

The Ottoman Empire, 1300–1650: the Structure of Power

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Ottoman histories – better put: histories of the Ottoman state – have some right to be regarded in a pseudo-Braudelian sense as *une historiographie du longue durée*. Richard Knolles's massive folio, *Generall Historie of the Turkes*, came out in 1603, a scant half-century before the cut-off point of this latest offering on the subject by Colin Imber (by 'the Turkes' Knolles meant, of course, the Ottoman state, also long known as the Turkish Empire). More than two centuries later, a more relevant founding father for the field is found in the Austrian civil servant, dragoman and orientalist Joseph von Hammer, who published in ten cumbersome volumes a history of the Ottoman Empire from its origins to the conclusion the treaty of Küçük Kaynarja in 1774, a point in history which marks if not the end, then at least the beginning of the end of the Ottoman *ancien régime*.⁽¹⁾ Hammer's *Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches*, dedicated to the archpriest of conservative reaction, the Russian tsar Nicholas I, had its successors; at least in the German-speaking world of central European scholarship, there was the seven volume work by J. W. Zinkeisen in the mid-century, and five volumes from the Rumanian polyhistorian Nicolae Iorga fifty years later, both with near-identical titles.⁽²⁾ But the best that English scholarship could offer at this time was a potted one-volume abridgement of Hammer put together by an Old Etonian High Court judge (and later Chief Justice in Ceylon), Sir Edward Creasy. Not unsurprisingly, the first edition appeared contemporaneously with the Crimean war, the second with the Russo-Turkish war.⁽³⁾ It is worth pointing out that some very real British skills in Turkish studies in the Victorian era lay in the fields of literary criticism and lexicography: Sir James Redhouse's extensive Ottoman-English dictionary first appeared in 1891 and is still in print; E. J. W. Gibb's history of Turkish poetry – six volumes, all, except volume one, brought out posthumously by E. G. Browne – appeared between 1900 and 1909 (Gibb had died prematurely in 1901). Neither work has been in any real way superseded.

During the century since Iorga's volumes began to appear, Ottoman history as a self-referential academic discipline has steadily waxed, although Ottoman history written in English, at least with reference to the period down to 1789, has tended to flourish more at the level of the scholarly article than what our Europeanist colleagues would regard as the standard monograph. In fact, it is hardly an exaggeration to state that the large-scale scholarly monograph on a definable period of Ottoman history, of the type that we have enjoyed for late medieval and early modern European history for at least the last fifty years by, e.g., Elliot on Spain, Michael Roberts on Sweden, almost does not exist in our field.⁽⁴⁾ Instead, the dominating figure amongst historians is that of the late Professor Paul Wittek, the Vienna-born expatriate and first holder of the chair of Turkish in the University of London, whose monistic formulations on the nature of the Ottoman state dominated the field until a posthumous reevaluation set in after his death a quarter of a century ago. Imber has had much to do with that reevaluation, but it is worth observing here that Wittek published, apart from some singularly influential articles, only a single monograph, and that was not devoted to the Ottomans. It is not surprising, therefore, that attempts to write surveys of Ottoman history within the confines of a single work, almost without exception, have been spectacular failures, with even Cambridge University Press's efforts in that direction coming to grief at the hands of the reviewers twenty-five years ago.⁽⁵⁾

This, of course, is all very deplorable, and may be taken as evidence of the intellectual backwardness of the field (equally visible in largely unsuccessful attempts to apply to Ottoman history the paradigm developed by the French historians of the *Annales* school for the study of pre-revolutionary France); the difficulties (linguistic, and in terms of freedom of access) inherent in any attempt to use the voluminous documentary inheritance of the empire preserved in the Turkish state archives and libraries; and the wilful neglect or dismantling of the field at university level in favour of Arabic studies in most western countries (with the notable exception of post-1968 France).

These thoughts are those of the reviewer, but they have also found a voice in the writings of Colin Imber. The short introduction, which he wrote a decade ago to preface his invaluable collection of *Studies in Ottoman History and Law* (Istanbul, 1994), should be required reading for all Ottoman historians who would take either themselves or their subject too seriously. Invoking the spirit of Sellars and Yeatman, he mordantly observes that

it is not the best work that defines the character of modern Ottoman historiography and gives it its direction. The best work tends rather to stand out in isolation and only rarely leads to serious debate and development. It is the bad and mediocre that is typical (p. vii).

