

Some Notes on the Changes in the Early Ottoman Society from the 14th to the Late 15th Century

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Abstract

This article re-examines social change during the first two centuries of the Ottoman state with special reference to the reign of Mehmed the Conqueror. In fact, in addition to the direct and/or indirect consequences of the conquest of İstanbul, the reign of Mehmed II (the Conqueror) witnessed a great deal of significant changes and developments with respect to the political, administrative, social, cultural and economic history of the Ottoman state. Some of these changes came about as a result of a conscious policy pursued by the Conqueror aiming at undermining the power base of some privileged groups.

Directed towards establishing a centralist empire, these reforms were deeply resented by various social and political forces, most of which had played important parts during the establishment of the Ottoman state. Consequently, their voice was to be heard, at least partly, by the successor of the Conqueror.

KEY WORDS: Social change, Mehmed the Conqueror, reform, privileged groups, the Ottoman empire

Özet

Bu makalede, Fatih Sultan Mehmed devrine özel vurgu yapılmak suretiyle, Osmanlı devletinin ilk iki yüzyılındaki sosyal değişimler ele alınmaktadır. Gerçekten de, fethin dolaylı veya doğrudan sonuçlarının yanı sıra, Fatih devri Osmanlı devletinin sosyal, ekonomik ve kültürel tarihi bakımından büyük değişiklik ve gelişmelere tanık olmuştur. Bu değişikliklerin bir kısmı Fatih Sultan Mehmed'in bazı imtiyazlı zümrelere karşı giriştiği bilinçli bir siyasetin sonucunda vuku bulmuştur.

Merkeziyetçi bir imparatorluk tesisini amaçlayan bu reformlar, büyük çoğunluğu

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Osmanlı devletinin kuruluş sürecinde önemli roller oynamış bulunan çeşitli sosyal ve siyasî guruplar tarafından tepkiyle karşılandı. Neticede, bu muhalefetin sesi Fatih'in halefi tarafından kısmen de olsa duyulacaktır.

ANAHTAR KELİMELEER: Sosyal değişme, Fatih Sultan Mehmed, ıslahat, imtiyazlı guruplar, Osmanlı imparatorluğu.

I. Introduction

In addition to the direct and/or indirect consequences of the conquest of İstanbul, the reign of Mehmed II (the Conqueror) witnessed a great deal of significant changes and developments with respect to the political, administrative, social, cultural and economic history of the Ottoman state. There is no doubt that during the reign of the Conqueror, whom Halil İnalçık has quite rightly described as the real founder of the Ottoman empire, some changes took place in the social life and structure of the Ottoman state, as a result, at least partly, of his unwavering determination aiming to bring the centralist policy into its peak as well as the gradual developments taking place since the foundation of the Ottoman principality. Taking into consideration this state of affairs, we find it worthwhile to briefly examine the historical background of this problem through a general analysis of the process the formation of the Ottoman state.

II. The Rise of the Ottomans

The problem of how a tiny frontier (*uc*) principality like the Ottoman emirate established in the north-western extreme of Anatolia at the turn of the 14th century developed into a long lasting world empire has stimulated an interesting and intriguing scholarly debate for nearly a hundred years. During the 1910s when the imminent dissolution and end of the once-mighty Ottoman empire seemed inevitable, H. A. Gibbons argued that a new race born out of the mixture of the former pagan Turks and Christian Greeks played a decisive part in the construction of this state and that the creative elements which were influential in this process could be attributed to the 'European' elements, not to an Asiatic people(Gibbons, 1998).

Gibbons' thesis has been criticised by various scholars from different angles. M. Fuad Köprülü offered a methodological approach followed by Turkish historians for decades that emphasised the need to deal with the problem of the rise of the Ottomans within the context of the 13th and 14th century Anatolian history, while in the same years P. Wittek contended that the most important factor, or more correctly the motive force behind the emergence of the Ottomans was the ghaza or holy war ideology. Even though there were some important differences between the two scholars regarding for example the Ottomans' attachment to the Kayı tribe of the Oghuz Turks, their views remained virtually unchallenged more than forty years in Turkey and in the West respectively.

