

contribution here to scholarship is broad ranging, and this book will be of particular interest to scholars researching and teaching Ottoman and Mediterranean Studies, piracy, commerce, religion, and legal and imperial history.

YUVAL BEN-BASSAT, *Petitioning the Sultan: Protests and Justice in Late Ottoman Palestine*, Library of Ottoman Studies 42 (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013). Pp. 331. \$135. ISBN: 9781780764573

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Yuval Ben-Bassat's *Petitioning the Sultan* explores the archival corpus of petitions (*arzuhal*) sent from Palestine (mostly Jaffa and Gaza) to Istanbul between the mid-1860s and 1908. It discusses the nature of this kind of document and examines, through their interpretation, crucial questions such as the Ottoman identity of the region, the relationship between rulers and the population, intercommunal relations, as well as the tensions and ambiguities between bureaucratic modernization in an age of reform and the continuation of old practices. One of the most interesting features of this book, in contrast with other studies that tend to anachronistically apply categories and paradigms, is to consider Palestine "from an Ottoman perspective" (p.6).

Ben-Bassat analyzes the role of petitions in late-Ottoman procedures with great precision and situates the nature and usefulness of these sources in contrast with other archival resources like the records of qadi courts (*sicill*). The author also proposes stimulating reflections on petitioning as a social practice and as an instrument of governance. Even if some of his conclusions on this matter can be debated—as when he argues that petitions were an instrument of centralization and that they reinforced the position of the ruler, although they were also an institutionalized expression of locality and a guarantee of the respect of all the decentralized features of governance at the scale of urban, rural, communal, and professional communities—the author's precise work at deciphering the administrative process and political treatment of the petitions, recognizing them as a complex element, is innovative.

As for the content of the petitions, Ben-Bassat proposes a reading of both urban, rural, and Bedouin societies under an original lens. The texts of the petitions allow access to the voices of the people. The passages on petitions sent by Ottoman officials are valuable additions, as they reveal previously underdocumented dimensions, such as the negotiation of Ottoman imperialism and the complexity of the personal identity and careers of such officials. Passages are also dedicated to petitions sent by Templer colonists and proto-Zionist migrants. They limn interactions with Ottoman authorities and the complexity of the categories and identities that other approaches in historiography tend to reify. This book hence constitutes an important contribution not only to the history of Palestine but also to the understanding of the nature of the Ottoman empire and of the dynamics of change that were enacted during the era of the Tanzimat.

Ben-Bassat, while proposing innovative interpretations on this later period, does not insist on the link between practices of this period and the Ottoman classical age in regard to petitions as a crucial tool of governance. Petitions, indeed, were a central feature

of governance in the Ottoman empire and represented an institutionalized tool of negotiation. The petitioning dialogue (each petition opening a procedure and calling for an administrative treatment and a political answer) was a key feature of imperial governance and its interpretation is a way to relativize visions of a distant Empire. The author shows this with great acuity for the late 19th century but might underestimate the consistency of the imperial heritage that other resources at Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA) in Istanbul illustrate. What was new during the Tanzimat era was a reform of the functioning of the office of petitions. Petitions from the whole Empire were no longer treated together, but classified according to the geography of the Empire. Hence Ben-Bassat found these petitions together, in contrast with researchers working on previous periods, who have contended with a mix of petitions from the whole empire.

Ben-Bassat also argues that there was, in addition to a technological change that introduced the telegraph to the petitioning system, a quantitative change in the number of petitions received in the capital city of the Empire. Having personally seen the millions of petitions of the previous periods at BOA, I think this may be an overstatement.

In his conclusion, the author discusses the question of the specificity of petitions from Palestine. Introducing this argument is a way for him to reconnect with debates on the historiography of the region, capitalizing on his study of both the Ottoman normality of the petitioning system and the emergence of new questions in early 20th-century Palestine. Another important issue, evoked in the introduction, pertains to petitions as possible “forerunners of modern public opinion” (p.19). This interpretive impulse is fascinating as it again breaks with culturalist visions of the region that suggest that there was no such dimension in local societies. Its exploration however might require Ben-Bassat’s vision to reconnect more intimately with the previous periods in which, I suspect, the petitioning system was already the expression of a local form of civic conscience.

As it uses, presents, and interprets petitions in a way that challenges many static visions of the Ottoman history of Palestine, *Petitioning the Sultan* is thus a very valuable contribution to the current trend in historiography that discusses the inertia of previous analytical postures and builds upon an innovative reading of largely ignored sources in order to propose reinterpretations and paradigmatic changes.

BRINKLEY MESSICK, *Sharī‘a Scripts: A Historical Anthropology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018). Pp. 519. \$70.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780231178747

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In *Sharī‘a Scripts*, Brinkley Messick analyzes the implementation of the Zaydi interpretation of shari‘a in the town of Ibb, in Yemen, during the first half of the 20th century. Ibb of this period stands out as a unique site to study the deployment of shari‘a before the penetration of modern/colonial techniques. As such, this work represents a departure from the usual methodologies of sociological and historical studies of the 19th- and 20th-century Islamic world that reduce the narrative to a mere colonial encounter. As an anthropologist, the author was able to observe the indigenous legal process *in situ*, thus, unlike the historian, Messick has insight into how his archival material was created.