

LEGITIMIZING THE OTTOMAN SULTANATE:
A FRAMEWORK FOR HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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Why Ruled by Them?

“Why and how,” asks Norbert Elias, introducing his study on the 18th-century French court, “does the right to exercise broad powers, to make decisions about the lives of millions of people, come to reside for years in the hands of one person, and why do those same people persist in their willingness to abide by the decisions made on their behalf?” Given that it is possible to get rid of monarchs by assassination and, in extreme cases, by a change of dynasty, he goes on to wonder why it never occurred to anyone that it might be possible to abandon the existing form of government, namely the monarchy, entirely.¹

The answers to Elias’s questions, which pertain to an era when the state’s absolutism was at its peak, can only be found by exposing the relationship between the ruling authority and its subjects. How the subjects came to accept this situation, and why they continued to accede to its existence, are, in essence, the basic questions to be addressed here with respect to the Ottoman state. One could argue that until the 19th century political consciousness had not yet gone through the necessary secularization process in many parts of the world. This is certainly true, but regarding the Ottoman population there is something else to ponder. The Ottoman state was ruled for

Most of the ideas I express here are to be found in the introduction to my doctoral dissertation (Bamberg, 1997) in considering Ottoman state ceremonies in the 19th century. I attempted there to place them in the larger context of questions of legitimacy. I would like to thank Christoph Schumann, Teyfur Erdoğan, and Maurus Reinkowski who read this article and made invaluable comments. I am indebted to Aaron Shakow who not only enriched my English, but also made many comments leading me to reevaluate some of my ideas.

¹ Norbert Elias, *Die höfische Gesellschaft: Untersuchungen zur Soziologie des Königtums und der höfischen Aristokratie* (Frankfurt, 1994⁷), 10–11.

more than 600 years by a single dynasty. Times of crisis were many, but toppling the dynasty and installing another on the Ottoman throne occupied the political agenda to a surprisingly small degree throughout this period. Sure enough, no change of dynasty ever occurred until the monarchical regime itself dissolved in 1923. How the Ottoman dynasty organized its relations with its subjects and thereby managed to stay in power for so long is thus a phenomenon of enduring interest for political theory.

One of the reasons for the Ottoman dynasty's longevity may be that it was "legitimate" enough not to be replaced by another. But such a statement requires us first to consider what might be meant by the portmanteau word "legitimate." While this term has become widespread in almost all branches of the social sciences and in everyday speech, its essential meaning is if anything more ambiguous than ever. While defining the term as I understand it and seeking answers for the above questions, I will try to suggest a framework within which to analyze the legitimacy of the Ottoman sultan and the Ottoman state. Accordingly, the strategies that Ottoman sultans and the ruling elite devised to keep the subjects content are the topics of this article.

Political legitimacy, I would argue, has a normative and a factual aspect. Yet I am also convinced that Ottoman political behavior, including tactics of legitimation, did not remain static over the centuries. Nonetheless, the schema I propose below is intended to address Ottoman legitimacy throughout its long life-span. Generally, the Ottoman state was not much different from other Islamic or non-Islamic pre-modern monarchies in its legitimation process. The reader should thus keep in mind that my method is meant as an approach to pre-modern states whose monarchs came to power by hereditary right. In such polities, the sovereign is often virtually identified with the regime. For that reason, legitimacy of the ruler and the state often significantly overlap.

The form of Ottoman political power to which I refer can be regarded as very roughly congruent with what Max Weber designated "traditional" authority. The terminology I employ here should be understood in reference to this typology. I believe it useful to use Weber's theories of legitimacy, whatever their shortcomings, to explain the subordination of subjects in a pre-modern monarchy like the Ottoman. Such ideal typologies cannot of course exist in their pure sense in the real world, but they help our understanding of the rela-

tions between the rulers and the ruled and the functioning of monarchical systems as a whole. Clearly, the theoretical approach suggested here will only be meaningful—whether in the breach or in the observance—as it comes to be articulated by future empirical studies.

What is Legitimation? Who is Legitimate?

“Legitimacy, as an ascribed attribute, and legitimation, the action of ascribing,”² are multifaceted concepts. Many definitions have been offered by political scientists and sociologists. Considering the aims of this introduction and the political system under examination, the most appropriate definition would be that political legitimacy is subjects’ *belief* in the rightfulness of the ruler or the state, more specifically in their authority to issue commands. Legitimacy, therefore, signifies the claim of a *right* to be in power by the political power and its factual acceptance by those over whom this authority is established. Subjects, however, should not obey these commands and support the regime only out of fear or self-interest, but also because they believe that they *ought* to obey.³ Legitimacy further implies the acceptance of the political power as it is—to the extent possible. The degree of subjects’ belief in and commitment obeying the authority’s directives is a more or less concrete indicator of the regime’s legitimacy. If subjects accept the ruler as s/he is by their own free will, without any sort of pressure by the ruler’s state apparatus, or not only out of self-interest, and if they have no desire to install another, we may say that such a ruler has attained a certain degree of legitimacy.

