Antonis Anastasopoulos, ed.


This volume is the product of the Seventh Halcyon Days in Crete Symposium of the Institute for the Mediterranean Studies. As its title suggests, the nineteen articles concentrate on the strategies by which local societies negotiated with the central government. Following the lead of Suraiya Faroqhi’s inspiring 1986 article, they seek to extend political agency beyond the office holders and challenge the prevalent (and perhaps Orientalist) historiography that ignores the political dynamism of local forces in Ottoman society. Based on a rich corpus of primary sources, they seek an answer to the following questions: How did local communities engage in political initiatives in a polity where the majority of the population did not have civil or political rights? How did the “bottom,” be it individuals or corporate bodies, negotiate with the “top,” i.e. the central authorities and holders of high offices? How did *re’aya* express themselves politically before the *askeri*?

Part I concentrates on “bottom up” political initiatives in the provinces. Leslie Pierce scrutinizes several aspects of a court case in Harput between various groups and strata of the local population on the one hand and *sipahi* Halil and his men on the other. Hülya Canbakal demonstrates the importance of local social and economic characteristics in understanding the urban unrest in late eighteenth-century Ayntab and notes the lack of social, economic, and political coherence between the two factions that dominated the city. Both Elias Kovolos and Eyal Ginio take Salonica as a case study: while the former asks questions regarding possible political initiatives of the peasants who rebelled against the reform of the method of the poll tax collection in 1691, the latter demonstrates how the Jewish community responded to the economic, social, and cultural crises of the eighteenth century by instituting the office of the community’s agent in an effort to present a unified front before Muslim authorities who surprisingly did not play any role in the election or the supervision of this elected agent. Sophia Laiou examines factional rivalry in the Orthodox community of the island of Samos and scrutinizes the relationship between the central government and the two rival factions. Finally, Andreas Lyberatos contextualizes the deposition of the Archbishop of Filibe by the guilds of the city in 1818 within the larger framework of local socio-economic considerations expressed through local guilds.

Part II concentrates on subjects’ right to petition the sultan as an instrument of influencing the central government’s political decisions. Nicolas Vatin
shows how the pressure of the Muslim community convinced the central authority to force the Jewish community to bury their dead in a new cemetery in Hasköy, rather than in Kasımpaşa. Rossitsa Gradeva concentrates on legal steps that non-Muslims needed to take to receive the central government’s permission for repairs and reconstruction of their temples. According to Demetrious Papastamatiou, while petitions written by the Moreans provided the central government with political information with which it could more easily control its provinces, access to the monarch, the ultimate dispenser of justice, they also enabled subjects to defend themselves against the abuses of powerful members of their society and state authorities. In this part’s final article, on the Ayvalik revolt in 1842, Evthymios Papataxiarchis demonstrates how the expansion of print culture transformed the nature of petitions addressed to the Ottoman Sultan from bureaucratic to journalistic. This was an attempt to make the most of possibilities offered by new media such as printed books and newspapers, and enabled petitioners to overcome bureaucratic fixity and convey their messages to a larger audience.

Part III focuses on direct challenges to the authority of the sultan. Four historians chose crucial moments in Ottoman political history when the relationship between the sultan, his elites and his subjects was reconfigured. Dimitris Kastritis seeks to link Şeyh Bedreddin’s uprising in 1416 to lower and middle ranks of society who showed their opposition to the existing social order by rallying around religious and intellectual figures such as Bedreddin. Baki Tezcan compares a number of contemporary accounts of the regicide of Osman II in 1622, a political initiative “from the bottom up” taken by janissaries whom he considers to represent lower and middle classes of Istanbul. He demonstrates how political interests shaped history writing and decided which version of events would gain currency. Seeking to establish relations between ideological currents and socio-economic or political developments in the most interesting article of the book, Marinos Sariyannis associates the second wave of the Kadızadeli movement in the mid-seventeenth century with a mercantile elite, rather than the common folk, as is usually assumed. With rigorous scrutiny of a variety of sources, he argues that the Kadızadeli movement provided an ideological platform for the merchants of the capital who sought a more active political role and that fundamentalist ideas functioned as a “mercantile ethic” similar to the Protestant ethic. Aysel Yıldız analyzes the May 1807 Rebellion to understand why the yamaks of the fortresses along the Bosphorus, this politically irrelevant extra muros military force composed of young and poor people, took such a risky political initiative that would eventually unseat the Ottoman Sultan.