

it is highly likely that this new text was not just a copy, but an updated and reconfigured text that was meant to serve the needs of users some 300 years after al-Nabulusi had produced the original. In this sense it is quite similar to the endowment inventory of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus that has recently been published (Eychenne/Meier/Vigouroux: *Le waqf de la mosquée des Omeyyades de Damas: le manuscrit ottoman d'un inventaire mamelouk établi en 816/1413* (Beirut/Damascus 2018)). Here, the only extant manuscript was reworked in the early Ottoman period to fit new administrative, fiscal and legal expectations. In the case of al-Nabulusi's work that might explain for instance a striking feature: While the text records the tax obligations of each village, it records hardly any actual payments. The book assumes that this was the way al-Nabulusi recorded the information, especially as the "lost" manuscript, that the 1898 edition used, leaves out this information as well.

Yet, another line of thinking would be to see this as the intervention of the later copyist(s) for whom the question of which village actually paid the annual tax a terribly long time ago, was most likely of limited interest. When we look at the actual Ayasofya manuscript we see a layout programme that does support this hypothesis. The copyist systematically wrote in red ink the names of the taxes that a village had to pay and the respective beneficiaries – exactly the kind of generic data an administrator would still be interested in after so many years. In addition, the Ayasofya manuscript does not stop with the text of al-Nabulusi, but shows another intervention by its scribe: there are four folia with further data on the Fayyum that are not mentioned in the edition or the study. Here we see the Ottoman-period scribe reworking another piece of Mamluk-period paperwork, in this case information drawn from an endowment deed by the late fourteenth-century sultan Barqūq. Taking the textual witnesses that we have as early Ottoman-period reconfigurations does not impact the main arguments, but it might have added some more nuance at some points.

Taken together, these two volumes are a wonderful result of a project that started with an AHRC grant back in 2009. Most importantly, they succeed in moving the gaze of scholarship beyond the walls of the major cities where most studies of this period remain. The study is a major piece of scholarship and a must-read for anybody interested in Mamluk history, Egyptian history, rural history or economic history. It is eloquently written and exemplary in the clarity of both argument and methodology – a privilege to read and to review.

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ETHAN L. MENCHINGER:

The First of the Modern Ottomans: The Intellectual History of Ahmed Vasıf.

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Ottoman history has produced few biographies. For the period before the late nineteenth century, we hardly have anything. Only a few isolated studies have appeared; and in recent years, it has sometimes seemed as though the field has given up. The

main reason for this apparent lack of interest is the sheer difficulty of writing them. Historians have few materials from which to work up individualized portraits. Ottoman literary tastes did not favour confessional writing and did not predispose authors to say much about their personal reflections and feelings or indeed to drop many details about their everyday experience at all. Writing was for scholarship and law, or put itself in the service of poetic expression, which cared little for mundane observation or self-disclosure.

These perennial difficulties have not deterred Ethan Menchinger from offering an engaging new study of Ahmed Vasıf Efendi (1735–1806), one of the foremost Ottoman historians of the eighteenth century. By Ottoman standards, Vasıf is a promising subject. He was a leading Ottoman statesman, rising through the bureaucracy to appointment as chief scribe at the end of his life. His paper trail is extensive and allows Menchinger to track him over several decades. More than a high-ranking official, Vasıf also served as official court historian, and gained recognition as one of the most accomplished stylists in eighteenth-century Ottoman letters. Along with several books and treatises, he wrote his masterpiece, an official chronicle of Ottoman history that covered most of the late eighteenth century.

Despite having such a suitable subject, Menchinger continually runs into the limitations of Ottoman biography. Originally from a mid-level family of scholars in Baghdad, Vasıf gradually made his way as a young man from Iraq to the imperial capital, and switched from a religious to a bureaucratic career, in which prospects were decidedly better for provincial newcomers. The sources tell us little about this stage of his life. Only from middle age did Vasıf begin to leave a fuller stream of records. Menchinger owes much of his portrait to careful research in the Ottoman archives, which preserves the vicissitudes of Vasıf's career. He pulls a few extra bits of colour from Vasıf's extensive literary output.