Legitimacy then is not something that the political authority possesses concretely but something that its subjects assume it to possess. Legitimacy is a belief. Some may believe that the authority is justified, some may not. The task of the authority, of course, is to construct and maintain devices that prop up its legitimacy, but the “article” itself is conferred by the subject population. Legitimacy, in a word, arises from a mutual relation. It is impossible for legitimacy to come into being on a unilateral basis. Where a subject utters that a ruler

² Rodney Barker, *Legitimizing Identities: The Self-Presentation of Rulers and Subjects* (Cambridge, 2001), 22.

³ Rodney Barker, *Political Legitimacy and the State* (Oxford, 1990), 11.

is justified, there we can indeed speak of a government possessed of legitimacy. Hence, the existence of political power depends, in dramatic fashion, on the stance of the ruled.

That a political authority is “legitimate” does not of course mean that it is especially competent. Nor does it mean that the factors that have led to acceptance by the populace are necessarily rational. Legitimacy grows out of the internal dynamics of a political system. The political authority, for example, may pursue destructive economic or military policies, which may in turn affect its longevity, independently of its being legitimate or not.

As Weber took care to point out, no political power can endure purely through brute force. It must proceed to routinize its authority. After seizing the factual power an authority, must make some claims about its rule and cause the populace to believe in them; to that end it engages in a variety of strategies designed to win popular favor. Such strategies may vary depending on the nature of the political authority, its relationship with the people, and many other factors. As we will see below, in general maintaining legitimacy has two aspects, normative and factual. But even an authority that succeeds in maintaining legitimacy cannot fully satisfy the many different strata of society. In other words, absolute legitimacy can never be achieved.⁴

Social groups that do not recognize the authority as legitimate may nevertheless not want to revolt. Their discontent may be suppressed for many reasons, such as self-interest, the successful functioning of the social institutions, or other means. However, the refusal of a certain social group to obey the authority at a certain time does not mean that it would act similarly under other circumstances. Expectations and interests of social groups vary from time to time. On the other hand, the devices that the authority utilizes may likewise change in effectiveness over time.

If a political authority wants to preserve its legitimacy (that is, its popular acceptance) it has to develop a self-presentation which accommodates the interests and demands of its subjects. Responding to such demands, the authority may adopt strategies that allow it to shape and reshape their expectations. Eventually, the subjects’ demands become identical or near-identical to what the political authority wants to offer, which thereby become acknowledged services. Again,

⁴ Karl Otto Hondrich, *Theorie der Herrschaft* (Frankfurt, 1973), 79.

if the authority is able to convince the subjects that the restrictions and regulations it implements are for some reason “necessary,” and that they conform with them of their own “free” will, it may achieve obedience with fewer complications.⁵

The construction of a legitimate authority has in general two aspects: founding a normative schema and backing it up with factual measures. A normative schema encompasses the “legal” grounds for legitimacy; factual measures constitute the pillars and walls of legitimacy-building. I am trying to construct a theoretical approach to analyze the Ottoman sultan’s legitimacy through these two intertwined legitimizing strategies. However, there is also the simple routine compliance by the populace with the authority’s commands, conceptualized by Rodney Barker as “habitual legitimacy”:

How far can one speak of legitimacy when subjection seems to be so settled and normal that its justification hardly seems to arise? . . . Legitimate government can be based largely on habit, in part because a relationship characterized by authority is not open to constant questioning or examination.⁶

Barker sees habitual legitimacy as the most important and most characteristic form of political legitimacy. This seems to me correct with respect to rather long periods of concord, when people tend not to question harmonious rule. But in times of turmoil, or, as in our case, when a pre-modern empire is steadily engaged in warfare, the political authority must constantly justify or support its rule by visible successes.

While Barker does not discuss it explicitly, there is also a special sense of “habitual acceptance” with particular relevance for long ruling dynasties, that is, genealogical habit. Ottoman subjects were accustomed to one dynasty and did not imagine any sudden change. I see such an incumbency of one ruling dynasty over a long period of time as *de facto* support for its claim to normative legitimacy, as I explain below. Let us now return to the two strategies utilized by a traditional monarchic rule which together constitute its main structure of legitimacy.

⁵ Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie*, ed. Johannes Winckelmann (Tübingen, 1990⁵), 16.

⁶ Barker, *Political Legitimacy*, 29–30.

