Permeable Borders of Faith and Politics: The Ottomans and Safavids in the Western Eye


Sonja Brentjes’ book *Travellers from Europe in the Ottoman and Safavid Empires, 16th-17th Centuries* is not only a book, in her own words, on the ‘meta-narrative’ of the intellectual relationships between the West and the East and its critique, but also a valuable collection of primary sources on learning and knowledge written by Western European travellers, diplomats, scientists, clergymen on early modern Iran and the Ottoman world.

The first part of the book explores an extremely interesting array of Western European erudite men who travelled into the Ottoman and Safavid states in the early modern period, composed of early natural and social scientists as well as gentlemen. It concludes by asserting that the presumptions about the Middle East in general, that the sciences and learning in these societies were static and ‘scholastic’, were not only inaccurate, but asserts also that Europe learned much about natural and social sciences through the writings and exchanges within the ‘Republic of Letters’. What is significant for the contemporary historian are not only the findings of Brentjes that the West saw the Middle East through its own prejudices, then, but many, though fortunately not all, contemporary historians of the Middle East of today also perpetuate similar misconceptions about the history of their own societies out of an unquestioning acceptance of Western European norms, probably acquired during their curricula of education. In fact the second part of the book provides examples from seventeenth- and
eighteenth-century accounts about the inaccuracies of these writings on the Ottoman Empire.

The chapters on Pietro della Valle’s (1586-1652) unpublished works and on his ‘Latin Geography of Safavid Iran’ not only bring to the attention of the reader less-known writings of della Valle, but also serve as an example to illustrate the difference between ‘mainstream’ censored literature of the time as opposed to the ‘unedited’ works of the same travellers wherein they indulged in a more genuine quest to understand Iran and the Ottoman Empire within these countries’ own native cultural patrimony. Part V and VI of the book are dedicated to the theme of established prejudices about Safavid Iran and the Ottoman Empire in Western European contemporary writings, the genealogy of these prejudices as well as political and cultural reasons arguing the nature of these writings from the point of view of who and when wrote them under which circumstances.

Of particular interest is the account of Prospero Alpini (1553-1617), the physician from Padua. Although he admitted the superiority of pharmacological and chirurgical knowledge in late sixteenth-century Ottoman Egypt as compared to Europe, Alpini also claimed that, as opposed to the Mamluk rule in Egypt, medicine declined under the Turks who rejected theoretical medicine and accepted only symptomatic cures because they were a ‘Tatar’ and a ‘barbarian race with bestial mores’ (234-235). Had this actually been the case and if the Asiatic barbarian genealogy had really been the cause, what Alpini was oblivious of, was the fact that the Mamluks were also a dynasty of Turkic origin. As Brentjes correctly demonstrates in a detailed manner, ‘physicians in Ottoman Egypt were by no means mere empiricists, but followed Hippocratic, Galenic and medieval Arabic medical theories’. Furthermore, the Ottomans, by state tradition, kept prominent families not only of physicians but also of other professions and notables in office as long as they were loyal to Ottoman rule, not only in Egypt but throughout most of the provinces. What is even more erroneous, as pointed out by the author, concerning today’s world is the unquestioned acceptance of Alpini’s ‘faked’ views by contemporary scholars as a matter of fact (235). Another interesting observation resulting from the detailed accounts of Brentjes was the general acceptance by Europeans travelling to the Ottoman and Safavid Empires in the early modern period that the general state of sciences and knowledge in the Ottoman Empire was more decadent than in Persia.

Brentjes argues that the unfavourable images contained in the works of travellers, merchants, and pilgrims of Catholic and Protestant origins