Imber, it has to be said, is perhaps the leading, and is certainly the most productive, of the painfully few Ottoman historians currently working in British universities: his *The Ottoman Empire, 1300–1650: The Structure of Power* (Basingstoke, 2002), reviewed here, represents the latest attempt to stuff the polymorphous genie of the first three and a half of the six centuries of Ottoman history back into the confining bottle of a single work.

It is also worth pointing out that Imber has not been the only Ottoman historian of note, working in the United Kingdom, never to have held a formal appointment in a department of history (evidence, perhaps, that the blurring of the lines of demarcation between oriental studies and history is still, to some extent, a feature of this field), and yet, if we were forced to choose between classifying him as a historian equipped with oriental languages, or as an orientalist who happens to write history, we would unhesitatingly – and correctly – place him in the former group. This is not to say that Imber's own definition of his field is not drawn somewhat tightly. Comparative history is not part of the equation: Imber's Ottoman history, like the Ottoman state itself for much of its history (and in much of its historiographic tradition) stands alone, in conspicuous 'otherness' from the politics, Christian or Islamic, which circumscribe it. This sometimes works to his, and the non-specialist reader's, disadvantage.

Where, then, does Imber's latest work fit, in the historiography of the field, and in late twentieth/early twenty-first century historiography in general? We may say, with some justice, that his approach contains more of the spirit of the *Revue Historique* than of the *Annales*; more of the *English Historical Review* than of *Past and Present*, but it may not be an exaggeration to suggest that Imber is a member of no particular and identifiable school of history-writing. This is the second of his two books which cover broad periods of Ottoman history. The first, *The Ottoman Empire 1300–1481* (Istanbul, 1990), is densely factographic and linear, recalling, in its approach to the subject, the now largely forgotten traditions of sound east European scholarship embodied in such works as Klyuchevsky's *Course of Russian History* or (albeit on a much larger scale) Hrushevsky's *History of the Ukraine* (to invoke the ghosts of Hammer, Zinkeisen or Iorga, mentioned above, would be superfluous, and essentially incorrect: Hammer's protean work is cast in a more antique mould; while neither Zinkeisen nor Iorga, unlike both Hammer and Imber, were acquainted with any oriental languages).

How to handle the subject? His opening words, typically self-deprecatory: '[t]o write a general history of the Ottoman Empire is a foolhardy undertaking, and one that needs justification', do not fill one with confidence. A plain, linear approach, *à la* Hammer and his successors down to the Shaws, obviously will not work; accordingly, in *The Ottoman Empire 1300–1650*, his approach is largely topical. A long first chapter, baldly entitled 'Chronology', compresses a factographic but critical survey of the first three and a half centuries of Ottoman history into eighty-six densely written pages. Thereafter, separate chapters are devoted to the dynasty: 'Recruitment' – namely of the sultans' servants; the 'Slaves of the Porte', often recruited from the male Christian children of the empire's Balkan and Anatolian provinces through the remarkable, much studied and much criticised 'peculiar institution' of the *devshirme*; 'The Palace'; 'The Provinces'; 'Law'; 'The Army'; and, finally, 'The Fleet'. A surprising omission, that of any treatment of the Ottoman financial bureaucracy, the hydra-headed collection of treasury departments which lay at the financial heart of the state, is excused away by Imber's admission that he was leaving 'this important topic to someone who, unlike me, understands figures'. This is somewhat disingenuous: an early, long study of the navy of Süleyman I (originally a large chunk of his Cambridge PhD thesis), based almost entirely on Ottoman financial documents of stunning mathematical complexity, make one wish that he had found time to work up a chapter on the subject. The emphasis of the work is very much on the organs of state, and their evolution from the early fourteenth-century origins to what I perceive Imber sees (without allowing himself the luxury of any comparative input) as a temporary resolution of the Ottoman 'general crisis' of the first half of the seventeenth century.

It would perhaps be mischievous to see encased within Imber's book the ghost of a well-known work by Professor Halil İnalcık, the (now nonagenarian) Turkish doyen of Ottoman history, which appeared more than thirty years ago in Imber's elegant English translation, which is cast in a similar, though slighter mould. (6) İnalcık cut off what he terms the 'Classical Age' of Ottoman history at 1600, by which time indeed things were beginning to go wrong with the Ottoman bureaucratic and military machine (whether dysfunction should be equated with a 'decline' which nevertheless failed to bring about the empire's demise for another three centuries is a question which needs further exploration). Imber continues to 1645, although in the last page or two of his chronological summary he briefly reviews events down to 1699, a 1066-like date which conveniently marks not only the virtual end of the seventeenth century, but the beginning of the

rolling back, in successive treaties, of the Ottoman frontier, first in Europe and (much later) in Africa and Asia.