Normative Legitimacy

After coming to power, a new sovereign entity must demonstrate its right to rule and lay the foundations of its authority on “legal” grounds. Its purpose is to protect itself from being short-lived. The right of an authority to rule—that is to say, its source of legitimacy—cannot be inferior to itself.⁷ It can, however, have multiple sources superior to it. In a monarchical regime such as the Ottoman, the right to rule is traditionally justified as a divine legacy and/or by the assertion that it passed to the present ruler by heredity. These two justifications are both founded ultimately on nothing more or less than common belief. Even if hereditary right can seemingly be proved, the idea of one lineage’s superiority to others is in the end based on conventional acceptance. People believe in the rightfulness of a higher authority from which the right to rule may be drawn. That is indeed also why the lineage in reality need not be especially long or traceable to a “sacred” person. It is only necessary to induce the populace with systematic propaganda to believe that it is so.

Because of their abstract nature, discussions on normative legitimacy concern the common people only to a limited degree. Those who believe in the rightfulness of the ruler usually do not agonize over his/her legitimacy. They are more concerned, or rather affected, by the effectiveness of the factual measures. The ruler’s normative legitimacy is more often discussed among the political elite, policy makers, state theorists, political philosophers, the ‘ulema, and opponents of the regime. Such discourse gains importance especially in times of crisis or amid struggles over succession. It is never certain when the validity of a ruler’s normative legitimacy will be at issue. A claim to normative legitimacy may be declared after the capture of de facto power. Or if more than one party is striving for power, the faction believed to possess or soon to establish a (stronger) normative legitimacy may already have favored status.

Because normative legitimacy consists of elements on which the ruler and the state rest fundamentally, it determines the color of political rhetoric and symbolism. It shapes the ceremonies, the state imagery, the architecture, the sermons. Thus, the common people,

⁷ Hamid Dabashi, *Authority in Islam: From the Rise of Muhammad to the Establishment of the Umayyads* (New Brunswick – London, 1989), 136.

too, become aware of the main features of the claim to normative legitimacy. In the Ottoman state the validity (or to a lesser degree invalidity) of a ruler's normative legitimacy was conveyed to the common people mostly by preachers in the mosques; by contrast, challenges to the ruler's factual legitimacy spread mostly in the coffee-houses or the like.⁸ But even claims to normative legitimacy may not be static. As we will see below in relation to the Ottoman sultan's claims to the caliphate, the same dynasty may exploit various arguments in the effort to maintain its normative legitimacy depending on the period or the political conjuncture.

Hereditary and Divine Right to Rule

One type of claim to secure normative legitimacy is that the right to rule has passed to the current ruler from his or her forebears. A dynasty's hereditary authority may have two sources: antiquity and nobility. People are inclined to believe in the rightfulness of the archaic. If a dynasty has been ruling for a "long" time, or, to put it more carefully, however long a dynasty is believed to have ruled or existed, in that measure is the status of its latter-day representatives enhanced. A charisma forms around a long-ruling dynasty. Since antiquity implies that the right to rule has been in the hands of a single dynasty continuously, the dynasty's authority increases in proportion to the measure of its supposed timeline.

In the quest for legitimacy, however, nobility is far more important to a dynastic authority. The arguments, to be sure, are complementary. If a dynasty can be traced to a legendary or a spiritual personage, or better yet to a prophet, it acquires additional support for its antiquity. Dynasties often vary their emphasis on these two claims, depending on which one seems to have more resonance in a given time or place. Antiquity and nobility are almost always presented as

⁸ A passage by Na'ima, an 18th-century chronicler, offers a clue to the role of coffee houses in dissemination of dissident ideas: "In the month of Rebiülevvel (1633) . . . evil acts and gossip became abundant in the coffee houses. In order that the probability of rebellion be driven away, a ferman was promulgated to the effect that all the coffee-houses in Istanbul be closed down and not opened again. Many of them were demolished. This decree was implemented all over the Ottoman lands." Na'ima, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 3 (Istanbul, 1280/1863³), 160.

intertwined. A lineage dating back to olden, even “pre-historic” times is pegged to a noble personality of that vintage. If, however, the lineage is traced to a person whose nobility is sufficiently magnificent, it need not hark back so far. The Turkish commander Timur Leng (1336–1405), for example, was content to claim descent from Jenghiz Khan (d. 1227), who had lived only some century and a half previously. Timur sought to revive the Mongol empire and legitimize his emperorship on the basis of his claimed descent from the legendary Mongol emperor.

