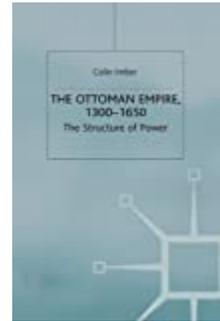




**Colin Imber.** *The Ottoman Empire, 1300-1650: The Structure of Power.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. xiv + 405 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-61386-3; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-333-61387-0.



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## Ottoman Statehood in Splendid Isolation

There are now a number of general Ottoman histories available; and that some of the more recent contributions cover “only” half of the potential time span of six hundred plus years probably reflects the fact that, by now, in many departments, Ottoman history is being taught as a two-term course.[1] Moreover, the field has grown enough to discourage even the most audacious scholar from offering a synthetic narrative that attempts more than being a short overview.[2] As somebody who himself has been involved in writing a general history of the Ottoman Empire, this reviewer can only admire the mass of reliable and detailed information presented by Colin Imber in *The Ottoman Empire, 1300-1650*. [3] The volume is a truly welcome addition to the genre. It is, however, a misnomer. Imber disregards all issues that do not directly relate to the political structure or history of the empire. Therefore, the publishers would have been well advised to entitle the volume *Ottoman Statehood* in order to avoid arousing the wrong expectations.

Imber presents his subject matter in eight chapters of rather different lengths (between fifteen and eighty-six pages). In what he calls the “Chronology” (pp. 1-86), he

offers a history of events in a masterful balance between foreign relations and war on the one hand, and internal politics on the other hand. What he covers are predominantly those developments that involved the shedding of blood either in large quantities or of blue color. Even imminently political acts of a cultural nature, such as the famous feast of circumcision in 1582, and the building of imperial mosques by Mehmed the Conqueror and Suleyman the Lawgiver, go unnoticed—indeed, the architect Sinan is mentioned only once throughout the volume, namely as the man who renovated the imperial kitchens (p. 146). Imber’s repeated efforts to motivate Ottoman policies with the personalities of individual sultans, especially after Mehmed the Conqueror (e.g., pp. 36-37, 43, 46), are perhaps a bit too well rooted in the tradition of nineteenth-century Western historiography. This is not to deny the influence of individual sultans, but in order to assess it we are in dire need of a better source basis and, additionally, a fuller understanding of the degree to which the Ottoman Empire was in possession of an institutionalized decision making process at any given time.

Imber’s next chapter on “The Dynasty” (pp. 87-127)

contains a wonderful account of family structure and marriage policies, a thorough treatment of the succession to the throne and its changing patterns, and finally, an outline of sultanic (rather than dynastic) legitimation. In this, he dwells on accession ceremonies and on the sultan as caliph, as leader in war, as holder of a noble genealogy, and as emperor. Interestingly, he pays little attention to the question of how legitimation was received by the society and also neglects the means by which it was communicated to different social groups. The concept of “justice” (*adalet*) that was so central to Ottoman state legitimation goes completely unnoticed.

Imber’s chapter on “Recruitment” (pp. 127-42) deals exclusively with the question of “military slavery” (*kapukulu*), discussing this important institution in terms of functionality and the Islamic law, but not in a wider historical context of Mediterranean state-making.

The next chapter treats the palace (pp. 143-76), dwelling on questions of location; the physical appearance of the Topkapi Palace; under the heading of “household,” the organization of the *enderun* (the “inners services”) to the exclusion of the harem; and the imperial council, here also discussing the career patterns of its members, the highest dignitaries of the empire. In this chapter, again a wealth of information is presented, but its actual value lies in Imber’s ability to treat his subject in a diachronical, dynamic way.

