Beginning from the 15th century, thousands of registers compiled during the Ottoman period document the activities of Muslim judges in the various provinces of the empire. Included among their contents are judicial decisions regarding property transactions, personal debts, marriage contracts and divorce procedures, commercial and criminal cases, local market prices, guild management, and tax payments, together with copies of imperial orders (firman), estate inventories and inheritance distributions, and so on through the minutiae of daily life. The Ottoman Muslim judge acted as adjudicator, arbitrator, notary, and occasionally mouthpiece of the imperial government, while his scribes duly recorded the proceedings transacted in his presence. It may have been the case that registers of judicial decisions, kadı sicilleri (sijillat al-qadi), were compiled in Muslim states prior to the rise of the Ottoman empire. Mamluk sources suggest that such registers were compiled in earlier times, but there are no known examples available for study.

Scholars of the Ottoman empire began to plumb the depths of these sicils as source material for historical study even in the early years of the Turkish Republic. After World War II, the growing interest in socio-economic history, and, subsequently, in subaltern studies, micro-history, and topics of research other than political, diplomatic, and intellectual history, brought the sicils to center stage. The extensive bibliography given by Suraiya Faroqhi in the Ottoman section of the article “sidjill” in the second edition of the Encyclopaedia of Islam is indicative of the extent and variety of research based on sicils from different periods and locations, but it is hardly exhaustive.

Following the initial boom in sicil research, a critical discussion also developed surrounding the nature of the sicils as a source, assessing their use of language, the veracity of the cases, and the extent to which cases were reformulated by judges and scribes to fit into familiar or seemingly appropriate legal constructs, making them more “judgeable” even if less accurate. An ongoing methodological debate derives from these critical analyses, suggesting research strategies to deal with the apparent treasure troves of detail for so many aspects of Ottoman society and culture.

The historiographic and methodological discussions in Leslie Peirce’s Morality Tales (Berkeley, 2003), a work based on two registers covering one year in the career of an Ottoman judge appointed to the eastern Anatolian town of ‘Aintab (today’s Gaziantep), provide a comprehensive and thoughtful introduction to sicil research. Her own research strategy and analysis of the judge’s work demonstrate the historical insights to be drawn from the sicils. Peirce’s work is important to keep in mind when considering the significance of the volume reviewed here, because it demonstrates how even sicils covering a limited time and place can reveal a whole world of local life: relations of people, property, class and gender,
together with occupations and resources, not to mention the personality of the judge, the techniques of the scribes, and the role of witnesses. Although circumscribed in time, one year nonetheless offers a local segment of Ottoman life to hold up against the larger imperial story, not only hinting at the dense and varied world concealed by the name “Ottoman” but also tracing out some of its specificities. 

İstanbul Mahkemesi 121 Numaralı Şerʿîyye Sicili Tarih: 1231-1232/1816-1817 comprises a transcription and facsimile of one sicil volume from the intramuros area of Ottoman Istanbul. It is the first fruit of the Ottoman Court Records Project (OCRP), a collective endeavor conceived in 1990 and now called the Halil İnalcık Araştırma Projesi, after the doyen of Ottoman history who was one of the first scholars to explore the sicils. İnalcık heads a committee of scholars overseeing the projected publication of further volumes from among the roughly 10,000 that exist for the several judicial regions of the city. These volumes are housed at the İstanbul Mâfitûlûgû, the offices of the chief mufti of Istanbul (known as the şeyhülislâm in Ottoman times). The earliest volume is from the Asian Üsküdar district, dated 1513, and the last volumes are dated 1924, the year in which the kadi courts were closed.

This project of publishing sicils is substantively different from the few similar projects preceding it. In the multi-volume publication of Jerusalem sicils, among the oldest and most completely preserved in the empire, Amnon Cohen chose to publish mostly translations and summaries (in English or Hebrew) of entries relating to the Jewish population of Jerusalem over 400 years. However, his volumes do not include facsimiles for all entries, nor any transliterations, and they do not include matter unrelated to the central theme.1 From the Ottoman Balkans, Marlene Kurz has published a thesis of almost 1000 pages containing a complete edition, translation, and facsimile of the only surviving kadi register from Skopje (Üsküp), which in its form probably resembles most closely the İstanbul Mahkemesi 121 Numaralı Şerʿîyye Sicili.2 Finally, the first volume of the Istanbul sicils was recently published by the Islamic Research Center of Istanbul.3 Although the OCRP claims that its “primary goal has been to edit and publish the defters,