Another type of claim made by traditional authority in the effort to maintain its normative legitimacy is that it rules by the divine right of kings. On this argument some sort of sanctity at least should be associated with the crown. Seeking to secure normative legitimacy by way of divine and hereditary rights simultaneously is a very common phenomenon of traditional rulership, an example of which we will also see in the Ottoman case below. Once the claim that the ruler reigns by divine right gains acceptance, it constitutes a highly effective control mechanism over the people. Discontent with the ruler comes virtually to mean non-compliance with God’s will. Individual discontent confronts an inner psychological barrier, and a ruler who is believed to be chosen by God is well on his way to robust normative legitimacy.⁹

World history is replete with rulers’ claims to normative legitimacy by hereditary and divine right. After the Byzantine Empire collapsed in 1453, the Russian Tsar Ivan III (1462–1505) married Princess Zoë Palaeologus, niece of the last Byzantine ruler Constantine (1472), hoping to claim kinship ties with his once great empire. The princess had been brought up in Rome, and was therefore a Catholic, and the marriage was arranged by the pope with the intention of exerting Catholic influence on the Russian court. After marrying the tsar, however, the princess chose to revert to the beliefs of her ancestors, and the tsar acknowledged her hereditary authority by promoting himself not only successor to the caesars but also protector of the Orthodox faith. The theocratic Byzantine legal corpus, its court ceremonies, and its state symbolism, such as the double-headed eagle, were directly imported to the Russian state. As a result, the tsars established a strong normative legitimacy for their dynasty based on hereditary right by way of marriage. Thereafter Russia claimed to

⁹ Bertrand Russell, *Power: A New Social Analysis* (London, 1983¹³), 27.

be the direct continuation of the Byzantine empire. The fact that both empires' official religion was Orthodoxy was certainly a bracing factor in this purported continuity.

Islamic states and rulers have traditionally attempted to legitimize themselves by constructing genealogies stretching back to the early Islamic period (632–661). Best of all, of course, was to trace their lineage to the Prophet Muhammad. Not only persons of political authority, but anyone who claimed to be an authority figure—such as the masters of sufi orders—sought legitimation through kinship with the Prophet. We are going to encounter the claims to the caliphate as we investigate the Ottomans, so we might glance at this institution's earlier history. The most powerful and effective claim to normative legitimacy in the Islamic political discourse has belonged to the office of the caliphate. A sitting caliph assumed not only a hereditary right, but also indirectly a divine right to rule.

The caliph, literally “successor of the Prophet” or “deputy of God,” was described traditionally by Islamic political theoreticians as a species of religious authority in contrast to the sultan, who was characterized as a mere conquering power. Yet many modern scholars of Islam also question the degree to which the caliphs enjoyed religious authority. In the context of this article such debates are a little beside the point. More pertinently, this title had a true legitimizing effect for the ruler who bore it and for other Islamic rulers who were recognized and thus authorized by him.

When the Prophet died, possible successors, not being competently representative of his comprehensive authority, experienced some serious problems of legitimacy. Later caliphs defined themselves less and less as *khalifat rasul Allah*, meaning “successor to God's Prophet,” and more and more as *khalifat Allah*, or “deputy of God.” Because of an continual diminution of authority amid mounting political turmoil they opted to stress the divine source of their sovereignty. Ultimately this strategy proved counterproductive, and around the 11th century the caliphate saw its prestige decline markedly. Sultans, namely less powerful rulers who had previously legitimized themselves through recognition by the caliph, strove to extract their legitimacy no longer from him but directly from the real source of authority, calling themselves *zill Allah*, or “the shadow of God.”¹⁰ While charismatic leadership became gradually routinized in Sunni Islam, the authority of

¹⁰ A.K.S. Lambton, “Quis Custodiet Custodes: Some Reflections of the Persian

the Prophet was preserved in Shi'ite Islam, institutionalized in the person of the Imams.

The Abbasid dynasty that ruled in Baghdad from 750 to 1258 took its name from al-'Abbas, a paternal uncle and early supporter of the Prophet. Close kinship to Muhammad was of great service to the Abbasids in marshalling support. After the collapse of the dynasty, de facto leadership of the Muslim world shifted to the Mamluks in Egypt. These did not claim descent from the Prophet; this was also technically impossible as by definition the Mamluks were originally non-Muslims taken as slaves. Considering the abundance of conspiracies and intrigues in the process of succession and the short duration of many individuals' rule, the Mamluks clung to power for a surprisingly long time. In general, official ideology in the early Mamluk period put most of its emphasis on the Mamluks' continuity of the Ayyubid sultanate, presenting the sultan as its legitimate successor.¹¹ As a further prop to the continuity of the regime, the practice emerged of appointing a member of the Abbasid family resident in Cairo and declaring him "caliph." In turn, the caliphs invested the sultan with authority over the Islamic dominion. Hence the presence of the Abbasid caliphs in Egypt lent a kind of normative legitimacy to the ruling Mamluk power.

