



17TH CENTURY EGYPT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF JEAN DE THÉVENOT*

JEAN DE THÉVENOT'UN PERSPEKTİFİNDEN 17. YÜZYIL MISIR'I

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<p>ABSTRACT</p> <p>The Ottoman geography became a center where many travelers visited in order to explore, observe or trade. The focus of these travelers was not only the imperial center but also sovereign regions such as Egypt. The works they wrote are important sources for understanding the history, culture and geography of the Ottoman Empire and the regions under its sovereignty. Each of them provided remarkable information by looking at the Ottoman lands from a different perspective in their own period. French traveler and geographer Jean de Thévenot, who lived between 1633-1667, is one of them. He started his travels in the middle of the 17th century. Thévenot made three different journeys between 1655-1667. Some of the cities the traveler saw were Istanbul, Alexandria, Rashid and Cairo. He made detailed notes of his travels. This work contains important information, especially about the culture, geography and lifestyle of the East. He traveled to Egypt in 1657 and stayed there for about two years. His work is a valuable source because it describes the situation of Egypt in that period in detail. It offers a perspective on Egypt in particular and the Ottoman Empire in general. In addition, he examined Egypt's history, culture, geography and social structure in detail. In his work, he shared various information about the cities on the banks of the Nile River, Egyptian architecture, the daily life and traditions of the local people. In addition, he provides enlightening data on the administration of Egypt, which was far from the center, despite being within the borders of the Ottoman Empire. This study aims to reveal the socio-economic and political life of Egypt in the 17th century by making a comparative analysis of Arabic-Turkish chronicles, Ottoman archive documents and data in the literature, based on Thévenot's travelogue.</p> <p>Keywords: Ottoman Empire, Egypt, 17th Century, Jean de Thévenot, Travelogue.</p>	<p>ÖZET</p> <p>Osmanlı coğrafyası, keşfetmek, gözlem yapmak veya ticaret yapmak amacıyla pek çok seyyahın ziyaret ettiği bir merkez olmuştur. Bu seyyahların ilgi odağı imparatorluk merkezi olduğu gibi Mısır gibi egemenlik bölgelerini de kapsamaktadır. Bu seyyahların kaleme aldıkları eserleri, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu ve egemenliği altındaki bölgelerin tarihini, kültürünü ve coğrafyasını anlamak için önemli kaynaklardır. Her biri kendi döneminde Osmanlı topraklarına farklı bir perspektiften bakarak dikkate değer bilgiler sunmuşlardır. 1633-1667 yılları arasında yaşayan Fransız gezgin ve coğrafyacı Jean de Thévenot da bunlardan birisidir. 17. yüzyılın ortalarında seyahatine başlamıştır. Thévenot, 1655-1667 yılları arasında üç farklı seyahat gerçekleştirmiştir. Seyyahın gördüğü şehirlerin bazıları İstanbul, İskenderiye, Reşit ve Kahire'dir. Seyahatlerini detaylı bir şekilde not etmiştir. Bu eseri, özellikle Doğu'nun kültürü, coğrafyası ve yaşam tarzı hakkında önemli bilgiler içermektedir. 1657 yılında Mısır'a gitmiş ve orada yaklaşık iki yıl kalmıştır. Eseri o dönemdeki Mısır'ın durumunu ayrıntılı bir şekilde anlattığı için değerli bir kaynaktır. Özelde Mısır ve genelde Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'na dair bir perspektif sunmaktadır. Bununla birlikte Mısır'ın tarihini, kültürünü, coğrafyasını ve toplumsal yapısını detaylı bir şekilde incelemiştir. Eserinde Nil Irmağı kıyısındaki şehirler, Mısır mimarisi, yerel halkın yaşam tarzı ve gelenekleri hakkında çeşitli bilgiler paylaşmıştır. Bunun yanı sıra Osmanlı İmparatorluğu sınırlarında olmasına rağmen, merkezden uzak olan Mısır'ın yönetiminde dair aydınlatıcı veriler aktarmaktadır. Bu çalışmada Thévenot'un seyahatnamesi esas alınarak Arapça-Türkçe kronikler, Osmanlı arşiv belgeleri ve literatürdeki veriler karşılaştırılmalı analiz yapılarak Mısır'ın 17. yüzyıldaki sosyo-ekonomik-siyasi hayatını ortaya koymak amaçlanmaktadır.</p> <p>Anahtar Kelimeler: Osmanlı Devleti, Mısır, 17. Yüzyıl, Jean de Thévenot, Seyahatname.</p>

