

BOOK REVIEWS

doi:10.1017/npt.2015.5

Dana Sajdi. *The Barber of Damascus: Nouveau Literacy in the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Levant.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013, xv + 293 pages.

There are few studies on history writing in the Ottoman Empire, partly because the fact that the Ottoman chronicles tended to reflect the perspective of the ruling elites distracts scholarly attention from the topic. Most chroniclers in the Ottoman Empire were members of the ruling elite, and in most cases they were commissioned to write history by the state. Dana Sajdi has found a valuable source—the chronicle of Ibn Budayr, a barber in Damascus—for studying how a layperson could write history and report the events of his time. Sajdi has managed to link this unique source to the general social, political, and cultural context of the eighteenth century. As a period of change, the eighteenth century presented a new opportunity for ordinary people to enter the field of chronicle writing, which had previously been reserved for the elites. Sajdi explains this change through the birth of “nouveau literacy,” the emergence of authors from humble backgrounds. This development is in line with recent studies showing the opening of political spaces and the entrance of new actors onto the stage of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century politics and society in the Ottoman Empire.¹

Methodologically, Sajdi’s study is inspired by microhistory. It begins with the deposition and chronicle of an individual, and it relates this micro level to large-scale political, cultural, and social change in the Ottoman Levant. It also proposes an interesting link between the nouveau literacy of the eighteenth century and the al-Nahda movement, the so-called “Arab Renaissance,” of the nineteenth century, thus making a claim for path dependency in literary movements. According to Sajdi, “the arrival of the nouveau literates, well over a century before the ‘renaissance,’ paved the path for the emergence of the modern public intellectual” (p. 211).

In the introduction, Sajdi defines this nouveau literacy by arguing that literary genres are socially apportioned, meaning that different groups use texts or genres as a means of self-presentation and/or preservation (p. 6). Thus, ordinary subjects entering the field of chronicle writing as new actors in the

1 See, e.g., Baki Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

eighteenth century represented, in their own view, a new social order. Chapter 1 discusses the reconfiguration of the social order in the eighteenth-century Ottoman Levant through the rise of new families, such as the al-'Azm family, that became foci of social, political, and economic power. The representation of this change in the cultural sphere came with the display of wealth in mansions, public buildings, and ceremonial picnics. The new order was also marked by urban violence and disorder, resulting from competition between the imperial corps, local corps, and fresh troops (imperial corps sent from İstanbul in the mid-seventeenth century). These issues of change and disorder were also represented in literature through changes in the forms of poetry, the rise of court chronicles, and the decline of biographical dictionaries (p. 35).

Chapter 2 focuses on the barber, Ibn Budayr, in an attempt to understand the factors that led him to write his chronicle. Sajdi underlines his social mobility, emerging from a poor family on the periphery of Damascus to becoming a barber to ruling elites in the city center. She calls Ibn Budayr a "learned illiterate," by which she means an educated layperson as opposed to a scholar with an established profession. After comparing the discursive practices of religious and legal scholars (*ulama*) and Sufis in an attempt to show how their social standing and relations to literacy influenced the way they constructed texts, verses, and *tarjamas* (obituary notices), Sajdi turns to the barber to show how his chronicle's construction of *tarjamas* was different from that of established scholars. As she points out, Ibn Budayr's obituary notices of ruling elites frequently refer to his personal connections, friendships, and proximity to the deceased, in an attempt to prove his social standing in Damascene society.

Was Ibn Budayr an exceptional individual and a rare example of a layperson writing a chronicle? How common was the practice of chronicle writing among ordinary subjects? Chapter 3 answers these questions by giving examples of other laypersons who wrote similar chronicles. These authors came from various origins and included a priest, agriculturalists, a Samaritan, a notary clerk, and a Janissary. Chapter 4 discusses the history of chronicle writing in the Arab world from the twelfth to the eighteenth century. The novelty of this chapter lies in its comparison of the historiographical production of Egypt and the Levant in this period. Sajdi defines the popularization of history in the Ottoman Levant as "the participation in history of social groups that were hitherto excluded from it" (p. 136). She links this popularization to the earlier emergence of chronicles in the public domain and to the consumption of chronicles not only by the learned elite, but also by the general public in Ottoman Egypt (p. 139).