The same holds true for his chapter on “Provinces” (pp. 177-215), a long chapter despite the fact that the author has consciously excluded questions of taxation from his book—allegedly because he does not understand figures (p. xiv), a somewhat astonishing statement for somebody who has published on fiscal calculation in naval warfare.<sup>[4]</sup> What this chapter covers is a detailed account of provincial administration, from the top level of *beglerbegi* down to the management of “districts” (*sancak*), to what Imber calls “fiefs,” namely the prebendal timar system. This is described with detailed discourse on bureaucratic procedure. The chapter is rounded out with a subheading, “The Provinces Transformed,” devoted to the transformation of the timar-system under the impact of changes in the conduct of warfare and the loss of relative Ottoman superiority in front of their adversaries (pp. 206-15).

The sixth chapter is devoted to law and its practice (pp. 216-51). On this subject, Imber has published extensively, and his monograph on Ebu’s-Suud stands as a major achievement. In the wake of his earlier works, Imber concentrates on law as a practice and scholarly

activity. Due place is also given to sultanic (in Imber’s parlance, “secular”) law, but Christian and Muslim law is disregarded.

The last two chapters concern the army (pp. 242-86) and fleet (pp. 287-307), respectively. After a short summary on the fourteenth century, Imber deals at some length with the troops, weapons, and tactics up until 1590, and then offers his view on the military revolution of the time thereafter. As he sees it, the Ottomans managed to adapt themselves to new conditions, albeit rather slowly and incompletely. With regard to the marine, Imber explains the relative superiority of the Ottomans until the middle of the sixteenth century with the “abundance of materials, money, and men” (p. 315). He then blames the failure to adopt the galleon as their primary man-of-war for the loss of this superior position.

In his concluding pages, Imber summarizes his findings and characterizes the empire as a dynastic state (thus, he implicitly prefers this aspect to alternative labels such as “Islamic/islamicate” or “feudal”) that experienced shifts in the distribution of state power (pp. 318-25). By this, he arrives at a portrait of the empire’s internal power structure that possesses clear lines and is based on a wealth of detailed information.

There is much to be said in favor of this history of the Ottoman Empire. The author covers a lot of topics under his institutional headings that are crucial also for a broader understanding of Ottoman society. Despite the constraints of space, which are unavoidable for such texts, Imber often includes source texts or dwells on bureaucratic procedure, thus clarifying how sources have come to be produced. The volume is sure to be an excellent textbook for courses on Ottoman institutions, and the chronological chapter will help many students find their way through quite a few centuries of Mediterranean history. Unfortunately, there are a number of less positive aspects that this reviewer feels compelled to dwell upon. All of them relate to questions of historical narrative. They can be assembled in two groups: language and conceptualization on the one hand, and contextualization within historiography on the other.

Imber’s book is written in English, and great care has been taken to produce an understandable text. The decision to write in English has been taken to a rather extreme point, though: Ottoman terms are rarely rendered in their original wording, but represented by an English equivalent; Turkish names are refused the kind of transcription that Slavonic or Greek names receive, and even the detailed account of the bureaucratic procedures lead-

ing to the appointment of a timar-holder (pp. 203-204), a very useful introduction to a whole array of sources, does not reveal the names of the documents treated here—thus making it impossible for a reader to locate them easily in manuals such as Mubahat Kutukoglu’s magnificent introduction to Ottoman diplomatics.[5] Likewise, it may enhance the readability of his text if Imber wrote “judge” instead of *kadi* (often also, for no apparent reason, “Judge”), a “professor” instead of *muderris*, and “military” instead of *askeri*. But is such practice really much better than rendering sultan as “king” or *sheyh ul-islam* as “pope”?

On the other hand, Imber avoids the discussion and use of concepts as much as possible. He calls a timar a fief, but does not explain what his use of the term means. He talks about the sultanic household, but because he shies away from talking about patrimonialism, his statement—that it was “not, in its essentials, different” (p. 148) from that of Ottoman grandees—does not mean a lot: he does not demonstrate that, nor why these dignitaries reproduced the household of the ruler. Throughout the text, Imber misses (or takes for granted without ever saying) that there have been patron-client relationships in the Ottoman Empire, and that *intisab* was one of the most important ways of social and political organization, complementing (and occasionally challenging) the official administrative and military structure of the elite—in this reviewer’s opinion, such an omission constitutes a serious lacuna for a political history.

