Review


Due to the ever increasing scope of Ottoman history, having a regional and/or periodical specialisation has become not only common, but practically essential in order for a historian to work effectively. This is a mixed blessing as one historian can spend their whole career specialising in for example Ottoman Egypt, which does contribute to the scholarship of the Ottoman Empire but does narrow the ability of that historian to gain an overall view of the empire and its identity. Unlike the British Empire, Ottoman Imperial characteristics are difficult to define given the Ottoman tendency to assimilate existing processes of local administration after conquest of an area. Studying the Ottoman Empire is made more complex by the fact that it no longer exists as an entity and due to the geographical, cultural, linguistic and religious make-up of the empire it has no single visible existing legacy today. In studying Ottoman Greece a scholar is often likely to slip into the study of Greece in the Ottoman period.² The distinction is subtle but significant and does have an impact on the writing and understanding of history.

The issues of periodisation, geography and the nature of societies which found themselves under Ottoman rule are addressed by Woodhead in the Introduction. She details the issue of the Empire's fragmented geographical legacy and poses the question of how far societies in the present day Middle East, North Africa and South-Eastern Europe would have considered themselves part of the larger Ottoman world. She offers that examining periodisation is a useful way of reassessing dominant preconceptions³ which, given the arbitrary nature of periodisation, is a valid suggestion. Periodisation appears to have played a part in the classification of only two sections of the book, that of the foundations and the end of the Empire, each of which can be somewhat objectively classified as having their own characteristics


distinctive of the intervening years. However this has not limited the options of the contributors many of whom deal with themes that transcend common periodisation.

In its treatment of geography the book is equally inclusive allowing for both regional studies of periods and topics and also general surveys. One of the key strengths of this book is that both editor and contributors have recognised the need for the 'Ottoman state' to mean more than Istanbul and this is realised in the treatment of the capital as a regional study, in the specifying of Istanbul and other regions together and in the segregation of the Imperial household as an area of study independent of the rest of the city. This is a step in the right direction for Ottoman historiography, the Ottoman Empire was more than Istanbul just as the Roman Empire was more than Rome. Expansion is thematic as well as geographical with Woodhead stating in the abstract the need to consider what it meant for ordinary people to be part of an 'Ottoman world'. This declaration is resonant of history from below, a popular approach in the writing of social history in recent decades. While this methodology is not something new the use of it in Ottoman Studies has only more recently become a popular practice.

The key issues of any historical publication are the objectives of the work and whether or not they are achieved. The main aim laid out in the Introduction is: to expand the traditional narrative of Ottoman historiography which is very narrow and government-centric yet which still forms a central part of general textbooks on the Ottomans. The proposed means of doing so, the subversion of traditional periodisation and geographical boundaries as well as an emphasis on the ordinary citizens of the empire are effective. In addition to sections on the empire's foundations and its later years there are sections entitled 'The Ottomans and Others', 'The Wider Empire', and 'Ordinary People' covering respectively Ottoman international relations, Ottoman expansion and administration and the daily lives of ordinary citizens, thus the book does succeed in expanding the 'Ottoman world' beyond its governmental boundaries.

With regards to methodology three case studies give us good examples of approaching a specialism within the context of a large question. These are Nükhet Varlık's *Conquest, Urbanization and Plague Networks in the Ottoman Empire, 1453-1600*, Başak Tuğ's *Ottoman Woman as Legal and Marital Subjects* and Ali Yaycıoğlu's *Provincial Power Holders and the Empire in the Late Ottoman World*.

Varlık's topic has very little primary documentation and so she offers a wide chronological context and thematic framework of diffusion to build connections between her key themes. Additionally charting a long chronological framework is prudent for the scope of plague, conquest and urbanization. Also in-keeping with the volume's intentions Varlık builds her own periodisation around her specific subject as

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4 I am indebted to Dr Gideon Nisbet for this comparison.
opposed to starting with a period and finding the subject within it which prevents the feeling that coverage of the subject has been cut short owing to a chronological restriction. Finally her core themes encompass all Ottoman society as illness, war and urbanization affected all inhabitants and regions of the empire.

Tuğ also opens the study on Ottoman women in a thematic framework blending the concepts of gender in history and anti-Orientalism setting out to challenge some existing stereotypes. The sub-headings in this chapter are built around case studies selected from the archives to answer the issues of the topic while also offering conclusions based upon the analysis of larger selections analysed under one problematic framework. This study follows the agenda of the volume as a whole by being inclusive and yet specific by turns in dealing with its topic and the spirit of challenging the status quo.

Yayçoğlu uses a blend of the above methods in selecting case studies to fit into a wider theme and also offering a broad context to his study. This is a well-rounded chapter emphasising both continuity and change in centre-province relations while also addressing historiography and methodology in the context of the 'big theme'. Yayçoğlu manages to keep his study readable while also covering the scope of a large question which meets the goals of the book exactly.

Woodhead intends to provide interest for Ottomanists of all levels, students and non-Ottomanists. The volume does not claim to be a general introduction for students or a complete overview of the empire and its associated historiography, however it is a starting point for projects in all areas of Ottoman studies due to the diversity of its contents.

The Ottoman Empire was certainly more than the sum of its component parts, yet each of those parts did have its own distinctive character making the transcendence of these identities into one overarching 'Ottoman-ness' a certain je ne sais quoi. This book certainly is an editorial achievement for Woodhead having managed to gather such diverse contributors to work towards the one question of 'Ottoman-ness', and if this book does not provide an definitive answer there is certainly something in the contents to interest every student and scholar of Ottoman history and encourage them to think about the definition of 'Ottoman' as it pertains to their interests. Hopefully this book should spark some further debate and scholarship upon the Ottoman Imperial identity.

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