Chapter 5 takes us to the barber's chronicle and a textual analysis thereof. Sajdi carefully analyzes the narratives of recorded events in the chronicle, searches for the use of historiographical genres, and shows how the style and the content of the text represent the changes and disorders of the eighteenth century. She considers Ibn

Budayr's text as a hybrid text containing both the standard event-narration of a chronicle and the formal elements of epic. This is a sign showing that the target audience of the text was not the learned *ulama*, but rather the general public (p. 162). The author also comments that Ibn Budayr not only represented the new order and disorder, but also called for the restoration of a lost order. Chapter 6 is a fine example of comparative textual analysis. Here, Sajdi compares the original version of the barber's chronicle with al-Qasimi's later nineteenth-century edition of the text. This comparison shows how the changes in political context influenced al-Qasimi's omission of certain parts and emphasis of others.

The major contribution of the book to the literature is its presentation of new and rare material from the eighteenth century. Studying the culture and literature of the Ottoman Levant through the textual analysis of a chronicle is an innovative strategy. The author also treats her material in an original and stimulating manner by not only performing textual analysis of a rare and original source, but also developing a comparative methodology that compares the original chronicle with al-Qasimi's later edition. Through such a textual analysis, Sajdi makes a contribution to the growing number of revisionist studies on the eighteenth-century Ottoman Empire by arguing for a changing landscape of politics and growing opportunities for the social mobility of ordinary subjects.

There are some aspects of the book that might be improved. Although Sajdi's discussion of the eighteenth-century context, of the historical development of chronicle writing, and of lay historians provides a general understanding of the field and the time period, it delays until Chapters 5 and 6 the introduction of the barber's chronicle and a textual analysis thereof. Also, in order to better situate Ibn Budayr and *nouveau* literacy in its wider historical context, there is a need to compare it with other chronicle writers in both the Ottoman Empire and the Western world. Only one short comparison is made to a European case—namely, the miller Menocchio written about by Carlo Ginzburg²—and this is only mentioned as a methodological inspiration for the microhistorical perspective of the author. Drawing on the well-developed literature on the court historians and non-Arab chronicles of the Ottoman Empire, the author could have compared the barber with such other Ottoman historians and authors of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries such as Na'ima, Gelibolulu Mustafa Âli, or Kâtîp Çelebi.³ In this way, Sajdi would have more effectively placed Ibn Budayr in the historical context of the Ottoman world.

2 Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

3 Especially Cornell Fleischer's study on Mustafa Âli employs microhistory and provides an example to compare Turkish and Arabic historians from different centuries of the Ottoman state. See Cornell H. Fleischer, *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire: The Historian Mustafa Âli (1541–1600)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

It would be interesting to have more information in the book about the audience and popularity of lay chronicles. Sajdi does engage with this issue, arguing that, given the scarcity of existing archival material and the dominance of oral culture at the time, what matters was not the chronicle's audience, but its sheer existence (p. 113). However, in order to support the author's argument for the existence and importance of nouveau literacy in the Ottoman Levant, there is a need to show that the barber's chronicle, as well as the other examples of lay chronicles provided, were not exceptional cases. Moreover, to show that these works represented a trend in the changing world of the eighteenth century, their audience and circulation in oral and written culture should be discussed somewhat more extensively.

Leaving aside these few issues, the book is a fine example of interdisciplinary research that speaks to both history and comparative literature. It is a pioneering study that introduces the world of laypersons in the eighteenth-century Ottoman Levant. Although the book engages in complicated issues of the cultural and social history and the literary studies of the eighteenth century, Sajdi's writing style is easy to follow, and her use of clear arguments and the fluidity of her language is impressive. The book represents a major contribution to microhistorical studies of the Ottoman world and will likely become a classic read by students of the cultural and social history of the Ottoman Levant in the early modern era.

Yonca Köksal

Koç University

doi:10.1017/npt.2015.6

Betül Başaran. *Selim III, Social Control and Policing in İstanbul at the End of the Eighteenth Century: Between Crisis and Order*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014, xiii + 281 pages.

Betül Başaran's *Selim III, Social Control and Policing in İstanbul at the End of the Eighteenth Century: Between Crisis and Order* is a most welcome contribution to the newly emerging scholarly literature on social control and policing in the late Ottoman Empire. In the last decade, Ottoman historiography has seen an increase in the number of studies on violence, criminal justice, and social control, with the majority of these studies sharing the common premise that the late Ottoman Empire witnessed a gradual change in administrative practices and mechanisms directed at controlling society. Başaran's book fits into this