
PRELIMINARY DISCOURSE.

THE CAUSES OF THE WEAKNESS AND DECLINE OF THE TURKISH MONARCHY,
AND SOME REMARKS ON THE SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT PURSUED IN THE
EUROPEAN AND ASIATIC PROVINCES OF THE EMPIRE.

THE history of no country has been distinguished by conquests so rapid and extensive, as those which attended the progress of the Turkish arms from the time of Othman to the establishment of their power over the fairest parts of Asia and Europe. The Christian world viewed their successes with alarm*; and the different states were exhorted to lay aside all mutual animosities, by the danger with which they were threatened.† The nations of Europe have derived strength and security from the general improvement of human reason, and the cultivation of the arts of peace and war. In the meantime, the spirit of military enterprise has declined among the Turks; the vigorous age of their monarchy is past; and the weakness of their empire has been exposed to their enemies, and parts of it have been invaded, or wrested from them.

* “The Turk,” says Lord Bacon, “is the most potent and most dangerous enemy of the faith.”

† Many treatises were written to rouse the Christian nations against the infidels. “J. Reusnerus, (says Bayle,) a recueilli plusieurs volumes de ces harangues, qui ont été publiées pour exhorter les princes Chrétiens à unir leurs forces contre les infidelles.” Art. Mahomet. 2. Note E.

In examining the causes which have produced this decline, we may first advert to one deserving of more consideration, than it has generally received. We allude to the discovery of the navigation to India by the Cape of Good Hope. Before that great event took place, the Venetians had formed establishments in the ports of Syria and Egypt, to which the productions and manufactures of the East were brought; they had received various privileges of trade from the Mamelukes, which Selim the First afterwards confirmed. The valuable commodities of China and India would have continued to reach these coasts, or would have been conveyed over land to the Black Sea, and thence by a short navigation to Constantinople. It was fortunate for the security and happiness of Europe, that the communication with the East was directed at that time into a different channel; the throne of Turkey was filled by sovereigns of great energy and enterprise, and the Christian states would not have resisted that power which the increasing wealth of their enemies might have enabled them to create and maintain. But when Turkey no longer continued mistress of the commerce of that age*, her national strength began to be impaired; her armies were no longer supported by the great means which were essential to the promotion and extension of her views against the peace of the Christian world, and her importance in the political system of Europe was greatly diminished.

2. The change occasioned by this circumstance has been followed by another in the constitution of the government of equal importance. The Turkish empire could only be supported by vigour and absolute power in the centre, by a promptness and decision which should pervade the whole system of administration, by a quick communication with the remotest parts of the provinces, by an army ready

* “About the year 1620, the voyages by sea to the East Indies had so lowered the prices of Indian merchandise, that the trade between India and Turkey, by the Persian Gulph and the Red Sea, having much decayed, the Grand Signior’s customs were greatly lessened.” Anderson, xi. 3.

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to check and subdue the first symptoms of rising independence and insurrection. The author of *Oceana** considered the policy and structure of all absolute monarchies in the East, to be not only contained, but meliorated in the Turkish government; and if we reflect upon the short duration of some of the Asiatic dynasties in Persia and India; if we consider that China has been four times subject to Tartar nations since the tenth century, we have reason to conclude that an empire which has now supported itself nearly five hundred years, has not been placed on weak foundations. While the Turkish Sultans were at the head of their troops, and kept in fear and subjection the different provinces, they could enforce and establish their ordinances; they were ready to protect or punish; they were rarely disturbed by the struggle of different competitors for power; the vigour of the armies was not suffered to relax. But a due regard to the extensive concerns and interests of the empire has proved a task too great for the degenerate successors of Selim, Mahomet, and Soliman. The stability of their monarchy depends on an adherence to those principles which first formed, and afterwards maintained it. The military ardour of the people is no longer nursed by fanaticism and enthusiasm; a decrease of reputation abroad, has been accompanied by internal weakness and decay. In proportion to the want of firmness and energy which have characterised the measures of the Divan, its authority has been disregarded, and the governors of various parts of the empire have had time to form their schemes of aggrandisement. While the customary tribute has been delayed by some, under various pretences, others more or less openly, according to the opportunities which present themselves, have disclaimed all allegiance; whole tracts are wasted in the wars kindled on these occasions; and in the nature and violence of the hostilities we are frequently reminded of those which belong to the history of the feudal times in Europe.

