
Largely based on kadi’s court registers, Canbakal’s book studies the seventeenth-century town of ʿAyntab (modern Gaziantep city in Turkey), situated north of the present-day Turkish-Syrian border, “from the perspective of social and political hierarchy, the power of the urban elite and their relationship with the common folk” (p. 2). The author thus aims to explore the urban history of Ayntabi society at a time when the center-periphery relations in the Ottoman Empire had become very significant. In terms of a time frame, even though the book roughly covers the second half of the seventeenth century, it focuses particularly on the last two decades, when the Ottomans confronted the Holy League after their failure to conquer Vienna in 1683.

After the introduction to the topic (pp. 1-16) the book is divided into three parts. The first part provides an introduction into the town and district (lıva) of Ayntab in terms of its geography, urban layout, population, and economy as well as its administrative structure. It appears that the inhabitants of the seventeenth-century town of Ayntab were “overwhelmingly Muslim and predominantly Turkish” (p. 33). Even though major trade routes bypassed Ayntab, the town nevertheless profited from its proximity to Aleppo, and played an important role in regional trade. Due to its place in the Ottoman imperial world Ayntab was, as the author points out, “an ordinary town no more or less significant for the historian than dozens of others located in the interior periphery of the empire” (p. 53).

Part two consists of two chapters; chapter two (the first one of this part) deals with the various aspects of the ʿaskeri class and its position in Ayntab and is one of the most intriguing and inspiring chapters of the book. Emphasizing that the term ʿaskeri “referred to a much larger group of people than is implied by the term ‘ruling elite’ or state functionaries” (p. 66), the author explores and analyzes the different ways in which people could become members of the ʿaskeri and she also studies the growth of the ʿaskeri as a group. Her investigation shows that the ʿaskeris of late seventeenth-century Ayntab made up for 36% of all the households in the town and seem to have included civil functionaries, descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, military men, and relatives and protégés of the members of these groups. Given the fact that, according to a survey from 1536 (which
seems to have included all the categories in the ‘askeri), this social group had only counted toward 6% of the total population, the growth of the ‘askeri by the last quarter of the seventeenth century is extremely striking. However, at this point we must qualify the author’s conclusion, based upon the work of Göyünç and Özdeğer, that the part of the population exempted from tax payment decreased to only 1% of the town population in 1574. For, although we are not given the exact details of the category involved in this case, I presume that, just like the detailed registers of most of the districts of this period, the register in question could not have included many ‘askeri such as timariots, fortress guardians etc. In any case, Canbakal’s observations concerning the increase in the number of ‘askeri seem to be in line with the evidence provided by research on ‘avarmz registers of the seventeenth century.

Another issue which is highlighted in this book concerns the increase in number of the so-called descendants of the Prophet, the seyyids, a result of a process quite properly labeled as Seyyidization. Her findings for Anatolia and Rumelia, based upon inspections carried out in the second half of the seventeenth century, support previous research regarding the Arab countries during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (pp. 77-83). Cases from court records moreover illustrate that military status could be gained, lost, or given up voluntarily. Meanwhile, the increase in number of both the seyyids and the military cannot merely be attributed to tax-exemption but also resulted from other advantages such as networks of interest on a local, regional, and imperial scale, for instance involvement in tax-farming. Intriguing as it may be, the suggestion of a probable connection between the political and demographic ascendance of the seyyids in the provinces and the promotion of the cult of the Prophet in the capital (p. 89) begs for more detailed research. We must also note that Canbakal poses new questions for further research in this context, such as the place of the ‘askeri in the political imagination of the subjects.

Chapter three (the second chapter of part two) is concerned with the distribution of wealth in ‘Ayntab and the identity of the members of the upper class. After examining the data found in the only probate register from the period—which has been studied on the basis of the criteria suggested by Establet and Pascal for contemporary Damascus—the author concludes that 20% of all the deceased in Ayntab could be classified as wealthy and that there was a high degree of wealth polarization. Canbakal also gives due attention to the role of different factors like gender and status on wealth distribution and polarity, and concludes that in general men