

The Power of Connections: Interpersonal Networks and Agency in the Ottoman Empire and Ottoman Europe

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Bericht von: Aysegül Argıt, Historisches Seminar, ZEGK, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg; Blanca Villuendas Sabaté, Zentrum für Islamische Theologie, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen

The 2017 Annual Conference of the Working Group „Ottoman Europe“¹ explored the importance of personal contacts for the history of the Ottoman Empire and Ottoman Europe both as factors shaping human agency and as objects of historical actions. The event was jointly hosted in Tübingen by the Institute for Modern History, the Center for Islamic Theology, and the Department of Oriental and Islamic Studies of the University of Tübingen as well as the Historical Institute of the University of Gießen. Organizational responsibility lay with Lejla Demiri (Tübingen), Aysegül Argıt (Heidelberg) and Tobias Graf (then Tübingen/Heidelberg, now Oxford).

In her welcome address, LEJLA DEMIRI stressed the particularities of the Ottoman Empire as a space of exchange, pointing to a cosmopolitanism that incorporated complex identities and multiple affiliations, an aspect recognized by Ottoman actors and modern scholarship alike. She celebrated the increasing cooperation of Turkish and Western historians in this area of world history and emphasized the enormous methodological advances in the study of this region of the world in recent decades. TOBIAS GRAF underlined the relevance of interpersonal connections in shaping the lives and actions of historical actors. He argued that social networks provided crucial infrastructure which enabled a wide variety of activities from political action and education to commerce and travel, but

also called for the integration of this focus on structures into a microhistorical perspective which examines the relevance of interpersonal connections (as well as their absence) on individual actors.

The first panel focused on scholarly and religious networks. M. SAİT ÖZERVERLI (Istanbul) discussed three areas of interconnectivity in Ottoman intellectual activity: the domains of disciplines, texts, and scholars. He showed that theological and philosophical studies were intertwined closely, leading to multidimensional approaches and methodologies in discussions of both fields, e.g. in the cases of al-Ghazālī, al-Razi and al-Baydawi. Religious scholars such as Şemseddin Fenari, Özerverli argued, often carried out their works within networks of institutional as well as personal ties. He accentuated that their production of thought took place in texts, translations and commentaries written reciprocally, which in turn established a strong intertextuality in theological and philosophical studies and furthermore fostered interfaith dialogue in the Ottoman Empire. ASIM ZUBČEVIĆ (Sarajevo) shared the initial results of his examination of 59 inheritance inventories (*mu'allafat defteris*) produced in Sarajevo between 1762 and 1828 and preserved in court registers (*sijils*). Focusing on the ownership of books in Ottoman Sarajevo, he reported that backgrounds of – predominantly Muslim – book owners were diverse and that the genre, thematic focus, as well as the prices of books listed varied widely. Still, the most common books recorded were firstly the Qur'an, followed by literature on the prophet Muhammad, dictionaries, legal works, medical, literary and history books, mostly by Muslim authors, although works by non-Muslim are also attested. Craftsmen and merchants appear to have owned the largest book collections. Zubčević pointed out that the inventories included unknown and lost titles and thus could complement extant manuscript collections. While inheritance inventories provide information about book ownership, they do not include information on what was actually read. Another severe limitation of this type of source is the lack of comparably detailed information on book

¹<http://www.osmanisches-europa.de> (09.01.2018).

ownership among non-Muslims in this period. INES AŠČERIC-TODD (Edinburgh) argued that professional guilds acted as strong social agents in the Ottoman Empire. Focusing on evidence for guilds in Istanbul, Bursa, Bosnia and Sarajevo, Ašćerić-Todd described specific liabilities of guilds such as controlling production, product quality and prices, establishing codes of conduct, as well as ensuring financial stability. For these ends, guilds established systems of regulations, punishments and funding opportunities. Using the example of celebrations and promotion ceremonies jointly organized by different guilds, Ašćerić-Todd showed how rules of conduct and production were shared among guilds through these interactions; the guilds predominantly followed *futuwwa* (chivalry) and Sufi codes. In Sarajevo, she argued, the connection between guilds and Sufi orders resulted in mutual benefits: guilds provided new recruits to the Sufi orders, thus facilitating conversion to Islam, whilst Sufi orders provided authoritative frameworks for the guilds, e.g. in the case of the Akhī-Qādiriyya order.