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1. INTRODUCTION

Following the Crusades, as relations with the Eastern world began to develop, especially in the field of trade, traveler and missionary activity towards the East gained momentum in the West. Especially in the 16th and 17th centuries, the West intensified its efforts to understand the East more deeply. During this period, many Western travelers learned Eastern languages and carried the written works they obtained from this geography to the West. The Netherlands, which rose as a colonial power in the 17th century, strengthened its intellectual ties with the East by establishing the Arabic department at Leiden University in 1613. When the Age of Enlightenment arrived, Europe continued its Eastern research in line with the secular and scientific spirit of the period (Kılıç, 2021: 12). One of famous explorers of the 17th century, Jean de Thévenot (1633–1667), made a significant contribution to the field of travel writing. Coming from a wealthy family in Paris, Thévenot started his travels of wide exploration in 1652 after he had completed the parts of his education. In addition to being viewed as a voyage of self-discovery, Thévenot's travelogues are regarded as a significant record of the social and intellectual exchanges of the time. Thévenot's extensive observations on the Ottoman Empire make his journeys especially noteworthy. Understanding Thévenot's work in this context requires an examination of his knowledge and relationships with the intellectual circles of the day.

Since there is not enough information about the traveler's life and the environment in which he was raised, Barthelemy d'Herbelot, who contributed to his education, is also included in the study. Barthelemy d'Herbelot, who made important contributions to the academic education of the traveller, also stands out with his dictionary studies. The Bibliothèque Orientale by Barthelemy d'Herbelot serves as the foundation for Thévenot's studies of the East. D'Herbelot's multilingual dictionary, which included definitions for terms in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, served as a fundamental resource for orientalist research at that era. An important work of orientalist science of the period, d'Herbelot's dictionary is multilingual and gives definitions of terms in Turkish, Arabic and Persian (Barthelemy d'Herbelot, 1777). Thevenot's narratives about the Ottoman Empire in his travelogue help us understand the dynamics of information exchange and self-discovery of that time.

The development of political and economic relations, the increase in the number of travelers and missionaries visiting the East, and the weakening of the ideological unity and dominance of Christianity in Europe in the 16th century, made it possible to collect more objective information about the Muslim East. During this period, the values, thought systems, customs and traditions of Muslims, which were previously considered absolute errors, began to be examined from a more objective perspective. There were evaluations regarding the political, administrative and military order of the Ottoman Empire. However, it is not possible to say that the Eastern world was completely objectively addressed in these evaluations. Nevertheless, it is obvious that a distinct differentiation process had begun compared to previous centuries (Bulut, 2007: 429).

Stefanos Yerasimos (1942-2005) prepared for publication the texts of travelers who had visited the East and especially Turkey for the François Maspero/La Découverte Publishing House in Paris between 1980 and 1985, and a twelve-volume work consisting of the writings of Marco Polo, Ibn Battuta, J.-B. Tavernier, J. Thévenot, J. P. de Tournefort, and J. Nicolas de Nicolay emerged. Some of these travelogues were published in Turkish after his death (Artan, 2013: 482). According to Stefan Yerasimos, Thévenot's observations have earned a special position in travel literature because he is honest and true, setting them apart from those of his

contemporaries. Because of his straightforward and easy-to-read narration (Jean de Thévenot, 2014: 12), Thévenot is a significant figure in the historical setting. This study looks at the significance of Thévenot's travels historically. Through a comprehensive analysis of their position and significance in travel writing, Thévenot's work serve as a valuable resource for comprehending the cultural and mental milieu of the time.

The life, travels, and contributions of Thévenot are all covered in detail in this introduction. It seeks to comprehend his significance both historically and intellectually. Thévenot's writings broaden the study's focus and offer a fundamental source for comprehending the social and cultural. There are studies on Thévenot and his travelogue. One of these studies describes Izmir and the Aegean Islands in Thévenot's travelogue (Kartal Güngör, 2022). Another study analyzes the data in the travelogue about the daily life of the Turks (Özkan, A. (2021). In addition, an article has been written that evaluates the information given by 17th century travelers who gave information about the mummies in Egypt (Muceni, 2021). Another recent study examines the orientalist impressions in Thévenot's travelogue (Türkyılmaz, 2025). Our study covers the traveler's observations about the political and socio-cultural life in Egypt.

