TIURKS IN THE OTTOMAN IMPERIAL PALACE*

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Sans family, sans ethnicity?

To a non-specialist “Turks in the Ottoman Imperial Palace” may sound reasonable, even expected, certainly innocuous, but in Ottoman studies the expression comes with a question mark and an exclamation point. Both in terms of the underlying principles and in terms of actual practice there were supposed to be no Turks in the Ottoman palace, except in special circumstances. But from the late sixteenth century, as critics put it, Turks and Kurds and other riffraff penetrated the palace and so caused the deterioration of the venerable institution of the imperial household.1

Any royal palace might be cosmopolitan to a certain degree but in Europe, except perhaps in the multi-ethnic Habsburg capitals, Madrid and Vienna, the main national element in a given polity would constitute the largest ethnic component in the royal establishment. In Islamic polities the reverse was true. Caliphs and sultans preferred to distance themselves from the main ethnic groups in society by developing household troops composed of outsiders. Furthermore, these outsiders were imported as enslaved, deracinated warriors owing sole loyalty to their masters: the perfect troops for dynastic empires. Slavs, Turks, Franks, pagan or Christian but always non-Muslim for they were slaves, were then trained to develop their supposed “innate” warlike qualities inherited from life in the Eurasian steppe, and served caliphs as highest commanders and loyal troops. They lived apart from the people as an elite corps with distinct dress, languages and customs.2 In time some such mamluk slave-turned-commanders wielded

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1 The most forceful statement on this is to be found in the work of Mustafa Âlî: see especially Cornell Fleischer, Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire: the Historian Mustafa Âli, 1541–1600 (Princeton 1986) pp. 156–157.

2 For the early development of the mamluk phenomenon see, for example, Patricia Crone, Slaves on Horses: the Evolution of the Islamic Polit (Cambridge 1980).
great political as well as military power and sometimes established their own dynastic states. Slave soldiers even established sultanates by acclamation rather than on dynastic lines, as in the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt and Syria and the Delhi Sultanate, a similar one in northern India, coming into being at about the same time in the thirteenth century.\(^3\)

In addition to this model of Islamic empires, there was also a feature of tribal life in the Eurasian steppe in the background of Ottoman royal household building. This is the institution of nöker, companions of the chieftain, a group made up of individuals cut off from their original tribes and adopted into a new tribe through joining the chieftain’s retinue.\(^4\) Later narrative accounts of the early, heroic but blurred Ottoman times mention Osman Bey the eponymous founder of the dynasty, though at first a very modest frontier chieftain, having a few mamluk-style slaves, kul in Turkish, among his own men and some nökers as well. As his successors enlarged their retinues, “outsiders” or “strangers” (gurebâ) was the name of one of the sections of the household cavalry, implying the continuation of the nöker-like phenomenon while a majority of household members were of kul origin.

As it fully developed, the Ottoman system of administering the realm was based on the distribution of livings (dirlik) so that the recipients could maintain proportionate official households (kapı). All sources of revenue, urban and rural, taxes, dues, fines and fees, were given out as revenue grants. The recipient of a rural revenue grant was expected to live at the source of his revenues, usually a village. Most of such rural revenue would consist of land rent for the peasant families and share of their crop, but there were also fees and fines collected in the course of keeping the peace and punishing crimes and misdemeanours. Thus the revenue grant-holder was the administrator of his area as well as serving in campaigns as a fully armed and equipped cavalryman. A revenue grant-holder of higher level of income was required to maintain out of his revenues a fully armed retainer for each multiple of the minimum allocated. A provincial official might have a dozen or so men in his retinue, a district governor bey a hundred or so, and

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