What, then, is Imber's 'view' of the Ottoman Empire, that posthumously reified construct with which we all concern ourselves? 'The History of the Ottoman Empire': a simple concept but, in terms of the history of the Turks, one which may be misleading. History may be, as it has been suggested, no more than what historians have written about the past; the past, thus defined, is what historians have written about it. That the past has had an existence apart from the historians' recreation of it is indisputable, but it is an existence by definition inaccessible, and for the loss of which no number of 'sources' can ever atone. The idea put forward by the nineteenth-century French historian Michelet, that historians are the custodians, almost in a legal sense, of the dead, has much to recommend it, although for Michelet, who was writing the history of his native land from a plethora of sources, the past – all around him as he wrote – was still alive.⁽⁷⁾ But how much more are historians custodians of the dead, with a special responsibility for them, when they come to speak of dead imperial structures, of a whole entity of governance and governed which has vanished from the land, leaving behind its monuments, its documents and its often dubious legacy. Imber's approach to this legacy has been one of rational enquiry tempered by skepticism, and further attenuated by a healthy disdain both for fashionable trends and for all-embracing monistic (or nationalistic) historical explanations.

At one remove, in his intellectual absolutism and refusal to compromise – and for this he will probably strike me down – Imber is a Wittekian (as well as an anti-Wittekian of course), although it is doubtful how much of Wittek's essentially acerbic attitudes were transmitted through the approach to Ottoman history of the late Susan Skilliter, the Cambridge supervisor of the former and one-time student and devotee of the latter. 'This apocalyptic state of mind ... exceedingly productive of myths and stereotypes', a phrase which Imber deployed tellingly in another context, could well have been applied by him to Wittek's historical formulations, most notably confronted in his impassioned dissection of Wittek's notable construct of historical determinism on the course of Ottoman history in the first half of the fifteenth century, published half a century earlier in the late 1930s.⁽⁸⁾ The genesis of that study was on the occasion of the holding of the first (and last) *Wittek-Tagung* at SOAS in 1984, where we shared a platform and where, perhaps, the formal break occurred between the hagiographers and the historians, the traditionists and the revisionists, over the Wittekian legacy and the ultimate nature of the Ottoman state. Since then, in what has at times seemed like a dialogue of the deaf, Imber has been a leading proponent of the revisionist approach, and his notable studies on 'The Ottoman Dynastic Myth' (1987), 'The Legend of Osman Ghazi' (1993), 'Canon and Apocrypha in Early Ottoman History' (1994) and 'What does *ghazi* actually mean?' (2000) ⁽⁹⁾ have forcefully and persuasively taken the debate forward, despite often failing to attract the cogent and informed response which their intellectual and historiographic merits deserve.

The shadows, if not the reality, of this conflict appear here and there in the present book, but without the fire which illuminates many of Imber's articles; one could stress here his uncompromising disdain for establishment figures past and present, and equally his disdain, expressed mainly in his reviews, for scholarship that appears to verge (no; let us say, that verges) on the bogus and the shabby. It would be invidious to go into detail but, as he once remarked apropos of one well-known publishing venture, 'in the field of Ottoman history, the demands of commerce do not coincide with the demands of scholarship'.⁽¹⁰⁾

Imber's work evinces a strong resemblance, at the very least, to another Manchester historian who was a mighty provoker of the establishment: the late A. J. P. Taylor. Certainly Imber, in his work, is more Taylor than Trevor-Roper (Taylor would never have been fooled by the 'Hitler' Diaries, nor, I suspect, would have been Imber); and what was once said of Taylor, that he was 'a technically outstanding historian, with two special qualities: intuition and a unique gift for making ordinary language carry extraordinary thought', could be equally applied in our field to Imber who, like Taylor in his, has been no friend to the long-entrenched certainties of the historical establishment. Equally, we must admire his technical expertise, evidenced most at length in his long article on 'The Navy of Süleyman the Magnificent' ⁽¹¹⁾, mentioned above, which his friends will regret was never expanded into the monographic treatment from an Ottoman archivally-based standpoint from which sixteenth-century Ottoman maritime history would have so greatly benefited. Technical skills and intuition both are in evidence in the difficult field of Ottoman legal history, to

which Imber has contributed much in recent years, and which find an echo in the excellent chapter on Ottoman law in the present work. Equally good is the long chapter on the Ottoman army, much of it written closely from contemporary sources, which shows how a growing inability to make use of technological change was closely linked with the slow decline of Ottoman battlefield flexibility from the late sixteenth century onwards.