* Art of Lawgiving, 368.

3. The condition of the provinces has been also affected by an alteration in the mode of appointing the governors of them. Formerly they were bestowed on slaves who had received their education in the seraglio; who considered the Sultan as sole master of their destiny: pretended to no sovereignty over their districts but that which flowed from his good will, and were prepared to resign them at his command, and return into the obscure situation from which they had been taken.* But when the nomination to these principalities could be obtained by paying great sums to those who held power and office at Constantinople, many parts of the empire were exposed to plunder and oppression. The Turkish Pasha, like the Roman Proconsul †, is obliged to satisfy the rapacity of the officers in the capital; if the demands of the Porte increase, the provincial governor must comply with them; the continuance in his district must be purchased by new contributions, or by sharing some part of the treasure accumulated by him for the purpose of procuring another government, upon his removal from that which he possesses. Uncertain, in the meantime, how long he may enjoy his present dignity, he is regardless of gaining the attachment or approbation of his subjects; his time is not employed in projecting works of public utility, or forming schemes for the general improvement of the province, or for securing and facilitating the intercourse between different parts of it.

4. The labour and industry of every country, whether they are directed to agricultural or commercial pursuits, are regulated by the manner in which wealth is diffused among the inhabitants. The very unequal distribution of it in Turkey, forms a great impediment

* Russell's Aleppo, i. 335.

† "The governors of the Roman provinces, were, if I may use the expression, the Pashas of the republic." Montesquieu, B. 2. These rapacious governors acquired vast wealth. "Even Cicero," says Melmoth, "who professed to conduct himself with exemplary disinterestedness in his province, was able in the course of a single year to acquire as much as 17,600l. of our money, and that too from a province by no means the most considerable of the republic's dominions."

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to any advancement of prosperity or general civilization.* In and about the great cities of the empire, where the Pasha, Mohassil, and other officers of high situation reside, and to which manufacturers or merchants are attracted, some degree of industry and cultivation may be observed. But as we proceed through the more distant parts of many of the provinces, we find little appearance of wealth or comfort. This inequality of property is a consequence of the insecurity of the possessions of those, who are in inferior situations in life. If we except some families of feudal rank, the most opulent people in every province are the officers of government, those who hold situations under the Porte, or Pasha of the district. All of a class below them, are checked and impeded in their exertions to raise themselves. If their occupations are agricultural, they do not possess that interest in the land which would encourage them to industrious exertion, in encreasing the quantity or improving the quality of the productions of it. Their territorial assessment is nominally fixed; but they are exposed to heavy and fluctuating exactions. If their means of subsistence are derived from commercial sources †, an incautious display of wealth would subject them to extortion and plunder. Under such a system of mischievous policy, it is not surprising that various modes of concealing property are practised. In the large towns it is not necessarily so much exposed to the eye of the government, as that wealth, which is derived immediately from the produce of the land.

Such is the favourable situation of some of the provinces of

* “Above all things, good policy is to be used, that the treasure and monies of a state be not gathered into few hands. For otherwise, a state may have a great stock and yet starve; and money is, like muck, not good, except it be spread.” Bacon. *Essay*, 39.

† “The Christians of Aleppo,” says Russell, (in a remark, which admits of general application to the Christian subjects of the Turks,) “find it prudent to avoid the ostentation of wealth, from fear of attracting the attention of their rapacious governors. They are under the necessity of contributing largely to the support of the poor of their respective nations, as likewise to the payment of Avantias, or unjust exactions demanded from them.” ii. 46.