In history, things are only rarely self-explanatory, and the “household” may serve as an example throughout Imber’s book. The English term is the equivalent not only of the Ottoman *kapu* but also of *hane*; and, in its turn, *hane* does not only signify the notion of a family unit but also, among others, that of a taxable unit. There is, plainly, no direct correlation between family and *hane*-numbers when it comes to taxation in the wide realm of *avariz-i divaniye ve tekalif-i ÂÂ¶rfiye*; and this important issue is hidden from the reader when Imber discusses the levy of oarsmen for the navy using the seemingly self-explanatory but thoroughly misleading term “household” (pp. 304-307).

In his introduction, Imber identifies as one of his goals “to provide a context which makes it possible to read the specialist works” (p. xiii). In the same context, he laments that all too often “the major questions” have not even been asked by historians of the empire. Be that as it may, what there has been in terms of debate in Ottoman studies is barely reflected in Imber’s account. A

nonspecialist reader of his book would not know which of the issues Imber discusses are controversial and which ones are common wisdom, because the author does not provide questions or arguments, but solutions. It is the strength of the book that his solutions are generally so sensible. Although this approach may enhance the value of the book as a college textbook, it certainly does not make it an introduction to contemporary Ottoman historiography.

This historiography has been reflected very selectively, indeed. Throughout the last few decades, Ottoman historians have been engaged in a number of debates pertinent to Imber’s topics: on state ideology and elite mentality, on the reasons for the great crisis at the turn from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century, on the role and function of pious foundations (*vakf*) in state structure, to mention only some of those that relate to political history and are not heavily informed by theory of history. Is none of these a “major question” that deserves at least a line of justification for their omission from such a work?

All too often, Imber is very reluctant to tell his readers why he is doing something. This reviewer, for example, would be interested in what led Imber to take 1650 as the end of his narrative. There has been some debate about periodization in Ottoman studies but 1650 is a rather unusual choice.[6, 7] Imber indicates that the “successive crises in the half century from about 1600 mark the end of the period in Ottoman history that it was once customary to designate as ‘the rise of the Ottoman Empire’” (p. xiv). Characteristically, Imber avoids providing his own designation for the period that he is covering; however, worthy of note is his preference to use the much debated term “decline,” drawing on an image created by the reform writers (pp. 208-9). (This reviewer would have considered putting quotation marks also around “reform writers.”) Though Imber avoids subscribing to the terminology of given paradigms, he does not always succeed in escaping from employing their underlying concepts. For example, when, in a subheading, he refers to the time between 1512 and 1590 as the “apogee of Empire,” he in effect gives up his strategy of writing without commitment to a theoretical (or pre-theoretical) framework (p. 44).

Likewise, although Imber steers clear from debating periodization, he cannot always avoid engaging in it. Moreover, in many of his chapters, he deals basically with only two subperiods: one stretching from about 1400 to 1590, another, much shorter one, devoted to the crises afterwards. In Imber’s narrative, this time does not

acquire much coherence. Had he continued his treatment up to say 1699, as he actually does only very sketchily in the last two paragraphs of his chapter on chronology, the political accomplishments of the post-Sokollu Ottoman Empire may have received a fuller covering.

Imber's reluctance to take issue with academic debates has other consequences, as well. Curiously enough, political and military history today, together with poetry, are among the most neglected fields of Ottoman studies. Certainly, this makes it an even more daunting task to write a book such as Imber's. Still, this reviewer regretted that Imber has confined himself to a concept of political history that largely excludes even ideological activity emanating from the state, let alone nonstate political activity. When Imber concludes "the Ottoman Empire was, above all, a military organization," this applies for most, if not all, early modern states (p. 324). But is it fair to make this statement and to ignore the astonishing amount of money and effort the same state put into the provision not only of its army but also of the capital and the Holy Places? The vast and ever growing literature on the topic should, at least in this reviewer's view, necessitate some thoughts on the delineation of state activity. Imber's lack of interest in ideology and in its repercussions in the field of economy (such as the provisionism analyzed by Mehmet Genç) leads him to draw a picture that portrays early modern states as being more warlike than they were in reality.