A belief in sacredness seems to have existed in some individual Mamluk rulers.¹² Since no single dynasty could assert itself formally as the royal authority under the regime's peculiar system of self-perpetuation, the Mamluks, after a long period of stable rule, appear to have achieved a sort of normative legitimacy that attached itself to the regime as a whole, rather than individual rulers or a dynasty. The success of early Mamluk rule was buttressed by their military accomplishments, such as the defeat of the Mongols and the Crusaders.

Other Muslim dynasties that did not lay claim to the caliphate maintained their normative legitimacy through a distinctive genealogy as well. Idris (d. 793), for example, founder of the Idrisite dynasty that came to power in Morocco in 789, sustained his rule in part

Theory of Government," *Theory and Practice in Medieval Persian Government* (London, 1980), 127. Cf. Patricia Crone, Martin Hinds, *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (Cambridge, 1986).

¹¹ P.M. Holt, "The Position and Power of the Mamluk Sultan," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 38/2 (1975), 238, 244.

¹² *Ibid.*, 245.

by frequent references to his descent from ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet’s son-in-law and the fourth “rightly guided” caliph (fig. 1). The Banu Sa‘d dynasty, which ruled in Morocco from 1544 to 1640, put so much emphasis on kinship with Hasan, one of the Prophet’s grandsons, that they came to be known as “*al-shurafa al-Hasaniyya*.”

As noted above, authenticity was not a particular feature of dynastic genealogies. Many dynasties managed to convince their subjects of spurious genealogies through systematic propaganda. Shi‘ite rulers traditionally asserted that they were representatives of the last hidden Imam, who was considered the only legitimate ruler. Shah Isma‘il (d. 1524), for example, founder of the Safavid Persian state with the Ja‘fari interpretation of Islam as its official religion, claimed descent from the seventh Imam, Musa al-Kazim, hence a genealogy going back to ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib. He thereby secured a firm normative legitimacy for his dynasty. In fact, the belief that Şeyh Safiyuddin (d. 1334), Shah Isma‘il’s ancestor and founder of the Safavid sufi order, was a descendant of the Prophet (*sayyid*) came to be accepted only after a massive propaganda campaign.¹³

Ottomans’ Right to Rule

Except for a few marginal attempts, no serious claim of Muhammadian descent was ever made for the Ottomans. In his mid-15th century epic-history *Düsturname*, the historiographer Enveri did trace Ottoman genealogy to one of the Prophet’s companions, but this assertion did not survive in later works, nor was it especially advantageous politically to the Ottoman dynasty.¹⁴ More useful was the suggestion that the Qayı clan, from which the Ottomans claimed descent, derived ultimately from Oguz Khan, a legendary figure who supposedly conquered the world and gave rise to the 24 Turkish tribes. The pre-eminent glory of the Qayı became a widespread topos among Ottoman history writers after the first quarter of the 15th century.¹⁵ This version was to become the official genealogy later on.

¹³ H.R. Roemer, “The Safavid Period,” *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. P. Jackson and Laurance Lockhart, vol. 6 (Cambridge, 1986), 198–199; cf. [Ahmad] Kasraviye Tabrizi, “Najad u tabar-e Safaviyya: Safaviyya sayyed nabuda-and,” *Ayanda* 2 (1926–28), 17: 358–65; 19: 489–97; 23: 801–12.

¹⁴ Colin Imber, “The Ottoman Dynastic Myth,” *Turcica* 19 (1987), 18.

¹⁵ Paul Wittek, “Der Stammbaum der Osmanen,” *Der Islam* 14 (1924), 94–100;

This was only the more recent part of the genealogy, however. The Ottoman family tree was drawn up as far back as Noah's son Japheth. Claims of descent from Noah were certainly not unique to the Ottomans. They were a tradition common to many Turkish and Mongol dynasties.¹⁶ Although not in any way unique, this earlier portion of the genealogy held something else of significance with regard to the Ottomans. It presented them as descended from a prophet of the Islamic tradition, thus investing them with a sort of sacred function. This point, however, seems not to have been particularly emphasized later on. In another version, albeit less widespread, 'Osman Gazi's genealogy was taken back even to Adam, another prophet in the Islamic tradition.¹⁷ True, in the Islamic belief system every human being's genealogy ultimately reaches back to Adam, but not everyone can specify it. A family tree that is abundantly endowed with important personalities gains distinctive importance when judged as a claim to political authority. These claims were repeated in popular works, whose simple and colloquial idiom betrays them as propaganda tracts intended for dissemination among soldiers and commoners.