2. THE TRAVELER'S LIFE

Born in a respectable family on June 7, 1633, in Paris, Thévenot finished his schooling at the University of Paris's Navarre College by the time he was eighteen. Then, on December 18, 1652, he left Paris for England, inspired by a strong desire to travel (Kartal Güngör, 2022: 84). He left that nation quickly, heading straight to the Netherlands. He thereafter went to Cologne and from there to Regensburg and Frankfurt. He crossed the Tyrolean Alps to enter Italy after traveling through the remainder of Germany, landing in Verona, Venice, and Rome in order of arrival (Jean de Thévenot, 1686: The Preface (b)). With the possible exception of a small donation from Madam Faret, to whom he dedicated the first book of his travelogue, it may be said that Jean de Thévenot paid for the most of his journeys alone. Thévenot's journey came to an end in 1667 when he died in Iran (Özkan, 2021: 35-36).

Between 1650 and 1660, the linguist and scientist Thévenot explored the East (Muceni, 2021: 11). Thévenot's first travels to the East were facilitated by the famous seventeenth-century orientalist Barthélemy d'Herbelot (1625-1695) (Jean de Thévenot, 2014: 12). Trilingual d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque Orientale* is a reference book explaining words in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. This dictionary is a well-known and important contribution to the field of Oriental studies, having emerged in the latter part of the seventeenth century. Such a work was also desired by other French visitors, including Laurent d'Arvieux and the scholar Melchisédech Thévenot, Jean de Thévenot's uncle (Bevilacqua, 2016: 216). Being in an academic environment affected his intellectual development.

There is an excellent traveler typology to be found in Thévenot's descriptions of the Ottoman Empire. Through the use of his forebears' writings and expertise, Thévenot enhanced his narratives. In spite of this, his successors eventually turned to his writings as well (Hentch, 1996: 118). This cycle illustrates how information is transmitted among travelers in a continuous and dynamic manner.

As noted by Stefan Yerasimos, Thévenot stood out from the many other travelers of his time because of his honesty -even naivety- and his unwavering dedication to veracity in his narrative. Thévenot's uncomplicated and clear style of narrating events -which had been previously

documented in great detail- has made him a prominent character in travel literature (Jean de Thévenot, 2014: 12).

Thévenot's narratives offer crucial insights into the Ottoman Empire's social, cultural, and political landscape. His realistic approach and meticulous observations make him an invaluable resource for contemporary historians and anthropological scholars. The most notable characteristic that sets Thévenot apart from his peers is the ethnographic elements he incorporates into his stories. His storytelling are authentic and dependable due to his meticulous attention to detail.

3. ARRIVAL IN EGYPT

Early in 1657, Thévenot arrived in the port of Alexandria from Rhodes and heard about a Turkish ship that had sunk two weeks before, taking with it its crew and cargo. This large vessel transported diverse goods such as coffee, sugar, and linen (Jean de Thévenot, 2014: 162). As a result of these problems, although there were periodic disruptions in the trade between Alexandria and Istanbul, the dynamism of trade can be mentioned. The details Thévenot gave about the sinking ship in Alexandria, for example, are corroborated by records from the Ottoman archives (BOA (Ottoman Archive), MAD.d., 3769, H-29-12-1067).

The visitor recounts his journey to the site of the lighthouse (Erdoğan, Tatar and Çakır, 2011), known as the Pharos of Alexandria, which was formerly counted among the Seven Wonders of the World. He paints a detailed picture of Qaitbay Castle, a fortification that currently stands on this location (Photo 1) (Jean de Thévenot, 2014: 165). The traveler also shares details about Pompey's Pillar, a historic structure that he finds admirable (Jean de Thévenot, 2014: 167).

Photo 1: Qaitbay Castle, Alexandria, Egypt.



This photograph was taken by writer on 26.03.2022

There are gardens full of lemon and orange trees in Alexandria; there are also many trees with fruits that look like oranges, but they are so big that they cannot be grasped with both hands. They don't taste good raw, so they peel them, cut them into quarters, take out the seeds and make jam. These jams are very delicious. Lemons are of two types; the very large ones do not taste good, but the small lemons, the size of a walnut, are the most delicious, because they are very thin-skinned and juicy. These lemons are squeezed on the meat, and their juice is also squeezed and sent to Venice and other places. Sherbet (limonade) is also made from this juice. There are also carob trees, cucumber trees and many other trees in these gardens. Alexandria countryside is full of date palms and gerbe grass (Jean de Thévenot, 2014: 169-170). It can be stated that the traveler liked the nature of Alexandria. The Ottoman Empire brought rice, sugar, coffee and lentils from Damietta, Fereskur and Reşit every year for the kilar-ı amire. These goods

were brought to Reşit and then sent to the port of Alexandria (Evliya Çelebi, 1938: 130-131, 453).

