

Istanbul and the Late Sixteenth-Century Ottoman Elite: The Significance of Place

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Istanbul achieved its eminence well before the Ottoman conquest as Constantinople, the second capital of the Roman Empire and after the fall of Rome its foremost city. It was the goal of the early Islamic jihad, the *kızıl elma* of generations of warriors over centuries of time. It resisted capture for nearly a thousand years, even though when it finally fell to the armies of Mehmed the Conqueror, the owl was sounding in the castle of Afrasiyab, as the Conqueror himself quoted. Its conquest has been called by Michael Angold “arguably the single most important event in Ottoman history.”¹ Not only did it link the conquests in Rumeli and Anatolia, it definitively altered the nature of the sultanate from the leader of a band of frontier warriors to the emperor of a new Rome.

Once he had gained Istanbul, Mehmed could have established himself nowhere else; the Ottoman legend of Constantinople linked it to earlier Islamic and pre-Islamic concepts of the city as a place whose weather is perfect, whose buildings are phenomenal, built by

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¹ Michael Angold, *The Fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans: Context and Consequences* (Harlow, UK: Pearson, 2012), 145.

giants, and whose conquest and destruction are signals of the Apocalypse, the end of time.² Mehmed worked for much of his reign to restore the glory of what was now *his* capital city.³ We are all familiar with the results; the mosques and markets, the houses and palaces, the gardens and fountains that made it once again a desirable place to live and that, after an initial reluctance, attracted residents from the whole empire. If indeed “the world is a garden, its wall is the state,” so Istanbul inside those walls was viewed as a protected garden. The sultans made Istanbul their base for future conquests and collected all sultanic functions within its boundaries; the whole city became known as “the threshold of the Ottoman Sultanate.”⁴ The highest servants of the dynasty also gathered inside its walls, making it “the home of all great affairs,” according to the poet Nabi.⁵ As he proclaimed, “There are the ranks of glory and honour / Anywhere else life is frittered away.”⁶ He was not alone in his view; a study of how Syria is represented in the Ottoman chronicles reveals that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century historians depicted the provinces primarily as steps on the official career path centered on Istanbul, not as places to be enjoyed for their own sake.⁷ These chronicles give very little attention to provincial events or even provincial resources; most of the time that they mention the provinces, it is in the context of appointment to office, dismissal from office, or reference to an office formerly held by someone. This makes sense given their readership—sultans, officials, and bureaucrats—but it also reveals

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2 Stéphane Yerasimos, *La fondation de Constantinople et de Sainte-Sophie dans les traditions turques: Légendes d'empire* (Istanbul: Institut français d'études anatoliennes; Paris: J. Maisonneuve, 1990).

3 Angold argues that it took Mehmed five years to realize this: Angold, 152-54. However, it may simply be that suitable quarters were not yet completed.

4 Poem of Nabi, quoted in Bernard Lewis, *Istanbul and the Civilization of the Ottoman Empire* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), 98.

5 *Ibid.*, 97.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Linda T. Darling, “The Syrian Provinces in Ottoman Eyes: Three Historians’ Representations of Bilad al-Sham,” *ARAM: The Mamluks and the Early Ottoman Period in Bilad al-Sham: History and Archaeology 9-10* (1997-1998): 347-55.

officialdom's Istanbul-centric view of imperial geography, assuming that this finding holds true for other provinces and other centuries.