These critical remarks are not meant to overshadow the merits of Imber's book. It is a reliable, comprehensive, and easy to use account of Ottoman political history and institutions. It deserved a more careful copyediting, a better layout (books like this need margins broad enough to put notes on them), and less dreadful artwork on the cover. Regardless of this editorial negligence, Imber's book is a valuable introduction to the field, presenting Ottoman statehood, rather splendidly, in isolation.

#### Notes

[1]. Daniel Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Erik Jan Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, rev. ed. (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1998). The oldest and still much used example of this one-volume, half-empire genre is, of course, Halil İnalcık, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age, 1300-1600* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1973) that has been reprinted many times. All the titles mentioned have been published in Turk-

ish translations. General Ottoman histories published in the framework of Turkish scholarship tend to be multi-volume collective works such as Sina Aksin, ed., *Türkiye Tarihi*, 5 Vols. (Istanbul: Cem, 1987-95); and Ekmeleddin İhsanoglu, ed., *Osmanlı Devleti ve Medeniyeti Tarihi*, 2 Vols., (Istanbul: IRCICA, 1994-98). An authoritative one-volume French history of the Ottoman Empire is the collective work, Robert Mantran, ed., *Histoire de l'empire Ottoman* (Paris: Fayard, 1989).

[2]. Recent examples for short overviews are Suraiya Faroqhi, *Geschichte des Osmanischen Reiches* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2000) and Douglas A. Howard, *The History of Turkey* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001). Something of a borderline case is Klaus Kreiser, *Der Osmanische Staat, 1300-1922* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 2001). This book gives a very short historical narrative complemented by a discussion of the most prominent areas of research and a bibliographical guide to the periods and issues covered.

[3]. I am the author of the parts on the period between 1512 and 1826 of Klaus Kreiser and Christoph K. Neumann, *Kleine Geschichte der Türkei* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam Jr., 2003).

[4]. Colin Imber, "The Costs of Naval Warfare: The Accounts of Hayreddin Barbarossa's Herceg Novi Campaign in 1539," *Archivum Ottomanicum* 4 (1972): pp. 204-216.

[5]. Mubahat S. Kutukoglu, *Osmanlı Belgelerinin Dili: Diplomatiği* (Istanbul: Kubbealti Akademisi Kültür ve Sanat Vakfı, 1994).

[6]. See, for example, Jane Hathaway, "Problems of Periodization in Ottoman History: The Fifteenth through Eighteenth Centuries," *Turkish Studies Association Bulletin* 20 (1996): pp. 25-31; Linda T. Darling, "Another Look at Periodization in Ottoman History," *Turkish Studies Association Journal* 26 (2002): pp. 19-28; and Eleni Gara's answer to the last article in a contribution to H-Turk on February 2, 2004: <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-turk&month=0402&week=a&msg=nOpwdwBEgJD1IgyRtaG4Mw&user=&pw=>.

[7]. In the 1970s, 1650 was occasionally used as a cut-off date for studies on Ottoman history, but this was motivated either by availability of sources or, even, the wish to transgress established periodization limits. See Suraiya Faroqhi, *Towns and Townsmen of Ottoman Ana-*

*tolia: Trade, Crafts and Food Production in an Urban Setting, 1520-1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 18; and I. Metin Kunt, *The Sultan's Servants: The Transformation of Ottoman Provincial Government 1550-1650* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). The

most recent example that comes to mind is Linda Darling, *Revenue-Raising and Legitimacy: Tax Collection and Finance Administration in the Ottoman Empire, 1550-1650* (Leiden and New York: E.J. Brill, 1996).

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