

KİTÂBİYAT / BOOK REVIEWS

V. L. Ménage, Colin Imber (yay. haz.),

Ottoman Historical Documents: The Institutions of an Empire,

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021, 208 p.,

ISBN 978-1-4744-7936-3.

The long-awaited publication of a series of Ottoman documents translated by the late V. L. Ménage dating primarily from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries. The English translation of the documents that cover various aspects of Ottoman political, social and economic history, continued to be used as course material for the undergraduate course “Ottoman Institutions” at the School of Oriental and African Studies long after Ménage’s retirement in 1983. Following the editing by Colin Imber of the documents, the result is a publication intended for those serious enough about Ottoman history that they wish to consult primary source material. The book has ten chapters, each covering a different aspect of Ottoman history or institution, with the material originating from a plethora of different sources ranging from popular Ottoman chronicles, tomb inscriptions, letters written to Ottoman rulers, to religio-legal rulings and register entries. Imber preserves the original order and structure of the documents but with the addition of notes, which a reader unfamiliar with Ottoman terms or concepts will find very useful. In the Preface of *Ottoman Historical Documents*, Imber sums up in a nutshell the reason for the continuing value to scholarship of the publication of the documents:

“Ottoman history has expanded beyond recognition: new fields of research have opened up, new journals devoted to Turkish and Ottoman Studies have

been founded and new scholars have come into the field. Nonetheless, the translations presented here remain as relevant as ever. Documents and other primary source materials do not go out of date, and the topics covered in the collection remain essential to an understanding of the Ottoman Empire's history between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries" (p. xix).

Indeed, the fashion of primary source material rarely passes and the value of the publication is heightened by the fact that the study of Ottoman history and historiography has long ceased to be solely about the pursuit of rulers. The contribution to scholarship by historians, such as İnalcık¹ and Fleet,² and others, who have undertaken research on different aspects of Ottoman social and economic history such as the movement of populations, economic ramifications of earthquakes and the fear of death, has provided an insight into the daily lives of Ottoman citizens. With regard to aspects of everyday life in Ottoman society, *Ottoman Historical Documents* provides a clear and strong narrative on how the wheels of bureaucracy within the framework of the law of the land affected different segments of society. In Chapter VI, we learn that *fatwas* (an authoritative legal opinion issued by a *muftî* in answer to a question (p. 177)) were issued on a variety of issues that affected the lives of everyday Ottomans. These included respective fatwas on Muslim villagers neglecting prayer (p. 74), and on executing a repentant heretic *şeyh* (p. 75). Another type of document utilised by Ménage are *sicill* entries (a *kađi*'s register, or a single entry in such a register, (p. 154)) that also allow an insight into the grievances and issues faced in Ottoman society. Such examples include a *sicill*-entry on a complaint by the weavers' guild (p. 80), and a *sicill*-entry on a violent argument between father and son (p. 81).

However, the law applied to all Ottoman citizens, and the ruling classes were by no means exempt. In a period in which Ottoman chronicles eulogised the Ottoman sultan and he was beyond reproach, it was generally those around him that had blame levied at them. Documents translated by Ménage include a fatwa on those who lead the sultan astray (p. 87), and a fatwa on a rebellious son of the sultan (p. 87). The fatwa on those who lead the sultan astray, ruled that "They who stir up *fitne* must be killed, (p. 87)" in relation to the legitimisation of the execution of the grand vizier Dilâver Pasha in 1622, on the demand of the

¹ Halil İnalcık and Donald Quataert ed., *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1914*, 2 vol. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

² Ebru Boyar and Kate Fleet, *A Social History of Ottoman Istanbul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

rebels who were to depose and murder Sultan ‘Osmān II. Despite the fact that the Ottoman rulers believed they had a divine right to rule, did not mean that they were above the law. Documents translated by Ménage reveal that religious rulings could also be used to depose of sultans. A fatwa on deposing a sultan who disturbs order by accepting bribery, was issued to justify the deposition and execution of Sultan Ibrāhīm in 1648 (p. 88).

As well as providing an insight into the social issues and dilemmas of Ottoman society, *Ottoman Historical Documents* also portrays the increasing centralisation of the Ottoman state. The popular oral traditions that were later embodied in the Ottoman chronicles such as the Anonymous Chronicles and *History of the Ottoman Dynasty* by Aşıkpaşazade, reflect the culture of the popular dervish groups that proliferated in the early Ottoman period (p. 1). In Aşıkpaşazade, Orhan is depicted as continuing the generosity of his father towards the local dervishes by building new soup kitchens so that the dervishes could come and eat every day.³ The documents translated by Ménage reveal the elaborate genealogical lineage that the Ottomans fabricated in order to justify military advances against fellow Muslims. The conquest of Constantinople also played a key role in the creation of a dynastic royal consciousness, which over time superseded nomadic legitimizing principles.⁴ One of the translated documents contains a tale that details a genealogical claim to assert the Ottoman Sultan Murād II’s superiority over the ̒arađoyunlu Cihānşāh, his neighbour on his eastern frontier (p. 5). Another document contains an excerpt from the Oxford Anonymous Chronicle: “The sultans are descended from ̒ayı Hān, the descendant of Ođuz Hān. Ođuz Hān’s testament was that ̒ayı should be hān after himself, and thereafter ̒ayı’s descendants.... From this it is clear how superior the Ottoman sultanate is to other sultanates.” (p. 5). The more centralised the Ottoman state became, the more the early rulers were eulogised to stress their humble and generous nature.

Ménage also translated documents on taxation and finance which adds to the range of Ottoman institutions covered in the book. Taxation was a complex and sophisticated tool used by the Ottomans as reflected in Ottoman registers. This is illustrated by the fact that Tīmār-income was primarily agricultural and raised directly from peasant households: the revenues of waqfs and of hāşşes supporting

³ Lale Özdemir, *Ottoman History through the Eyes of Aşıkpaşazade* (İstanbul: The ISIS Press, 2013).

⁴ Hakan T. Karateke and Maurus Reinkowski, *Legitimizing the Order: The Ottoman Rhetoric of State Power* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), p. 24.

KİTÂBIYAT

the imperial family, viziers and governors were drawn from a broader tax-base (p. 121). From a document detailing the Annual income and expenditure of the Imperial Treasury we learn that foreigners paid a higher rate of tax on fish and wine for example (p. 122), and that Silver mines in Serbia, Novo Brdo; in Bosnia, Srebrenica; Kratovo, Priştina, Serres, Salonica, Sofia were sold by various sales for three years (p. 123).

In conclusion, *Ottoman Historical Documents* is a welcome addition to scholarship on Ottoman history, and allows for the primary sources of the period to speak for themselves on how the Ottoman taxed their subjects, viewed themselves, and ruled on a range of legal matters.

Lale Özdemir Şahin

Marmara University