The city at the meeting point of “the Two Lands and the Two Seas” was “*The City*,” the one and only city, originally for the Byzantines and after the conquest for the Ottomans as well. That's what the name Istanbul means in Greek, and the Ottomans adopted it from the Byzantines without any change. Istanbul was the central place, not only for the empire's resource flows but for its structures of power; it was the imperial center, the home of first the Byzantine and then the Ottoman state. We today take that for granted, but despite all the natural advantages of its location, perhaps we should not. Apparently it took several years for Mehmed the Conqueror to move to Istanbul and adopt the identity of a Muslim successor to the Byzantines; at a minimum, he waited until his palace was completed as a showcase for his power. Foucault argues that states are constituted by the actions and ideologies of their subjects, and the same would be true for capitals.⁸ In this view, Istanbul was the capital of the Ottoman and Byzantine states because the Ottomans and the Byzantines made it the center of their political lives and created discourses and institutions that perpetuated that relationship. Some of those discourses have already been mentioned, and they are familiar: the New Rome, the *kızıl elma*, the centerpoint of “the Two Lands and the Two Seas,” the threshold of the Sultanate. Now our attention must turn to a set of practices that reinforced these discourses on the level of official behavior, pertaining in particular to the role of Istanbul in the creation and perpetuation of the empire's military-administrative elites.

Look back to the time before the conquest of Constantinople, when the empire had two capitals, Bursa and Edirne. Neither could count on the sultan's presence; some sultans operated from one city, some from the other, and some were in the saddle more than the palace. The real capital listed on documents was wherever the army was encamped and the sultan issued orders. The military-administrative elite were chosen from the army, the *timar*-holding *sipahis*, by reason of their prowess in battle and their ability to organize their troops

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 8 Sallie A. Marston, “Space, Culture, State: Uneven Developments in Political Geography,” *Political Geography* 23 (2004): 1-16, at 4.

for victory. These skills qualified them for the offices of *beylerbey* and *sancakbey*, where their duties involved leading the provincial army and preserving order in their territories. If they proved themselves on campaign, under the sultan's eye, they were awarded power and resources in the provinces, where they exercised a temporary autonomy until the next campaign, when they would be once again under the sultan's eye, in his presence, as his companions and servants. Since campaigns were annual, or nearly so, these elites rotated every half year between service in the Ottoman military organization and the more or less autonomous exercise of provincial power. This rhythmic annual alternation reinforced a sense of the Ottoman sultan as the centerpiece of the military-administrative career, the magnet to which, or to whom, the elites would always return. Wherever he was, there was the place where they could prove themselves again, demonstrating their capacity for greater responsibilities and higher rewards.

This well-known career pattern continued for a period of time after the conquest of Istanbul. However, the seeds of change were sown with the establishment of the palace school for the best of the Janissary recruits. In Murad II's time the Janissaries had already begun to participate in the *timar*-holders' rhythm of advancement; Murad had awarded *timars* to numbers of Janissaries, granting them places in the *sipahi* army and the opportunity to gain provincial offices. In a surviving register from his reign they amounted to 22% of *timar*-holders; in *defters* from later periods these numbers diminished to usually less than 10%, but hardly ever to zero.⁹ We do not have much evidence of the impact of this practice on the military groups in question. However, given that for much of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century the policies of the empire varied between supporting the interests of the *timar*-holders and those of the Janissaries, there must sometimes have been high levels of tension in the military forces, and Janissary *timar*-holders must have been torn between divided interests.

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 9 Linda T. Darling, "Nasihatnâmeler, İcmal Defterleri, and the Ottoman *Timar*-Holding Elite in the Late Sixteenth Century," *Osmanlı Araştırmaları* 43 (2014): 193-226.

We do know that at least from the beginning of the sixteenth century a discourse of “outsiders” in the military, *ecnebiler*, developed in the writings of advice-givers and the agendas and complaints of rebellious groups.¹⁰ This certainly reflects a conflict of interests among members of the military. It is unclear, however, who these “outsiders” specifically were, and it probably varied over time; there were Janissaries of slave and peasant origin holding *timars*, volunteers and men-at-arms awarded *timars* for military prowess, and some people who had not performed military service at all. When Mustafa ‘Ali wrote in 1581, the outsiders to whom he referred were *devşirme* boys educated in the palace school who were granted *timars* and thus the possibility of advancement to elite status, but for those writing during and after the Long War with Austria (1593–1606) Janissaries were apparently no longer considered outsiders; their presence in elite offices had become accepted.¹¹ By the seventeenth century advice writers were even complaining about outsiders in the Janissary corps.