Thévenot made the decision to ride a horse to Rashid (Rosetta) after realizing he had passed Alexandria. They traveled for a day before arriving in Rashid, where they told the French consul about their adventures and what they had seen at the sea-Nile river intersection (Photo 2). With its exquisite squares, caravanserais, and gardens, Rashid -one of Egypt's most picturesque cities- serves as a major trading center. A port is created by a branch of the Nile River that flows through Rashid. This is the stopover point for "çayka" ships that are trading with Egypt from the Aegean islands. The governor of the city guards this city, which is governed by the customs office of Alexandria. Thévenot, who does not spend much time in Rashid, learned about the enormous boats, known as "barka" and decides to take them to Cairo every Tuesday and Friday. He chose to travel in a big group in order to protect themselves against pirate attacks and arrived at Cairo's Bulak harbor after traveling for almost six days (Jean de Thévenot, 2014: 171-173).

Photo 2: The Damietta Branch, where the Nile River empties into the Mediterranean Sea-Ras-el-Bar/Damietta, Egypt.



This photograph was taken by writer on 17.02.2023.

While summarizing Cairo's a high number of attractions, the traveler talks about the city's past. The Mamluk Sultanate ruled Egypt before to the Ottoman Empire's arrival, as Thévenot mention. After the Ottoman ruler Sultan Selim I arrived in Egypt in 1517, Tumanbay attempted to incite revolt, therefore two months later, Sultan Selim I had him hanged at the gates of Cairo, Bab Zuweila (İbn İyas, 2016: 164; BOA (Ottoman Archive), TS.MA.e, 881-27, H-09-10-0926; Celâl-zâde Mustafa, 1990: 432-433; Gelibolulu Mustafa Âlî, 2024: 1254; Jean de Thévenot, 2014: 174-175). It is said that Tumanbay remained like this for about three days (Hoca Sadettin Efendi, 1992: 329). It can be said that after the Ottomans conquered Egypt, they maintained the organization of the Mamluk State with some changes, gradually converted the main organization of the province to the Ottoman order, and started a stable period in the province with the regulation of the Egyptian law code (Es-seyyid Mahmud, 1990: 11). After Egypt was taken by the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century, the annual payment sent to Istanbul was around 400-500 thousand gold coins. The state demanded that this payment be paid in gold coins. This situation began to change in the 17th century. Because the state's dominance in Egypt was decreasing and gold was becoming difficult to find. Therefore, the annual payments were sent in silver coins (Pamuk, 2003: 73). Annual payments sent from Egypt to Istanbul are reflected in Ottoman archive documents (BOA, A.{DVNSMHM.d..., 43-318, H-29-06-988; BOA, D..BŞM.d..., 535, H-29-08-1098).

The political history of Egypt during the Ottoman period can be classified as follows: the 16th century, when the pashas appointed from Istanbul were effectively governed; the 17th century, when the Mamluk emirs (beyler) were influential; the late 17th century and early 18th century, when Egypt's Yedi-ocak and especially the Janissaries (Yeniçeriler) were influential; and the 18th century, when the Mamluk emirs regained their supremacy (Winter, 1992: 17-18; Tok, 2002: 3).

Photo 3: Bab Zuweila, Cairo, Egypt.



This photograph was taken by writer on 02.12.2022.

The traveler states that Cairo is a smaller metropolis than Paris after talking about Cairo's political past. He clarifies, nevertheless, that Cairo has a larger population than Paris (Jean de Thévenot, 2014: 176-177). The perspective of the Italian traveler Pietro Della Valle (1586-1652), who came to Cairo approximately 41 years before Thévenot, was different. He claims that Cairo was larger than Istanbul and other places he knew (Pietro Della Valle, 1990: 48).