Convincingly arguing that such previous scholars as Köprülü and Wittek did not subject the process of foundation into a thorough analysis, Halil İnalçık has brought into light the fact that demographic, social and political changes made significant contributions towards the emergence of the Ottoman state (İnalçık, 1982: 71-79). On the other hand, a heavy storm was begun in the 1980s against Wittek's ghaza thesis. Thanks to the writings of such Ottoman historians as R. P. Lindner, C. Imber, G. Kaldy-Nagy, R. Jennings etc. about the structure and nature of the early Ottoman principality, this period has again attracted a great deal of scholarly interest to the extent that even some international symposia have been devoted to this intriguing period.¹

A new work, entitled *Between Two Worlds-The Construction of the Ottoman State* (1995), scrutinising various arguments concerning this issue by taking into consideration both the contemporary sources and modern discussions with a critical approach has been written by Cemal Kafadar. As is well-known the heart and perhaps the most emphasised, though in a somewhat reductionistic fashion, feature of Wittek's thesis has been the argument that the ghaza ideology was a motive force in the formative period of the Ottoman state. The point, however, is that unlike his critiques writing in the 1980s, Wittek did not see the ghaza as the ideology of religiously fanatical warriors aiming to expand the abode of Islam. Very well aware of the fact that in the culture of the ghazi circles, the establishment of occasional friendly relationships with 'the other' was not incongruent with the spirit of ghaza, he analysed the development of this culture in the historical process. Wittek's critiques have argued that the historical sources such as the famous Bursa inscription dated 1337 (or much later as argued by Jennings) and Ahmedî's '*Dâstân ve Tevarih-i Âl-i Osman*' [The Legend and History of the House of Osman] (Atsız, 1947) constituting the very foundation of this thesis reflects not the ideology or aspirations of Osman and his friends but that of some later historians and statesmen; they also claim that during the first decades of its foundation the Ottoman principality did have nothing to do whatsoever with a holy war ideology, as they describe ghaza, and, as a matter of fact, their friendly relations with their non-Muslim neighbours, their tolerant attitude towards heterodox groups and, last but not least, their wars and battles waged against other Turco-Muslim principalities demonstrate this fact in a clear-cut fashion (Kafadar, 1995:50 ff.).

According to Kafadar this line of argumentation against the ghaza thesis contains many flaws, as "it is based on an essentialism that leads Wittek's critics to assume, even more rigidly than earlier Orientalists, the existence of a 'true Islam' whose standards 'true

¹ For a scholarly and comprehensive treatment of the life and personality of Mehmed II see İnalçık, "Mehmed II", *İslam Ansiklopedisi*, v.7: 506-535.

² One of these symposia was organised by the Institute for Mediterranean Studies in Crete in 1991; the papers presented there were published (1993) and translated into Turkish: *Osmanlı Beyliği(1300-1389)*, ed. by E.A. Zachariadou, trans. by Gül Çağalı Güven-İsmail Yerguz-Tülin Altınova, Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1997.

gazis' are then supposed to conform to." However, as Kafadar points out, Wittek's definition of the ghazi milieu and their ethos was not a canonical but a historical one(Kafadar, 1995:55).³

As a matter of fact, one of the most enthusiastic critiques of the ghaza thesis, Lindner, is also aware of this point and uses the term popular Islam in this connection, but, then, he argues that popular religious practices had a syncretic and flexible nature and consequently discordant with a missionary religious fervour(i.e. ghaza)(Lindner, 1983:6). Indeed, this assumption lies at the heart of the debate: to assume that ghaza ideology was a rigid ideology of holy war against infidels.

Here we are not going to attempt to give a detailed analysis of these discussions; it, however, seems quite important to touch upon yet another idea put forward by Lindner to explain the nature of early Ottoman beylik and its historical development: the tribal character of the early Ottoman society. Based on some recent anthropological research his thesis assumes that a tribe consists not only of the people of the same descent but also those joining it through various ways. He further argues that as opposed to the exclusivism of the ghaza ideology the inclusivism of the early Ottoman society was congruent with this kind of tribalism(Lindner, 1983:2,8-9).

However, even if we accept the role of the tribalism in the formative years of the Ottoman beylik, as Lindner himself concedes, we observe that the Ottomans started to adopt the rules and institutions of sedentary society at least from the reign of Orhan Ghazi. Lindner puts special emphasis upon the fact that the nomadic element that helped the establishment of the Ottoman enterprise became increasingly alienated from the centre and that the centralist policies favouring sedentary life consolidated this process of alienation(Lindner, 1983).