The second panel entitled „The Ottoman Empire’s Tributaries“ started with DANIEL URSPRUNG’s (Zurich) paper on elites in Wallachia during the seventeenth century. Ursprung explained that, under Ottoman suzerainty, the boyars were charged with the collection of taxes from Wallachian peasants, the principal taxpayers, for the tribute payable to the Ottoman State. In this constellation, he argued, the Wallachian prince functioned more as a representative of the Sublime Porte and local elites grew eager to increase their political influence in the region by instrumentalizing their networks to Istanbul using gifts and personal relations. The emergence of a new money- and appointment-based elite oriented towards Istanbul contested the position of the traditional hereditary nobility. KONRAD PETROVSZKY (Vienna) examined the Phanariot Iordaki Stavraki (fl. 1745-1765) who had risen to prominence in the service of Mihai Racoviță. After Racoviță’s son Constantine’s death, Stavraki achieved proximity with the Ottoman Sultan and ultimately became his chief envoy to Wallachia. As Petrovszky showed,

Stavraki was viewed as a cunning power broker who would find his demise after provoking the mass emigration of Wallachian peasants by imposing heavy taxation and confiscating their property. Stavrakis’ story of rise and fall was fueled by his exploitation of his social networks which, so Petrovszky argued, he reinforced and expanded by organizing charitable events and sponsoring religious scholars, but especially by establishing relationships of dependency on his favour by lending money.

The third panel „War and Peace“ focused on networks in the context of intelligence and espionage. TOBIAS GRAF explored the information gathering activities of the Austrian-Habsburg ambassadors in the Ottoman capital in the late sixteenth century. Using reports and expenditure accounts, he reconstructed a substantial portion of the network of spies and informants assembled by the ambassadors in this period. The emerging pattern shows clearly which Ottoman grandees and institutions the Habsburgs specifically targeted in search of valuable intelligence. While the Austrian Habsburgs could take advantage of their diplomatic presence in the Ottoman capital, in the mid-seventeenth century the Muscovites, as NIKOLAS PISSIS (Berlin) showed, had to rely almost exclusively on informal agents such as Greek ecclesiastics, monks, merchants, and travellers who frequently crossed the Ottoman borders. The resulting networks were consequently formed along existing family, church and trade connections. Especially during the years of crisis and uprisings between 1648-1656, the trade in intelligence flourished, promising to those offering their services money, protection, privileges, and the opportunity to pursue their own interests. For this reason, Pissis showed, reports as well as protocols of systematic interrogation often contained false or misleading information alongside more accurate representations of developments, a welcome reminder that information has instrumental value.

The fourth panel on networks of „Commerce and Trade“ opened with EVELYN KORSCH’s (Venice/Erfurt) investigation of the global networks of the Armenian merchant banker family Sceriman based in Julfa, Venice

and Livorno which was particularly active in the Eurasian gem trade. The family company was, as Korsch showed, organized in the form of a patriarchal hierarchy. Its members effectively used interpersonal networks in order to build a worldwide communications system that provided them with the latest market trends. Following mercantile strategies including both cooperation and competition, e.g. with the East India Companies, and profiting from personal contacts as well as from privileges in diplomatic, political and ecclesiastical circles, they derived fantastic profits from what was essentially a high-risk, high-return trade. Shifting to the Aegean Sea, GÜLAY TULASOĞLU (Ankara) discussed the mercantile activities of local notables (*ayans*) in the Ottoman Empire in the early nineteenth century. Using the case study of the *voyvoda* of Izmir, Katipzade Mehmet Efendi, she explored how the local political power and wealth drew these actors into increasingly international mercantile networks and gave them an opportunity to further enhance their political authority, in Katipzade's case even vis-à-vis the Ottoman sultan. Katipzade in particular profited immensely from the assistance he gave to British merchants in Izmir at the outbreak of the Anglo-Ottoman War (1807-1809) which later secured him profitable trade licenses. His international contacts extended beyond the Mediterranean to London, Russia, and the USA. Indeed, this *ayan* quickly became so powerful that the sultan had to resort to having him executed in secret in 1816 in an attempt to reassert imperial control of this important port city in a move which in its intentions prefigured the Tanzimat era of reform. ANNA VLACHOPOULOU (Munich) offered an insight into her research on the Greek trading family Rallis, who, beginning with five brothers in 1511, built a global trade company that lasted until 1961. Vlachopoulou stressed the importance of network building for the Rallis' trading business, as family and company members deliberately fostered and expanded personal and institutional connections in order to increase commercial profit, to minimize business risks and to gain advantages on the growing global market. In her analysis of the network structures, differ-

ent layers of competency and affinity could be discerned: with the core family members at the center, the networks spanned the extended and in-law family to include fellow towns- and countrymen in an attempt to ensure the loyalty, trustworthiness and diligence of their business partners.

