was nothing less than a worldly expression of God's will and favor for the Ottoman dynasty, a “manifest destiny” or exceptionalism for which they found proof in past events. The realm's rapid growth from a medieval frontier polity, its expansion into Europe and the Islamic heartlands, its capture of Istanbul – these feats proved that God had not only sent the dynasty to renew and spread the faith, but fated its success. The Ottomans had their origins in warfare. If expansion had mostly ceased by the eighteenth century, élites still paid lip service to an archaic warrior ethos and celebrated the realm's past and future conquests in poetry and prose, in panegyric and historiography. They seem to have believed their own press. The realm could not be beaten, they claimed; come what may, it would triumph and last until the end of time.

The eighteenth century did not unfold as these men hoped and envisioned, however. Not all was well. In fact, the Ottoman world would face an unprecedented crisis in several long-term trends: military defeat,

⁵ Virginia Aksan, “War and Peace,” in *The Cambridge History of Turkey* (Cambridge, 2006), 3: 113–114.

6 Introduction

a breakdown in elite consensus, and the glaring failure of exceptionalism as an ideology. The 1700s began with promise. Despite the terms of Karlowitz, by which they ceded large territories for the first time, Ottoman rulers had enough success to feel a false sense of strength and security. Abroad, they balanced losses at Passarowitz (1718) with the capture of Azov (1711) and the Morea, regained in 1715 from Venice, while the 1739 Treaty of Belgrade rewarded a three-year struggle against Russia and Austria with Belgrade, parts of Wallachia, and thirty years of peace. At home, meanwhile, Ottoman fiscal policy triumphed. Alongside a general economic boom, tax-farm yields grew tenfold between 1703 and 1768 and made up some fifty percent of the empire's revenues, prosperity that was reflected in Istanbul as élites built waterfront pleasure domes and followed the royal household up and down the Bosphorus on seasonal villegiatura. This was the world in which Vâsîf and his peers grew to adulthood. They would look back on the time as an Edwardian summer of feasts, garden parties, and entertainments.⁶

The 1768–1774 Ottoman-Russian war put an abrupt end to this golden vision. It is fair to say that many Ottomans were overconfident and shocked by the war's outcome; it is also accurate to date to 1774 a cascading series of crises in the empire, both political and ideological. The Ottoman military had not kept pace with European tactics and weapons, nor did the empire's weak central authority work well under the strain of war in raising men, revenue, and supplies. Bankrupt and feeble, the realm needed some measure of reform to preserve the old order. The problem was that reform in the army or bureaucracy threatened vested interests and shifted power away from some élites – Janissary, grandee, tax-farmer – toward others, stirring up bitter resentment. As calls for reform grew louder in the century's final decades, then, the Ottoman élite bickered. The violent political life of the period points to a breakdown in consensus as well as a deep moral and intellectual crisis that not even the empire's putative savior could resolve. While Sultan Selim III (1789–1807) ended the vacillation of his predecessors Mustafa III (1757–1774) and Abdülhamid I (1774–1789), overseeing bold changes, his deposition and murder and the purging of his allies set Ottoman reform back by decades. By 1808, the régime was beset by paralysis and failing legitimacy, the old order unable to support itself.

⁶ Shirine Hamadeh evokes this zeitgeist well in *The City's Pleasures: Istanbul in the Eighteenth Century* (Seattle, 2007). See also Ariel Salzmann, "An Ancien Régime Revisited: 'Privatization' and Political Economy in the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Empire," *Politics and Society* 21 (1993): 393–423.

Historians know these details well, if they may quibble with my rather grim reading of the century as a whole. What we do not know is how Ottomans reacted. That these reverses challenged the empire's ruling ideology must only have made them harder for élites to rationalize and digest. Ottoman political beliefs brooked no middle ground. If God truly blessed the dynasty and realm, if He gave them special favor, how and why did they now fare so poorly? In fact, this question was not new. Ottoman thinkers since the late sixteenth century had worried about the empire's "decline" and how best to restore its former glory, devoting a genre of political advice literature to the issue with models by men like Mustafa Âli (d. 1600), Kâtib Çelebi (d. 1657), and Mustafa Naîmâ (d. 1716). Ottoman decline literature voiced a sense of loss at an imagined "golden age" when truth, order, and justice had prevailed. As often happens in changing societies, its authors sensed that their ideals and concept of the world no longer matched reality. They thus looked to the past, usually the reign of Süleyman I, and called for reform to rebuild the distinctions of class and estate that they believed once guaranteed the empire's order. It is not always helpful for us, with the benefit of hindsight, to dismiss these ideas or to point out that early modern Ottomans simply mistook historical change for symptoms of imperial "decline." The psychological effect was real. In the eighteenth century, too, Ottomans saw "disorder" and "decline" as the source of the empire's problems and tried vainly to hold on to their sense of mission. It was only as defeat built on defeat that the effort failed. In fact, for Vâsîf and his peers, the world did not just appear to be changing. It seemed to be sliding inexorably into chaos.⁷