Should we then take into consideration the fact that the centralist policies became more pronounced under Mehmed the Conqueror than the preceding period, we may conclude that these policies brought extremely important changes in Ottoman social structure with respect to the sedentarisation of nomadic groups. It is quite obvious that such gradually alienated elements as the frontier forces and nomadic tribes became less and less efficient in the process of building a centralist state structure. We should not nevertheless overlook the fact that this process continued in the succeeding centuries; there are even very strong signs of a re-nomadisation in the wake of the well-known Celali uprisings in Anatolia at the turn of the 17th century.⁴

³I had highlighted the specific character of the concept of Islam adopted by the gazis in a what might be called review article on the views of Wittek's critiques : Mehmet Öz, 'Osmanlı Devleti'nin Kuruluşu Meselesi Üzerinde Bazı Görüşler', *VI. Osmanlı Sempozyumu*, Ankara 1992, pp.5-12.

⁴Examining the tribal administration in a comparative perspective and comparing the Ottoman case with that of the 18th-19th centuries Manchu China, İsenbike Togan Arıcanlı draws attention to the conscious frontier policies followed by the Mongols, the Seljukids and the Ottomans and to their ultimate aim of weakening tribal ties. See, Togan, "The Evolution of Ottoman Tribal Administration", a talk delivered at the University of Chicago ,1987.

III. Towards a centralist empire: Sedentarisation and Resettlement Policy

Undoubtedly it was not only the nomads who became increasingly alien to the central government. It is a well-established historical phenomenon that such groups as the ghazis and dervishes, who had made significant contributions to the formation and development of the Ottoman state, were complaining about the centralist policies that became more obvious in the reign of Mehmed II. In fact, Halil İnalçık has time and again emphasised the relationships and contradictions between the core lands and frontiers of the Ottomans in the process of the rise of the Ottoman state (İnalçık-Quataert, 1994). From the legendary *Saltuk-nâme* we can infer that such groups were eager to regain their previous status and made attempts to realise this aim (Kafadar, 1995:147 ff.). Again, behind the exaltation of Osman Ghazi as a shepherd or dervish by Aşıkpaşazâde, himself belonging to the ghazi-dervish circles, lies some harmful consequences on these groups of the harsh measures initiated during the Conqueror's reign (We will turn this problem below) (İnalçık, 1994:147).

Yet another misunderstanding regarding the Ottoman state and society has been that no fundamental change took place in the ideological and institutional structure of the Ottoman state at least until the so-called stagnation or decline period. Research undertaken in the last decades has helped to modify this view.⁵ Put briefly, Ottoman historians are becoming more inclined to think that Ottoman ideology and institutions had a dynamic nature and the capacity to adapt to changes. In this connection, for example, Kafadar attempts to demonstrate that while the ghaza concept continued to play a significant role in the periods following the formative stage of the Ottoman state, its content nevertheless underwent some changes in time (Kafadar, 1995:120).

Here it should be pointed out that the Ottoman society was essentially a pre-industrial agrarian society, that in this kind of societies the pace of 'change' or 'social change' was so low as to be noticed, and that the term 'change' implied deterioration of the present conditions. The esteem in which such concepts as the ancient law (*kanun-i kadim*) and customary law (*örf*) were held by the Ottomans is perhaps the most obvious evidence to be adduced to evaluate the concept of change in Ottoman mentality. However, we should not exaggerate the importance of this mentality, because it does not reflect the attitude of the Ottoman statesmen in real life.

To return to the period of the reign of Mehmed the Conqueror, we see that various changes occurred in a variety of fields extending from the central government to the provincial administration, from the army to the *ilmiye* institution, and changes in social structure and life were no exception. First and foremost we see the continuation of the process of sedentarisation in line with the centralist policies referred to above. In view

⁵ This is not the place to give a whole list of the literature on this issue. For an outline of the periods of Ottoman history see İnalçık's article in the volume edited by İnalçık and Quataert (1994).

of the geographical conditions of Anatolia, this process, along with that of Turkification, may seem quite a natural development. Among others, the use of the terms *kabile*(clan) and *karye*(village) in the tahrir defters (generally described as tax-registers) as synonyms may be accepted as yet another sign of this process(Öz, 1999). Besides, in these registers we also come across some evidence indicating that various nomadic groups called *etrakiye* (lit. a group of Turks, but meaning semi-nomads) and *yörükân* (nomads) were engaged in agriculture as well as animal husbandry, which might suggest their transition from a nomadic way of life to a settled one.

