

Sultan Selīm's Obsession with Mamluk Egypt according to Evliyā Çelebi's *Seyāhatnāme*

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Introduction

The history of the Ottoman Sultan Selīm's conquest of Egypt and the overthrow of the Mamluk Sultanate is well known from many Arabic and Turkish chronicles and other sources. In his early career, Selīm was a crown prince in Trebizond, the most distant province from the capital, with the least likelihood of taking the Ottoman throne than his two half-brothers. He was the least popular with Sultan Bāyezīd II, his aging father, and his grand vizier 'Alī Pasha. Selīm established his power base locally, fighting Georgia, his Christian neighbor in the East, but planning to move his forces to the West, with the excuse of fighting the infidels on the Danube. It is undeniable that although the conquest of Egypt was Sultan Selīm's greatest achievement for the Empire, this had not been his plan or ambition during his early career. It was the result of complicated political and strategic developments that no one could have predicted in advance.

In this chapter I discuss Evliyā Çelebi's version of Selīm's conquest of Egypt. In the tenth volume of his famous travelogue *Seyāhatnāme*, Evliyā Çelebi devotes only 20 pages to Selīm, each printed in two columns. The whole volume has 537 pages that are mostly about Egypt (and some on the Sudan and Habesh/Ethiopia), all printed in very small letters. I discuss only those parts that are pure fantasy, where the author attempts to show that Selīm was obsessed with Egypt from the start. All these chapters are based on the mystical and the supernatural.¹

Klaus Kreiser describes the *Seyāhatnāme* as a valuable source for many aspects of Ottoman politics, society and culture.² Even though Evliyā Çelebi compares his work to that of "other historians" and is classified by the two modern scholars and bibliographers of Turkish history and literature Bursalı Mehmed Tāhir (d. 1926) and Franz Babinger (d. 1967) among others as a historian, the *Seyāhatnāme* cannot be regarded as 'history.' However the quality

1 Evliyā Çelebi, *Seyāhatnāme* x.

2 Kreiser, Evliyā Çelebi.

of the work as a first-rate 'historical source' is beyond question. According to Rhoads Murphy, Evliyā Çelebi's "partisan remarks enrich rather than distort our understanding of Ottoman realities. Moreover, precisely by recording controversial and deeply felt contemporary opinion Evliyā's account achieves its unique standing and value as a source for the study of seventeenth-century Ottoman society and politics."³ In this regard, Kreiser notes, "he clearly discriminates the Ottoman *Rūm* elite from the other subjects of the Sultan, a feature which is particularly noticeable in the tenth volume of the *Seyāhatnāme* focusing on Egypt."⁴

The tenth volume of Evliyā Çelebi's great travelogue *Seyāhatnāme* is mainly a detailed description of Egypt. He presents a panoramic view of the country as he saw it in the second half of the seventeenth century. As an Ottoman patriot and a deeply religious Muslim, the author was a keen, observant traveler who was a foreigner, but not a stranger to Egyptian culture. He paid attention to the local color, social and cultural subtleties, rules, and the ways the country was governed by the Ottomans. In particular, he was interested in local practices of Islam.

The aim of the present article is not to trace the history of the important Ottoman Sultan Yāvūz Selīm (r. 1512–20), and the political and military events in which he took part. His dynamic personality in leading, and even saving, the Ottoman Empire has been described in other more reliable and accurate sources than Evliyā Çelebi. Rather, my purpose is to document Evliyā Çelebi's unique approach as a mystic and fascinating writer, who brazenly mixes the real Selīm, as he was known to contemporary historians, with mysticism, imagination and naïve techniques that attribute the power of divination of future events (*kashf*) to historical figures like famous Sufi saints. These events were known to Evliyā Çelebi because he had the advantage of living a century and a half later. His most daring device is to involve the Prophet himself, either in appearances in a dream, or in one case, when he speaks to Selīm from his grave in Medina.

Despite these literary contraptions, the figure of Selīm emerges as credible. Not surprisingly, he appears to be very similar to Evliyā Çelebi himself. Both were deeply religious, with a tendency toward superstitions. Selīm respected and admired Muslim scholars; Kemālpāşāzāde Aḥmed, his chief Mufti, had a strong influence on him. At the same time, he had extreme faith in living and dead Sufis, regardless of their kind of mysticism. His admiration of the figure

3 Murphy, *The historical setting* 24.

4 Kreiser, *Evliyā Çelebi*.