Thus, over the course of the sixteenth century there was a perceived change in the identity of the military-administrative elite and in the qualifications for elite status. The concentration of political power in Istanbul and the sedentarization of the sultans meant the interruption of the rhythm of campaigning and provincial service that formerly established eligibility for promotion. Sultans now spent time with their intimates—family members, palace personnel, and friends from the palace school—and those are who they began to choose as their top advisors, starting during the reign of Süleyman. Gradually, with many protests and a considerable degree of violence, the wider elite also ceased to be drawn from the cavalry army. It was apparently around 1570, just before Mustafa ‘Ali’s treatise was

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¹⁰ Gyula Káldy-Nagy, “The ‘Strangers’ (*Ecnebiler*) in the 16th Century Ottoman Military Organization,” in *Between the Danube and the Caucasus*, ed. György Kara (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1987), 165–69.

¹¹ Mustafa ‘Ali, *Mustafâ ‘Alî’s Counsel for Sultans of 1581: Edition, Translation, Notes*, ed. and trans. Andreas Tietze, 2 vols., Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, 137, 158 (Vienna: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1979), 25. Darling, “*Nasihatnâmeler, İcmal Defterleri*, and the Ottoman *Timar*-Holding Elite.”

written, that significant numbers of palace school graduates began to be awarded positions as *sancakbeys* and *beylerbeys* without having spent any time as *timar*-holders, according to Metin Kunt's research.¹² Their career patterns were very different from those who formerly held those offices.

These graduates were the children of provincial Christian peasants, chosen in the *devşirme* and brought to Istanbul to be educated. Carrying out the "walled garden" motif, the palace school, where these offspring of subjects were turned into members of the ruling class, was located in the inner court of the sultan's palace, which sat in the center of a walled garden in the heart of the similarly walled garden of Istanbul. Its graduates, from the heart of the heart of the empire, came to be seen as the ideal office-holders. Even those not accepted into the palace school received their military training in the palace's *bostancı* corps and spent time in the capital city. After a number of years of education and assimilation of Ottoman culture, most graduates were sent back into the provinces as soldiers and administrative officials; in the seventeenth century larger numbers returned to the provinces as garrison troops. Advancing in their careers, the best and most favored of them returned to Istanbul full-time in their maturity to become viziers and high officials. This rhythmic movement into and out from The City became a defining aspect of the elite career, replacing in importance the alternation from the province to the campaign that the *timar*-holders had experienced.¹³ The new movement was made possible by the shift of the capital to Istanbul and the construction of permanent quarters for the sultanate in both its residential and its governmental capacities. There the Janissaries had their barracks, there the married office-holders had their residences, where their wives and agents looked after their interests while they were away. In turn, their rhythmic movement constituted Istanbul as the goal for all office-holders, the center of their aspirations, the *kızıl*

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 12 İ. Metin Kunt, *The Sultan's Servants: The Transformation of Ottoman Provincial Government, 1550-1650* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 64, 66.

13 See, for example, Robert Dankoff, *The Intimate Life of an Ottoman Statesman: Melek Ahmed Pasha (1588-1662)* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

elma of the political career. Thus Nabi could write, “Whatever men of merit there may be / All win their renown in Istanbul. / There every perfection finds its measure, / There every talent attains its value.”¹⁴