It is probably true to say that the failure of Ottoman exceptionalism worsened the century's political turbulence. An eighteenth-century Ottoman had few options when faced with his worldview's bankruptcy. One was to ignore it; another, less forgiving, was to look for answers and assign blame. What had happened and why? The vitriol and recrimination in our sources seem to fit the pattern of a blame game, one that singled out different groups in the élite for moral or political failings and escalated as the century wore on. We would be wrong to focus only on the destructive,

⁷ There is a large literature on Ottoman "declinism." See Douglas Howard, "Ottoman Historiography and the Literature of 'Decline' of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," *Journal of Asian History* 22 (1988): 52–77; Cemal Kafadar, "The Myth of the Golden Age: Ottoman Historical Consciousness in the Post-Süleymânic Era," in *Süleyman the Second and His Time*, eds. Halil İnalcık and Cemal Kafadar (Istanbul, 1993), 37–48; and idem, "The Question of Ottoman Decline," *Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review* 4 (1998): 30–75.

8 Introduction

however. A third option remained: to seek out new and creative solutions. Collective anxiety drove much intellectual debate in the late 1700s as Ottomans of all stripes – military men, statesmen, shills, earnest objectors, and cynical opportunists – moved to save the old order. We see it at work in issues ranging from the legal and moral merits of peacemaking to the limits of human reason and political reform. We even find it in debate over historical causation and in theological disputes over free will and theodicy. Ottoman anxiety was highly productive.⁸ Vâsif and his peers met the period's challenges largely on the strength of their own resources by adapting, reinterpreting, and reshaping the capital of some thousand years of Islamic culture. While they did not intend to remake their society, preferring to see the empire's plight in familiar frameworks, their activity forces us to ask how the eighteenth century shaped Ottoman minds, how it eroded key legal, ethical, and philosophical concepts, and how it contributed to a looming Ottoman modernity. So formed, this question hangs over the following pages. We must look to this eighteenth-century *fin de siècle* if we choose to define “modern” not only by technological progress, but in terms of episteme and worldview, for it was then that Ottoman élites forged new ways of seeing themselves and the wider world.

While nearly inescapable to us today, modernity remains a loaded term in Islamic and historical scholarship. “Modern” means many things to a great many people. It can signify a discourse, a culture, a lifestyle, a mindset, or a historical period. It may be a parochial European phenomenon or bleed into all manner of local “modernities” and conflate with related but distinct issues like westernization, enlightenment, and secularism. Modernity as such tends to lose meaning as an analytical category.⁹ I do not wish to get bogged down in the well-trod debates over Islamic and Ottoman modernity. However, the reader deserves to know upfront how I treat the concept. Historians have often linked the onset of modernity in the Ottoman Empire to the adoption of European arms, tactics, institutions, and morés starting in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as a result of Western encroachment. The idea that modernity came via technological or institutional import is not entirely wrong, but it masks other useful perspectives and ignores the role of domestic actors. The very act of borrowing required deliberation on the part of statesmen and thinkers. It forced them to grapple with new and at times profoundly

⁸ I treat the link between “decline,” anxiety, and intellectual debate in “Free Will, Predestination, and the Fate of the Ottoman Empire,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 77 (2016): 445–466.

⁹ Alev Çınar, *Modernity, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey* (Minneapolis, 2005), 1–9.

unsettling ideas. Modernity as an emerging intellectual mindset or attitude, then, or as episteme or worldview, must form part of our narrative. Focusing on intellectual development restores a good deal of agency to the Ottomans. It also highlights changes that occurred wholly or mostly through internal dynamics. The past three decades have seen heated discussion in the field about “Islamic Enlightenment” – whether the eighteenth century saw a native growth in scholastic rationalism, a valorization of philosophy, and a shift away from a theocentric to an anthropocentric worldview in the empire. While I hesitate to use the term “Enlightenment” – usually reserved for the intellectual-philosophical movement of eighteenth-century Europe – this complex of ideas offers intriguing parallels and seems to indicate a break with the past. My own study explores some of the contemporary trends in more detail, in contests over the limits of human reason and action and in showing a clear disjuncture with older conceptual frameworks.¹⁰