In the fifth panel entitled „Connecting the Localities and the Imperial Centre“, UROŠ DAKIĆ (Belgrade) concentrated on Grand Vizier Sokollu Mehmed Pasha's kinship network within the Ottoman administration and the Serbian Orthodox Church. Dakić examined the collection of taxes in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Serbia as an indicator of the degree of rivalry between the Serbian church and the Ottoman administration. Following the argument that Makarije Sokolović was Sokollu Mehmed's nephew who received support from his uncle for his appointment as the archbishop of Peć, Dakić contended that the two men continued to stay in close contact long after Sokollu Mehmed's conversion to Islam. With these close ties to the patriarchy, Dakić argued, the Christian branch of the Sokolović family was promoted to collect taxes from Catholic and Christian subjects in Ottoman Bosnia, thus successfully using their family and institutional ties to advance professionally. HENNING SIEVERT (Berne/Heidelberg) introduced his analysis of brokerage in the Ottoman Empire as an alternative way of understanding this particular imperial system. In his view, brokers functioned as intermediaries – Sievert prefers the German term *Vermittler* – between subjects and notables, mediating and translating concerns voiced, for example, in official complaint letters. Sievert argued that for successful brokers the possession of relevant knowledge and personal networks was more important than wealth, rank or education. He named three groups of brokers comprising locally recruited officers, individual actors close to the government and local representatives like *mukhtars* or *sheykhs*. Their position as *Vermittler*, Sievert concluded, not only helped bridge structural gaps, but also enabled them to control politically relevant information flows.

In the final panel focusing on political mobilization, AYŞEGÜL ARGIT presented her

doctoral project on the newspaper „Tanin“ in the context of Istanbulite communication infrastructures during the Second Constitutional Era (1908-1914). Argıt traced the ways in which institutional, professional and personal networks structured the dissemination and exchange of information in the capital and how they consequently shaped journalistic work. She focused particularly on the potential of information networks for failure in terms of productivity and effectiveness, concluding that misinformation, gaps in knowledge and false evaluations based on a reliance on personal sympathy and trustworthiness rather than on credibility were common.

In the concluding discussion, RENATE DÜRR (Tübingen) called for close collaboration between researchers of Ottoman and European History for an enhanced methodological and theoretical exchange which moves beyond traditional disciplinary borders. She furthermore stressed how connecting global and microhistorical approaches benefit the understanding of interpersonal networks and their relevance to political, cultural, and intellectual history, uncovering the making of multilayered identities and historical intersectionality, for instance, of capital, authority and the ‘human factors’. Dürr concluded that conceiving of networks as processual constructs rather than as static structures contributes to a more thorough understanding of their agency in historical events.

Conference Overview:

Welcome and introduction

Lejla Demiri (Tübingen) and Tobias Graf (Tübingen/Heidelberg, now Oxford)

Panel 1: Scholarly and Religious Networks

Chair: Lejla Demiri (Tübingen)

M. Sait Özervarlı (Istanbul), Study Circles, Scholar Invitations, and Text Competitions: Building Scholarly Networks in the Early Ottoman Period

Asim Zubčević (Sarajevo), Books and Their Owners in Ottoman Sarajevo, 1762–1828

Ines Aščerić-Todd (Edinburgh), Sufis, Artisans and Traders: Ottoman Guilds as Economic, Social and Spiritual Networks

Panel 2: The Ottoman’s Empire’s Tributaries

Chair: Philip Hahn (Tübingen)

Daniel Ursprung (Zurich), Christians Acting as Ottomans: Wallachia’s Seventeenth-Century Elites as Agents of Ottomanization
Konrad Petrovsky (Vienna), When Networks Fail: The Case of the Phanariot Iordaki Stavradi

Panel 3: Between War and Peace

Chair: Ayşegül Argıt (Heidelberg)

Tobias Graf (Tübingen/Heidelberg), Reconstructing Intelligence Networks: The Example of Austrian-Habsburg Intelligence in Istanbul, c. 1575–1583

Nikolas Pissis (Berlin), The Greek Spies of Muscovy in the Ottoman Empire, 1640–1660

Panel 4: Commerce and Trade

Chair: Denise Klein (Mainz)

Evelyn Korsch (Venice/Erfurt), Global Networks and Multi-Layered Agency of an Armenian Merchant Banker Family

Gülay Tulasoğlu (Ankara), The Katipzade Family between Trade and Politics

Anna Vlachopoulou (Munich), Networking as a Business Strategy in the „Long 19th Century“

Panel 5: Connecting the Localities and the Imperial Centre

Chair: Stefan Rohdewald (Gießen)

Uroš Dakić (Belgrade), Sokollu Mehmed Pasha’s Kinship Network in the Serbian Orthodox Church

Henning Sievert (Berne/Heidelberg), Brokerage in the Well-Connected Domains

Panel 6: Political Mobilization

Chair: Tobias Graf (Tübingen/Heidelberg)

Ayşegül Argıt (Heidelberg), Press, Politics, and Mobilization in Istanbul, 1908–1914

Concluding discussion

Commentary: Renate Dürr

Chair: Tobias Graf

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