The discourse in the advice works concerning the *devşirme* graduates has been aggregated with that regarding people of other origins, and they need to be disentangled. Mustafa ‘Ali considered them all outsiders; he called the Janissaries low-born and poorly trained, and he complained that the low were put in the place of the high, the ignorant in the place of the educated. Many writers worried about the increasing number of Janissary troops and the strain their salaries put on the treasury, but for most of the later writers the issue became the presence of other, different outsiders in the Janissary corps. ‘Aziz Efendi, who explained this most clearly, complained in 1632-33 of outsiders who were allowed to join the Janissary corps without the training that real Janissaries had to undergo, and it is important to identify who they were. During the last third of the sixteenth century, the sons of Janissaries had been allowed to join the Janissary corps, but they were not generally seen as outsiders. Although as free Muslim subjects they could not be enslaved, they underwent the regular course of training and became regular Janissaries. Their free status, and the fact that most of them must have grown up in Istanbul, may have made them more ungovernable (that is, less subservient), more eager to participate in political actions such as protests and dethronements, and more involved in urban society, but they were legitimate Janissaries. In addition, by 1630 the sons of members of the Six Bölüks and other palace personnel were legitimately allowed to enter various palace military corps including the Janissaries under the name *ağa çırağı*, although Ahmed I had earlier prohibited them from joining. They followed a similar career path to the sons of Janissaries, becoming Ottomanized in the sultan’s palace in Istanbul. ‘Aziz Efendi tells us that besides these, the commander of the Janissaries selected recruits from outside the *devşirme* system for his own personal service and for non-combat jobs on campaign under the name *ferzend-i sipahi*, and that these were also becoming Janissaries after working for a number of years and getting some

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¹⁴ Poem of Nabi, quoted in Lewis, *Istanbul*, 97.

training. The *Kavanin-i Yeniçeriyân* of 1606 had complained about both these groups as disruptive to the health and good order of the military, but in the 1630s ‘Aziz Efendi was willing to accept them, since they had undergone an apprenticeship and training period in Istanbul, as had the Janissaries.¹⁵ What *he* complained about was the practice of selling the pay ticket of a deceased Janissary to anyone who offered a sufficient bribe, a person who had gone through *no* training and had no loyalty to the corps—in other words, real outsiders. He identified these outsiders as shepherds, farmers, or robbers, but where would such people come up with a 50-*guruş* bribe? More likely, these were the same people he described as infiltrating the Six Bölüks, that is, Celalis, Turks, and urban people. Some of the Celalis were former members of the Ottoman military; others, despite their origins, had military training and experience; and their illegitimacy was based mainly on their being defined as rebels by the state. Those labeled Turks presumably had at least some military skills. It is the urban people who are likely to have seen membership in the Janissaries as a purely economic investment; as Baki Tezcan described them, they were merchants and artisans who had no interest whatsoever in military activity.¹⁶ Unlike the earlier recruits, both *devşirme* and other, these last groups had not undergone training in Istanbul, nor had they had the course of indoctrination that the palace provided for aspirants to elite status, or participated in the rhythm of office-holding in the provinces that marked the normal progress of advancement.

For legitimizing the Ottoman elite, the old geographical rhythms of the *timar* system had been completely replaced by a new official geography that brought elite recruits from the provinces to the capital for training, sent them out into the provinces again for service, and brought the most successful back to the palace and the highest status positions. Those who did not participate in that movement were truly outsiders, in the modern sense of aliens, strangers;

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15 Pál Fodor, “Bir Nasihat-name Olarak Kavanin-i Yeniçeriyân,” 5. *Milletler Arası Türkoloji Kongresi* (Istanbul: İstanbul Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi, 1986), 217-24, at 221.

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

they did not inhabit the same spaces as the genuine elites. They were also perhaps outsiders in an Ottoman sense of not being *enderûnî*; they were *birûnî*, even *taşralı*. Having never undergone the palace training that gave the elites a common language and culture, they were seen as ignorant and uncultured, no matter what skills and abilities they might possess. Place marked them, branding them as unfit for high office at the center. When they were promoted, the old elites complained about the decline of the empire, meaning (among other things) that the correspondence between place and power had been disrupted. Istanbul was the space in which Ottoman elites were formed, and to which they returned for the highest forms of service. All other spaces were subordinated to the capital as the sultan's threshold, as they had not been earlier in the empire's life. It is hard for us now to see what a radical change that was; we take its centrality for granted, but it changed the meaning of the military career, along with so many other aspects of Ottoman life.