How does Ahmed Vâsîf illuminate these issues, then? What makes him a good subject and how does his life help us to grasp the intellectual history of the eighteenth-century Ottoman Empire? This is a fair question. For one thing, Vâsîf is uniquely fitted for biographical study. Born in Baghdad around 1735, he had a long career in government service and left a richly detailed paper trail: ten major and minor works totaling some 2,500 manuscript folia in poetry, ethics, geography, lexicography, politics, and history, as well as drafts, personal papers, and scores of archival documents. We know more about Vâsîf than perhaps any other pre-modern Ottoman statesman. We can trace his career almost continuously from his entry into state service in 1768 to his 1806 death, follow his formation and growth, and catch snatches of family and personal relations. There is also inner life. Vâsîf had a strong if complex personality, what some today might call an “over-developed ego.” He wrote prolifically and enjoyed writing about himself and adding personal commentary, allowing us to judge his views on Ottoman state and society and a host of pressing issues. Vâsîf the intellectual emerges most clearly in the court chronicle that he began in the 1780s and continued, off and on, until

¹⁰ On Islamic Enlightenment, see the provocative work of Reinhard Schulze: “Das islamische achtzehnte Jahrhundert: Versuch einer historiographischen Kritik,” *Die Welt des Islams* 30 (1990): 140–159; and idem, “Was ist die islamische Aufklärung?” *Die Welt des Islams* 36 (1996): 276–325. B. Harun Küçük argues the Ottoman case in “Early Enlightenment in Istanbul” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 2012). See too Fatih Yeşil’s study – also a good intellectual biography – *Aydınlanma Çağında bir Osmanlı Kâtibi: Ebubekir Râtib Efendi (1750–1799)* (Istanbul, 2010).

10 Introduction

the year before his death. Called the *Charms and Truths of Relics and Annals*, or *Mehâsinü'l-Âsâr ve Hakâikü'l-Ahbâr*, the work is a sprawling account of the latter half of the eighteenth century, a sort of tapestry in which he interwove his views with those of his patrons, the sultans, and his own courtly faction. *Charms and Truths* is as notable for its historical contents as for its interpretation. Vâsîf showed his benefactors in a fawning light, it is true, but he also took pains to support their policies with the intellectual means at hand. He mined the Ottoman canon for compelling arguments, created a coherent philosophical framework, and quite literally rewrote the dynastic history by reworking and annexing earlier accounts to his narrative. His is an intellectually forceful and partisan work – it is a historical monument to Ottoman reformism.

For Vâsîf wrote from a definite point of view. Indeed, he is well-suited to study insofar as he belonged to and spoke for an identifiable group of like-minded élites. Mostly scribes, these men had survived the Russian-Ottoman wars, tasted defeat firsthand, and believed in the need for centralizing and royal reform. They first held power as a loose coalition in the 1770s and 1780s, for a time under Grand Vizier Halil Hamid Paşa. However, it was only under Selim III that they came into their own and began to push for deeper change. With the sultan's help, they issued the “New Order,” or *nizâm-ı cedîd*, a bold and wide-ranging reform program in the empire's military, administrative, fiscal, and social spheres. For the first time, the empire opened embassies in European capitals. For the first time, it joined the concert of non-Muslim foreign powers. Selim III and his courtiers even upstaged the Janissary corps by founding a new style army drilled in European arms and tactics, loyal to the sultan, and funded by its own treasury. Vâsîf spent his adult life with these men. His ideas formed and evolved as they worked, talked, plotted, squabbled, and (very often) died together. While a leading thinker, then, Vâsîf was fairly typical of the group and more successful as a systematizer of their ideas than as an innovator. His story is not uncommon. If we can say that he was an outsized personality, his ideas were less exceptional than representative of Ottoman reformist currents at large.

The fact that Vâsîf is so richly documented does not make the task of biography easy, nonetheless. His writing poses distinct obstacles. It is well to remember that Vâsîf lived in a patrimonial society, supported by sultans and Grand Viziers, and as such was limited in what he could or could not say. Court could be a dangerous place. A scribe or historian might offer criticism, but not usually of living, powerful figures, lest he lose his position or life, and he could not diverge too far from a patron's