Turkey, with respect to the great markets of Germany and Italy, that the merchants of this empire are enabled even in times of war, when the communication by sea is interrupted, to maintain an active commercial intercourse by land. The territorial wealth of this country is so great, the climate so various, that few parts of the world would enter into competition with European and Asiatic Turkey, if a better direction and a greater encouragement were given to the industry of the inhabitants. The activity of the Greek and Armenian merchants would extend the internal trade, and open new sources of prosperity. But the spirit of enterprise and commercial speculation, is checked by the insecurity of property, and by the defects and abuses of the administration of the affairs of the provinces. It is only in those where the Pasha exerts himself to maintain order and tranquillity, and where he feels himself secure for a time from the intrigues of the Porte, that the interests of trade or agriculture are regarded. The want of punctuality in the fulfilment of pecuniary engagements, and the difficulty of recovering debts occasion the rate of interest for money to be very high. In Constantinople, and Smyrna, it amounts to twelve *per cent.*; in many parts of the empire to twenty *per cent. per annum.* As a great portion of the commerce of the country consists in the exportation of unwrought articles, there is little encouragement given to those various occupations which in Europe excite the industry and ingenuity of the artist and mechanic. Of the sums collected by the Pashas and other powerful individuals, some part is hoarded or concealed, and thus withdrawn from general circulation; some is annually sent out of the provinces to the great officers of the Porte.

5. The transportation of goods through different districts of the empire is slow, and often obstructed by the intestine troubles of the provinces; frequent interruptions arise in parts of Syria, and the northern and eastern extremities of Asia Minor. The independent Sheiks of the tribes who frequent one of the routes from Basra to Aleppo, all maintain equal pretensions to demand from the merchant, as the price of his safety, some portion of his goods. The

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caravans are obliged frequently to accept the escort which some neighbouring Sheik or Pasha offers to them, and the expences of the merchants are multiplied by the delays and obstructions which their protectors purposely occasion. (Niebuhr, i. 339.) According to the measure of their strength and force, the Arabs and other tribes resist or obey the authority of the Turks. By extraordinary energy and vigour, a Pasha may sometimes be enabled to repress the encroachments of the Arabs, and confine them within certain limits; he prevents them, until they have paid the tribute which is due, from entering the great cities for the purposes of traffic or exchanging different commodities; but the expences of raising levies and troops, active and numerous enough to watch their conduct, and threaten them with punishment are so great, that the governors, who consider their residence in the provinces as uncertain, are seldom disposed to maintain an army which can inspire the Arabs with fear and respect. The inhabitants of the villages, in the meantime, are left to a vicissitude of insult and oppression; they are kept in constant alarm by the incursion of these wandering tribes, and when the Pasha takes the field, they suffer not less injury from the vexatious insolence and disorder of the Turkish soldiers.

The internal trade of the Asiatic part of the empire has been diminished by another cause; the caravans of pilgrims or merchants, who assemble annually at the temple of Mecca, and on their return through the provinces of Asia and Syria, dispose of their various commodities and productions, are now less numerous than in former times. This is to be attributed partly to a declining zeal for Mahometanism, and partly to the fear of being plundered in those routes, which have lately been frequented by the Wahabee.

The decrease of the commerce* of this part of the empire is

* “It is a proof of the great European commerce carried on at Aleppo about the beginning of the 17th century, that the hire only of camels to fetch and carry goods to and from Scanderoon, the port of Aleppo, amounted at least to 8000 sequins a year.” See P Texeira, quoted by Russell, ii. 3.

proved by the decline of the mercantile establishments once maintained in some of the large cities. “It is worthy of remark,” says a late traveller, who directed his attention particularly to subjects of a commercial nature, “that at a period not far distant, the Turks had many articles of exportation, of which they have now scarcely a sufficiency to supply their own wants. Silk, for instance, was once exported in considerable quantities; at present, hardly enough is to be found for the manufactures of the country, and that is at six times more than its former price. Every article of exportation has fallen off; the few which remain, are raised to such prices as to render exporting them a certain loss. This proceeds in a great measure from the extortion of the Agas, or governors of the provinces, and from the export goods being farmed by the rich destroyers of the state, who of course pay a small price, and prohibit the sale to any one else. Silk is at present farmed by the Reis Effendi, or minister for foreign affairs.”