All in all, therefore, there is much here to attract not only the Ottoman specialist but also those other and more numerous specialists in late medieval and early modern European history, whose approach to the history of the European East still often seems to reflect Metternich's timeless remark about Asia beginning on the Landstrasse. As an elegant and well-informed introduction to the pre-1683 realities of that 'Asian' Europe, the present work has much to recommend it.

Notes

1. Joseph von Hammer [-Purgstall], *Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches, grossentheils aus bisher unbenützten Handschriften und Archiven* (10 vols., Pest, 1827-35; repr. Graz, 1963).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. W. Zinkeisen, *Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches in Europa* (7 vols., Hamburg, 1840-1863) (covers the period down to 1856); N. Jorga, *Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches nach den Quellen dargestellt*, (5 vols., Gotha, 1908-13 (down to 1912)).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Sir Edward Creasy, *A History of the Ottoman Turks from the beginning of their empire to the present time* (2 vols., 1854, 1856; 2nd edn. 1877-8; repr. Beirut, 1961).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. The only serious monographic treatment of the early Ottoman state, George Arnakis's *Ho protoi Othomanoi* (Athens, 1947), described by Rudi Lindner as 'the finest unread book on Ottoman history', still remains, after half a century, inaccessible to anyone without a reading knowledge of modern Greek (R. P. Lindner, 'Beginning Ottoman History', in ed. C. Heywood and C. Imber, *Studies in Ottoman History in Honour of Professor V. L. Ménage* (Istanbul, 1994), 199-208).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. On S. J. and E. Kural Shaw's *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1976-7), see the reflective and profound study by K. Kreiser, 'Clio's poor relation: Betrachtungen zur osmanischen Historiographie von Hammer-Purgstall bis Stanford Shaw', in ed. G. Heiss and G. Klingenstein, *Das osmanische Reich und Europa 1683 bis 1789: Konflikt, Entspannung und Austausch* (Wien, 1983), 25-43.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. H. İnalcık, *The Ottoman Empire: the Classical Age, 1300-1600* (1972).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. From the 'Préface' to vol. ii of J. Michelet, *Histoire du XIXe siècle* (3 vols., Paris, 1872), cited in Roland Barthes, *Michelet* (trans. R. Howard, New York, 1987), p. 101.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. C. Imber, 'Paul Wittek's "De la défaite d'Ankara à la prise de Constantinople"', *Osmanlı Araştırmalar?*, v (1986), 65-81, reprinted in *Studies in Ottoman History and Law*, 291-304. Also see, of course, Wittek's own study, 'De la défaite d'Ankara à la prise de Constantinople: Un demi-siècle d'histoire ottomane', *Revue des Etudes Islamiques*, xii (1938), 1-34.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. C. Imber, 'The Ottoman dynastic myth', *Turcica*, xix (1987), 7-27, repr. in *Studies In Ottoman History and Law*, 305-22; C. Imber, "The legend of Osman Ghazi" in *The Ottoman Emirate (1300-1389)*, ed. Elizabeth Zachariadou (Rethymnon, 1993), 67-75, repr. in *Studies in Ottoman History and Law*, 323-331; C. Imber, 'Canon and Apocrypha in Early Ottoman History', in Heywood and Imber, 117-137; C. Imber, 'What does *ghazi* actually mean?', in *The Balance of Truth. Essays in Honour of Professor Geoffrey Lewis*, ed. Çiğdem Balım-Harding and C. Imber (Istanbul, 2000) 165-178.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. C. Imber, review of S. J. and E. Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, *English Historical Review*, xcii (April 1978), 393-5, at p. 393.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. 'The Navy of Süleyman the Magnificent', *Archivum Ottomanicum*, vi (1980), 211-282, repr. in *Studies In Ottoman History and Law*, 1-69.[Back to \(11\)](#)

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