What emerges from all this careful combing of archives and libraries is, as Menchinger readily concedes, more of an intellectual biography than a sketch of a person in the flesh. Menchinger has little choice. Vasıf's writings invariably turn to intellectual, political, and historical matters, leaving little else for the historian to examine. As a result, the reader gets a tour mainly of intellectual circles in eighteenth-century Istanbul. Menchinger is adept at decoding their abstruse debates. Philosophical treatises on ethics, he explains, were really heated debates about politics. The crux of the matter for Vasıf's generation was a series of shocking military defeats, starting with the Ottoman–Russian war of 1768–74. The old Ottoman self-image of superiority crumbled. Officials quarrelled about who was responsible for this weakness and what was to be done about it. With the ascension of Selim III (r. 1789–1807), the court would commit itself to the ill-fated New Order, a programme for reforming the army and administration openly modelled on European techniques and fiercely opposed by entrenched interests like the Janissaries. Reformers tried to make the case that borrowing from Europeans was both necessary and unobjectionable and did nothing to compromise Ottoman legitimacy.

Fully in the reform camp by the 1790s, Vasıf's full-throated advocacy for the New Order tempts Menchinger to declare him the "first modern Ottoman". He flirts with the debate, now more than three decades old, about the possibility of an eighteenth-century "Islamic Enlightenment". With his emphasis on "free will" in historical affairs and demotion of divine intervention, Vasıf seems to become an exponent of greater "rationality". Subsequent pages essentially walk back this claim. The eye-catching title (perhaps to please the publisher) yields to a more subtle assessment of Vasıf and other reformers standing at the dawn of an age that they understood imperfectly. They were not really "modern" in their instincts; they were "pragmatic" thinkers and officials who continued to "look to the past". To

the extent that Vasif appears modern, his reaction begins to look very much like a matter of circumstance, not the principle of free-thinking reason that Enlightenment *philosophes* would espouse. Perhaps Menchinger would have been better off setting his study within a more global framework, instead of forcing parallels with intellectual currents in the Atlantic world. Why not measure Vasif against Russian statesmen and intellectuals? Or those, say, in India, whose experiences with European power were not so different?

More fruitful is Menchinger's investigation of Ottoman thought on its own terms. He demonstrates the enduring creativity of received intellectual paradigms. Vasif and his contemporaries did not mindlessly adhere to inherited doctrine. They refashioned it to the needs of the day. The reader watches statesmen and intellectuals entering a new and unwelcome era of forced choices and compromises. There were no ready-made programmes or policies. Underscoring the makeshift nature of eighteenth-century thought is the intellectual journey of Vasif, which Menchinger is able to show in fascinating detail. We follow Vasif through the thick of political intrigue and manoeuvre. More than he (or any other Ottoman author) might have liked to admit, his ideas evolved with circumstances. In retrospect, we can pick out glaring inconsistencies or watch as his ideas suddenly shift with the twists and turns of court politics.

We never quite meet Vasif as an individual. But if we cannot have biography as we would like it, then perhaps we can, like Menchinger, make the most of intellectual biography. Given the nature of the sources at our disposal, Menchinger has surely set an instructive example to future researchers.

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NİKOLAY ANTOV:

The Ottoman 'Wild West': The Balkan Frontier in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries.

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Antov's study is an attempt to contextualize the overlapping processes of Turcoman colonization, ethno-religious change and urbanization in the north-eastern Balkans, more precisely the Dobrudja and Deliorman region, from the initial period of Ottoman conquest in the mid-fourteenth to the late sixteenth century. Given the complexity of the relevant source material (administrative, fiscal, legal, and narrative), and the debates around their interpretation, Antov has chosen a composite model of presentation so as to arrange the disparate materials into an articulate text organized in seven interwoven chapters. Comparative case studies enable the author to offer a detailed and circumstantiated analysis on both rural and urban spaces by highlighting the particularity of each case and avoiding any generalization, still a common reflex in Ottoman studies, not only about the formation and historical development of Muslim communities in the Balkans but, quite often, in the analysis of overall processes.

The author argues that the Ottoman settlements had some significant continuity with pre-existing patterns, but each differed considerably in its development, reflecting the heterogeneous nature of Ottoman society. Most of the new settlers from