6. In countries, where the springs of industry and exertion are unbroken, the evils occasioned by plague, war, and famine are soon removed; but in Turkey the calamities they inflict are slowly repaired. The neglect of agriculture is one among other causes, which check the population of the country; nor is it difficult to assign the reason of the small esteem in which it is held in many parts. It is not only without any direct encouragement, but it has not that indirect assistance which an extended commerce always affords. The various tribes that wander over the deserted plains of Asia Minor and Syria, sometimes broken into small parties, at other times united in formidable numbers, remove according to the season of the year to districts where more extended pastures, or other advantages tempt them to a temporary settlement. The habits of life of all these hordes are unfavourable to a proper cultivation of the land. In addition to the Kurds and Bedoween Arabs, we may mention the Turkmans, the peculiar descendants of the Nomad Scythians, who are frequently met by travellers in Syria; we have observed their flocks, herds, and reeded tents on the western coast of Asia Minor. The

Rushwans are a tribe of wandering Kurds who inhabit the ancient Cappadocia, and in parts of the year establish themselves in the vicinity of Damascus and Aleppo. The Begdelees, a tribe of Turkmans, are described by Poccoke as consisting of bodies of one thousand persons, and raising contributions on different villages. These wandering tribes increase in numbers, in consequence of the unquiet state of the country, and want of protection; peasants, Christians as well as Mahometans, being driven from the cultivation of their lands.

In policy, as in architecture, the ruin is greatest when it begins with the foundation. Under that very imperfect establishment of order and law, which prevails in some part of the European, as well as Asiatic provinces of the empire, the peasants are so depressed and interrupted in the exercise of their occupations, that the country is almost desolate. Five hundred villages are not found in the district of Mesopotamia belonging to Mardin, which once possessed sixteen hundred.* Cyprus before the conquest of the Turks contained 14,000 villages; in two insurrections great numbers of the inhabitants were slain; a dreadful mortality was occasioned by the plague in 1624, and in less than fifty years from that time, seven hundred villages only could be found.† Three hundred were once comprehended in a part of the Pashalik of Aleppo, now containing less than one-third of that number.‡ Many towns are mentioned in the history of the Caliphs, which no longer exist; the site of others may be traced on the route from Bagdad to Mosul. In consequence of the decrease of agriculture and manufacturing industry, the sums formerly paid to the government by some of its officers of revenue are diminished; 50,000*l.* was the amount § of

* Niebuhr, ii. 320.

† Rycaut. State of the Greek church, p. 91.

‡ Russell, i. 339.

§ Payments of money in the Turkish empire are made in purses; each purse containing 500 piastres. We find the payments made to the exchequer in the Greek empire were called 'folles.' Clarke on Coins, 351.

the agreement made by the Mohassil of Aleppo in D'Arvieux time with the Grand Seignior's treasury; the contract in 1769 was fixed at a much lower rate. The reservoirs and canals by which the fertility of Palestine, Syria, and Egypt, and Babylonia, under the time of the Saracens, and Mamaluke Soldans, was augmented and improved, have been neglected. The land throughout the empire is charged with a rent paid either to the Sultan himself, to the governors of provinces, or to those who farm the territorial impost, and other taxes: the amount of that levied on the Mussulman is a seventh or tenth of the produce; the Greeks on the continent and Islanders pay a fifth. But this tribute is not collected by any fixed regulations; and the inequality of exactions, and the want of just and proportioned impositions are the great political impediments to all improvements in Turkey. Great *avanías* are levied occasionally on the villages of Asia Minor and Syria, and as the land owners or renters defray that part of the assessment laid on the peasants and labourers, who cannot themselves pay it, from the small portion of the fruits of the earth which they receive, a heavy debt is always due from the latter to the former. In some parts, the Agas from improvident and extravagant habits of life have been unable to pay the Miri*, or territorial tax, and have been obliged to quit the lands which they had hired. A long interval of time elapses before they are again occupied, and the peasants are forced to seek in the larger towns the means of support. The great cities are filled in this manner, because they afford a certain supply of provisions, as the governors are unwilling to expose themselves to those tumults which would arise in cases of famine, or dearness of corn. In the meantime large tracts of country are deserted. A melancholy illustration of the depopulated state of them is afforded by the view of those extensive cemeteries so frequently passed by the traveller in his route. Scarcely any vestiges of the villages which

* Russell, i. 339. and 342.