The conquest of Constantinople played a key role in the creation of a dynastic royal consciousness. It also gradually superseded nomadic legitimizing principles.¹⁸ One unique claim about Mehmed II's genealogy merits mention: Spandugnino, a member of a noble Byzantine refugee family that settled in Venice after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, wrote in his *De la origine deli Imperatori Ottomani* (1509) that Mehmed II believed he was descended from Komnenian lineage. The Komnenian dynasty was traditionally considered nobler than the last Byzantine ruling family, the Palaeologoi, which was overthrown by Mehmed.¹⁹ If Spandugnino's account is indeed accu-

İsmail H. Danişmend, "Osman Gazi'nin nesep ve hüviyeti," *Türklük* 3 (June 1939), 207–223; Hüseyin Namık Orkon, "Osmanlıların aslına dair," *Türklük* 5 (August 1939), 345–357; cf. Imber, "Dynastic Myth," 16 f. and Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley – et al., 1995), 37, 122.

¹⁶ John E. Woods, *The Aqqyunlu: Clan, Confederation, Empire* (Salt Lake City, 1999), 173 f.

¹⁷ Cf. Grenville Temple who quotes the genealogy directly from an Ottoman manuscript: *Travels in Greece and Turkey*, vol. 2 (London, 1836), 285 f.

¹⁸ Barbara Flemming, "Political Genealogies in the Sixteenth Century," *The Journal of Ottoman Studies* 7–8 (1988), 126.

¹⁹ Theodore Spandounes, *On the Origin of the Ottoman Emperors*, trans. and ed. Donald M. Nicol (Cambridge – New York, 1997), 11. I am grateful to Cemal

rate, can it be taken as an early attempt to seek recognition from new Greek subjects, traumatized after the fall of the Byzantine Empire? At the very least it is interesting to observe how Mehmed, now in possession of the Roman imperial throne, felt free to improvise with non-traditional lineages. Without confirmation from other sources, however, this train of thought must be consigned to the realm of rank speculation.

Some 60 years after the conquest of Constantinople Selim I, the ninth Ottoman sultan, sent a letter to the Mamluk sultan Tuman Bay, just prior to seizing Cairo in 1517. Selim's consciousness of his descent from a "long-ruling" dynasty opens a unique window onto the Ottoman calculus of normative legitimization at this relatively early date. "It has been revealed to me," Selim wrote, "that I shall become the possessor of the East and West, like Alexander the Great . . . You are a Mamluk, who is bought and sold, you are not fit to govern. I am a king (*malik ibn malik*), descended through *twenty generations* of kings."²⁰

As mentioned above, the Ottoman dynasty did not claim kinship with the Prophet Muhammad. Although assertions of their "ancestral" tribe's magnificence were accepted in some quarters, the Ottomans seem to have found it far more difficult to convince people of their divine right to rule. Until the 16th century this was not especially troublesome. The divine right to rule, justified within an Islamic semiotic framework, became more and more important with the conquest of the Arab principalities. Until then a sizeable fraction of their subject population had been non-Muslim.

The fall of the Mamluks, however, thrust them into an entirely different symbolic universe, and their arguments for normative legitimacy bear witness to the pressure of new political exigencies. Ottoman sultans seem not to have used the title "caliph" in the form of a political claim before the mid-16th century, and even then it was only as a loose, unfounded, and rather infrequent assertion. Selim

Kafadar for his help in locating this source. Also many thanks to Colin Imber for sharing his ideas on the issue.

²⁰ *An Account of the Ottoman Conquest of Egypt in the Year A.H. 922/A.D. 1516, Translated from the Third Volume of the Arabic Chronicle of Muhammed ibn Ahmed Ibn Iyas, an Eyewitness of the Scenes He Describes*. Translated by W.H. Salmon (London, 1981 [1921]), 91. Cf. Ibn Iyas, *Badayī' al-zuhur fi waqayī' al-duhur*, ed. Muhammad Mustafa, vol. 5 (Cairo, 1961), 125.

conquered Syria in 1516, and Egypt, where the caliph had his seat, in 1517. According to the legend—most probably fabricated later, al-Mutawakkil III, the last Abbasid caliph, personally transferred the caliphate to Selim after the conquest of Egypt. Although al-Mutawakkil presented himself to the Ottoman sultan in Aleppo after the battle of Mercidabik and was received by Selim amicably,²¹ there is no indication in contemporary chronicles that a transfer of the caliphate in fact occurred there. Nor do we have any evidence that such a ceremony took place subsequently in Istanbul, where the caliph took up residence in Ottoman custody.