Yet another noteworthy development observed in the reign of Mehmed II relates to the policy of settlement launched in the wake of the conquest of İstanbul. As a matter of fact the Ottomans practised a settlement policy through forced deportation and voluntary migration from the early 14th century onwards. We see that an attempt was made for the rebuilding and resettlement of İstanbul following the conquest, for which imperial decrees were sent to various provincial administrators. In this context we may cite the deportations from Bursa to İstanbul in the years 1454 and 1455, and the deportees sent by the Conqueror from the newly taken regions to İstanbul(İnalçık, 1967:8).

In a foundation deed (*vakfiye*) belonging to Mehmed II, we understand that while describing the military conquest as the lesser [holy] war(*cihad-ı asgar*) he defined the rebuilding and resettlement efforts to transform the Byzantine Constantinople into the Ottoman Ystanbul as the mightiest war(*cihad-ı ekber*). As a result of this resettlement policy realised through forced deportation or voluntary migration, the state expected to attract people from diverse religious, ethnic and occupational backgrounds to revitalise the economic life of such cities as İstanbul, Trabzon and Selanik(İnalçık, 1967; Lowry, 1986).⁶

IV. Struggle for agricultural revenues in the process of centralisation

In addition to the sedentarisation process and the settlement policy, another important change involved the efforts to undermine the privileged positions of some well-established social groups, whose privileges originated either from their prestige attained in pre-Ottoman times or from their role in the formative period of the Ottoman state. The gradual abolition of this kind of privileges should be deemed very well congruent with the nature of the Ottoman methods of conquest(İnalçık, 1954). As a cursory examination of the Ottoman tax-registers will reveal, there was a gradual decrease in the number of the tax-exempt persons between 1450s and 1480s. According to the Ordu registers, examined and analysed by Bahaeddin Yediyıldız, in this region the number of those tax-exempts with no religious duty or physical or mental handicap fell from 807 to 325

⁶On the concept of the two categories of cihad of the Conqueror expressed in his deed of foundation see also, Fahri Unan, *Kuruluşundan Günümüze Fatih Külliyesi*, unpublished Ph.D., Hacettepe University, Ankara 1993: 22-23.

between 1455 and 1485. Despite the fact that the overall population in the mentioned region nearly doubled by 1520's, this number further fell to 66 due to the reduction of such previously exempt groups as 'tax-exempts' (*el-muaf*) and auxiliary peasant soldiers (*müsellems*, who had been actually mounted soldiers in the earlier periods) into the ordinary tax-payer (*reaya*) status (Yediyıldız, 1985:70). Similar trends are also observable for the neighbouring areas of the districts of Canik (Samsun), Karahisar-ı Şarkî (Şebinkarahisar, Giresun) and Tokat (Öz, 1999; Cook, 1972: appendices; Acun, 1993:91 ff).

The most significant attempt directed towards various privileged social groups was the so-called land reform of the Conqueror through which some 20.000 villages previously held as private property or assigned to religious foundations were turned into state property (*mirî*). In a newly-published article, my friend and colleague Oktay Özel discusses first the nature and results of this reform on the basis of the literature devoted to this issue and then evaluates its application in the Amasya area, concluding that it was not a land reform but a fiscal one aiming at increasing the revenues and military strength of the state as well as undermining the power of local aristocracy (Özel, 1999). As a matter of fact the reform attempt intended to bring about a change in the ownership of rural revenues, not in the ownership of land. The late Ömer Lütfi Barkan, for instance, interpreted this reform as a war launched by the state against local landed aristocracy. According to him, this widespread reform movement was undertaken to abolish those foundations not working for the good of the public and those privately owned lands (actually only their revenues would accrue to their so-called owners) that were originally state-owned lands, and thus to provide fresh financial and military resources for the state (Barkan-Meriçli, 1988:128).⁷ In this way the Conqueror deprived privileged groups or persons of their income or imposed some new military obligations on them, such as sending armed soldier(s) to (*eşküncü*) the campaigns. There are numerous entries in the Register of the district of Hüdavendigâr concerning those villages and *mezraas* (so-called uninhabited cultivated lands) that were turned into timar in the reign of Mehmed II. These records also tell us that most of them were given their previous status under Bayezid II, son of the Conqueror.⁸