The incubation of eggs for hatching of chicks is another event that draws the interest of traveler in Cairo. When the chicks crack open from the eggs, they are sold after being measured with tin. The eggs are placed inside the ovens (incubators) and heated until the temperature is just right. The temperature is exactly right-close enough to what the chicks need to grow and hatch from their eggs (Jean de Thévenot, 2014: 187-188).

The traveler explains that Egyptians, like other people, had superstitious religious beliefs. He says there was a vast burial place at the edge of the river, close to Old Cairo, and many bodies were buried there. Coptic or Greek, Turkish or Moorish, all parts of Cairo residents on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Holy Fridays according to the old calendar they believe that the dead are resurrected in this cemetery; Do this in the cemetery of the dead they don't mean wandering around, but during these three days the bones that it came out of the ground, and after these three days it went back under the ground and they claim to have entered (Jean de Thévenot, 2014: 189).

Egyptians celebrate the rise of the Nile River as a momentous occasion. The dykes are opened and water begins to flow through the channels when the river floods. This is vital to Egypt's fertility. People throw boats into the river that are loaded with candy and fruits, and then jump in to retrieve the boats. Thévenot also tells about the ancient Egyptians who used to participate in these festivities and who, during the rites, would cut the throats of a boy and a girl and throw them into the river as sacrifices (Jean de Thévenot, 2014: 218-219). Evliya Çelebi, another famous Ottoman traveler who visited Egypt about 15 years after Thévenot, also describes

comparable experiences (Evliya Çelebi, 1938: 320; Şahin, 2017: 286; Keikha Shahinpour, 2024: 166).

According to Thévenot, there is a multicultural population in Cairo that includes Jews, Franks, Greeks, Turks, Maghrebians, and Copts (Jean de Thévenot, 2014: 234). He talks on the strength of the Jewish community in Egypt, their involvement in matters pertaining to customs, and their involvement in money-changing enterprises. He states that there are many Jews in Cairo and that they all have a place where they stay together; This neighborhood is quite big and has many streets, but he mentions that the streets are small, narrow and dirty (Jean de Thévenot, 2014: 240, 245). Importantly for the Turks, the Ottoman Sultan has sent a pasha from Istanbul to rule Egypt (Jean de Thévenot, 2014: 245). He says nothing good about the Maghrebians. He tells of a Moorish woman who lived in a dead-end street and who would pull worms out of children's ears. When a child would not stop crying and it was understood that he was sick, they would take him to this woman, who would lay the child on his side, then scratch his ear, and see worms, similar to those that breed in rotten flour, falling out of the child's ear. Then, she would turn the child over and scratch his other ear, and the worms would fall out of it in the same way. A total of ten or twelve worms would come out of the two ears. She would wrap these worms in a cloth and give them to those who brought the child, who would keep the cloth in their house. She would then return the child to them, and the child's screaming would stop. The woman explained that she had accomplished this by saying certain words (Jean de Thévenot, 2014: 235-236). Since the traveler lived in Egypt for a long time, he had the opportunity to get to know the society of this place. He saw the places where these people lived and their daily life.

3. CONCLUSION

Egypt played a significant administrative, and socio-economic role in the Ottoman Empire. Egypt became the focus of many travelers due to its strategic and cultural significance. In this regard, our study's main source, the French explorer Jean de Thévenot, gave important and in-depth details on Egypt in the 17th century. During his nearly two-year stay in Egypt, Thévenot had the chance to extensively examine the area and carry out in-depth observations.

The viewpoints by Thévenot touch on a variety of subjects, including daily life and political developments. Thévenot gives in-depth accounts of social gatherings and paints a vivid picture of the locals' festivities. He highlights the ancient culture of the area by introducing significant locations from Egypt's historical and cultural legacy. With the statement "Egypt is the Nile" he highlights the significance of the Nile River and emphasizes its crucial function as a supply of water for the region.

It can be argued that Thévenot is a valuable source for information about Egypt in the seventeenth century because his observations do not contradict the accounts of other travellers of the time. Viewing a foreign country and culture through the eyes of a traveler offers a valuable viewpoint for comprehending the personality and beliefs of a society. Thévenot's views of these travels shed important light on Egyptian society and culture in the seventeenth century. While the works describing seventeenth century Egypt describe the administrative and political structure, travelers such as Thevenot and Evliya Çelebi also provide detailed information about social life. The travelogues of these travelers play a role in reflecting the social life in Egypt.

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Destek ve Teşekkür: Çalışmada herhangi bir kurum ya da kuruluştan destek alınmamıştır.

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