In his research on the district of Hamid (Isparta and its environs), Zeki Arıkan points out that there is a list in the register of TT 30 of the villages turned from *vakıf* into *timar*, while the registers of religious foundations (*evkaf defterleri*) have more detailed information about this issue. It is quite clear that the reform was applied in the Hamid region, as a result of which some villages previously assigned to foundations or held in the form

⁷ H.İnalçık drew attention to the same issue a long time ago: (1947: 693-708).

⁸ These entries read as follows: '*Emlak mensuh olduğu esnada bu dahi mensuh olub timara verilmiş imiş. Sonra emlak mukarrer olcak, padişahımız (...) mülkiyetini mukarrer tutub...*' '*...mülkiyet üzere tasarruf ederken üzerine eşküncü kayd olmuş, şimdi ise padişah eşküncüsün bağışlayub mülk olmak için mukarrername erzani kılmış*' see Barkan ve Meriçli, 1988: 83, 102 and so on.

of *mülk* (private property) or *malikâne*⁹ were turned into timar-holdings. They were, too, returned to their previous owners in the reign of Bayezid II (Arıkan, 1988:121 ff.).

Oktay Özel's research on the Amasya region, where the *malikâne-divanî* system of dual ownership of revenues was in force, has demonstrated that while those persons possessing the *malikâne* shares as private property were put under the obligation of sending *eşküncüs* (armed soldiers) to military campaigns, those *malikâne* shares whose previous owners had left no heir to take over them were turned into state ownership and then given as *timars*. This state of affairs in this region attests to the fact that the so-called land(or more correctly fiscal) reform of Mehmed II was not applied there in a radical fashion. There is yet another interesting point that should be reminded in this context: those *malikâne* shares that were recorded as ownerless and therefore turned into state property in the register dating from the last years of the Conqueror appear once again as belonging to pious foundations (*evkaf*) or private persons (*emlâk*) in the registers compiled around 1520. It may be suggested that while the commission undertaking the previous survey regarded the documents of these *vakıfs* and property owners as invalid, another investigation made in the reign of Bayezid II found out(or preferred to accept) that their claims had sound legal bases, thus reaffirming their rights to their old revenues.

Conclusion

To sum up, as Özel points out, in no case did the reform of Mehmed the Conqueror have anything to do with the possession of land; rather it had a financial character with a limited scope. For this reason it was not even designed to deal a decisive blow at local aristocracies. Taken together with the restoration in the following decades, these show us in a clear fashion the limits of the real power of the Ottoman sultans vis-à-vis locally powerful men (Özel, 1999).

Among the elements that helped to consolidate the authority of Bayezid II, there was not only the so-called local aristocracy, whose rights he re-affirmed, but also the *kapıkulus* or the servants of the Gate, who have been widely regarded as the opponents of the former, i.e. the local aristocracy. It becomes, therefore, somewhat difficult to see his reign as a time when the local aristocracy took precedence over the Sultan's servants, recruited mostly from the Christian subjects of the Empire. Taking into consideration all these aspects of this reform, we may conclude that this movement was thwarted as a result of an open or tacit alliance of the social groups discontented with the reforms of the Conqueror (Barkan ve Meriçli, 1988:128).

From this brief account, it becomes apparent that the Ottoman socio-politic forma-

⁹The term *malikâne* indicates the part of the income of an holding accruing to the so-called private property owner, while the other part called *divanî* belonging to the state or its agents such as timar-holders.

tion did not have a static nature and various power struggles took place from the early beylik stage to that of empire and so on. In the light of the previous experience the Ottoman dynasty pursued a gradual policy of conquest and annexation, tried to create and maintain a balance between central and provincial foci of power, and, gradually undermined the status of pre-Ottoman or old Ottoman privileged groups. However, it is also apparent that this kind of groups proved their resilience to a certain extent; to sum up, it seems that it is a misconception to see the Ottoman history from the 14th to the early 17th century as an unbroken centralisation process.

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