From the evidence, at this historical moment neither Selim nor his political entourage conceived of assuming the caliphate. The greatest imaginable political advantage they could extract, much like the Mamluk sultans, was to obtain a smooth means of legitimacy through the officiating caliph. In another letter to the Mamluk sultan in Cairo sent shortly before the *coup de grâce*, Selim wrote that he himself “was now authorized by the caliph and the three chief qadis.”²² At first al-Mutawakkil apparently enjoyed even greater respect from Selim than he had under the Mamluks. Selim does not mention a transfer of the caliphate in his detailed letter to his son Prince Süleyman informing him of the conquest of Syria and Egypt.²³ Nor is the title of caliph ever mentioned in his correspondence with other rulers or with Ottoman judges.²⁴ The prophetic insignia that have been put forward as evidence of the transfer of the caliphate were actually not presented to Selim by the caliph but by the Sharif of Mecca. The first thought of the conqueror of Cairo was probably to convey the caliph to Istanbul, which he did, and to replicate the Mamluk practice whereby the sultan received authorization from the caliph.

But the Ottoman sultans’ claim to the caliphate suffered a more fundamental weakness. According to the preponderance of Sunni jurisprudence, to which the Ottomans were subject, their Turkic ancestry excluded them from the start. A so-called hadith, or saying of

²¹ *An Account of the Ottoman Conquest of Egypt*, 47.

²² Gustav Weil, *Geschichte der Chalifen 5: Geschichte des Abbasidenchalifats in Egypten* (Stuttgart, 1862), 421 quotes Ibn Iyas.

²³ Feridun Bey, *Münşe’at-ı selatin*, vol. 1 (Istanbul, 1275/1859), 427 f. Cf. Ahmad Asrar, “The Myth About the Transfer of the Caliphate to the Ottomans,” *Journal of the Regional Cultural Institute* 5/2–3 (1972), 111–120.

²⁴ Feridun Bey, *ibid.*, 429 f.

the Prophet, cited very frequently in legal works, quoted Muhammad as having said that “the imams are of the Quraysh tribe” (*al-a’imma min Quraysh*), that is, descended from the same line as the Prophet himself (cf. fig. 1). The Ottomans’ very emphasis on the purity of their Turkic lineage in a previous era proved something of an embarrassment as ambitions grew.

Despite their new found military supremacy, ethnicity was a major stumbling block to Ottoman attempts at self-legitimization in the newly conquered Arab lands. The caliphate was truly an Arab institution, and the qualification of the caliph’s Qurayshi descent was the continuation of an old Arab tradition. When it had taken power in 750, the Abbasid dynasty too had justified its rule primarily through kinship with the Prophet Muhammad. Until the fall of Baghdad at the hands of the Mongols in 1258 every caliph had been of Qurayshi descent. Many other sayings of the Prophet eulogized the Arabs, besides the one above; some seem to have been fabricated during the Umayyad era.²⁵

Yet within a few decades of their victory over the Mamluks the Ottomans became inclined to assert their claim to the caliphate. Selim died in 1520 and was succeeded by his son Süleyman. Caliph al-Mutawakkil was kept captive in Istanbul until 1522, at which point he returned to Egypt, where he died in 1538. In 1544 the Ottoman grand vezir Lutfi Paşa (d. 1563), Selim’s son-in-law and Süleyman’s uncle, penned a treatise entitled *Khalas al-umma fi ma’rifat al-a’imma* [The Salvation of the Islamic Community through the Knowledge of the Imams] in which he discussed the validity of precisely the aforementioned prophetic tradition. The work, composed in Arabic, set forth a remarkable interpretation of the hadith.²⁶ Lutfi Paşa argued that it was not acceptable to deduce a regulation from the hadith that persons of non-Qurayshi descent could never become caliphs. Even if valid, he reasoned, it would have been legally binding only in the earliest times of Islam, during the period of the four “rightly guided” caliphs (632–661). Lutfi’s fundamental point was that any ruler who captured de facto power might assert a claim to the office of the caliph:

²⁵ D. Sourdel, “Khalifa,” *EF*, vol. 4 (1978), 938.

²⁶ A Persian translation of the treatise completed in August 1554 exists at Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi, Ayasofya no. 2876.

If the conditions mentioned above are combined in one person—to wit, conquest, power of compulsion, maintenance of the Faith with justice, command of the good and prohibition of evil, and the general leadership—then he is a sultan who has a just claim to the names of Imam and Khalifa and Wali and Amir, without contradiction.²⁷

Lutfi Paşa was not the first to make this argument. The famous jurist Al-Mawardi (d. 1058), for example, who exerted great influence on Sunni political thought, saw *de facto* power as legitimate. In fact, if we read between the lines the following comment of Lutfi Paşa can be regarded as a loose indication that the caliphate was not in fact officially transferred from the Abbasids to the Ottomans. While rejecting the argument that the caliph must be of Qurayshi or Hashimi descent, Lutfi Paşa also seems to be responding to possible allegations that the caliphate was never officially handed over by the Abbasids to the Ottomans:

Thus, not one of the authors of the books mentioned has ruled or asserted in their books that the sultan should be of Quraysh or Hashimi [descent], or commissioned by the Abbasid [*ma'dhunan min al-'Abbasi*] or by any other person.²⁸

The question of official transfer aside, a discussion seems to have taken place a few decades after the capture of Egypt as to whether or not the Ottoman sultan could be envisaged as caliph. Lutfi Paşa's treatise should be seen in this context. While the treatise may not have been especially influential, it does indicate that the "Ottoman caliphate" was a live issue and the subject of discussion by scholars of the time.²⁹ However, possibly also in consequence of their fairly dim prospects regarding the caliphate at this juncture, Ottoman sultans discontinued ardently to assert their claims about an Ottoman caliphate after the end of the 16th century. Although the Ottoman sultans continued to refer to themselves as "caliph" in their own correspondence or elsewhere, this was not meant as a political claim.³⁰

²⁷ Hamilton Gibb, "Lutfi Paşa on the Ottoman Caliphate," *Oriens* 15 (1962), 290.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ I am grateful to Hüseyin Yılmaz, Harvard University, for discussing with me issues relating to Lutfi Paşa's views. His dissertation *The Sultan and the Sultanate: The Theory of Rulership in the Age of Süleyman the Lawgiver* will be submitted in 2005.

³⁰ For example, see Mehmed Nergisi, *el-Vasfî'l-kamil fi ahvali'l-veziri'l-'adil* (written 1628), Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Hs. or. oct. 813, f. 10a, *passim*.

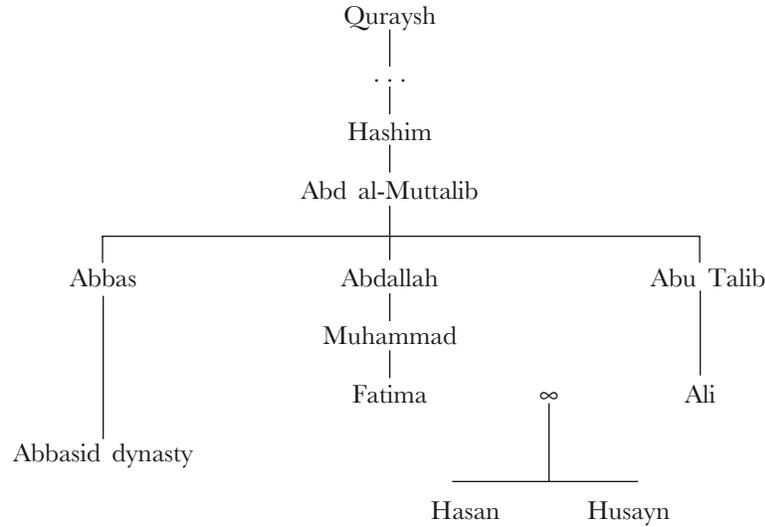


Figure 1. Qurayshi family tree.

After all, present-day scholars looking back may be in danger of projecting onto the 16th century their own sense of the caliphate as an institution. It was certainly one of the most important political symbols of the 19th century, but during the Mamluk period, and even before, its prestige had suffered a significant decline. The caliph had become rather a weak figure next to the political authority, namely the Mamluk sultan, and accordingly less efficient in maintaining legitimacy. In 1310, very early in Mamluk rule, when a usurper sultan was confronted with revolt he tried to bolster his authority with a new certificate from the caliph, only to be sneered at: “Stupid fellow! For God’s sake; who pays any heed to the caliph now?”³¹ The Ottomans may well have been wise to the discredited support of legitimacy by the caliphate at this time, and did not consider it a sufficiently prestigious addition to their titulature until they sought to revitalize it with fresh content in the 1550s. They paid far more attention to another religious and yet stronger support for legitimacy, namely retaining—or in their own terminology, “serving”—the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

³¹ Ibn Taghribirdi, *al-Nijum al-zahira*, vol. 8 (Cairo, n.d.), 262; quoted in Holt, “The Mamluk Sultan,” 248.

Khadimü'l-Harameyn, a title the Ottomans were eager to add to their titulature to fill the lacuna as a religious support for their normative legitimacy, perhaps impressed the Muslim population more than claims to the caliphate. “Servant of the two sacred cities” was a title the Abbasids and the Mamluks had used already. Even after he conquered Constantinople (1453), Mehmed II, in a letter to the Mamluk sultan, had to recognize his position as the protector of the holy cities.³² Selim I was the first Ottoman sultan to appropriate it (1517). Mustafa ‘Âli wrote some 60 years after this title was adopted by Selim:

This [Selim’s] zeal was the cause of that he raised the honor of the Empire higher than under his great ancestors, and adding the noble title of “Servant of the two sacred cities” to his illustrious Friday sermon *he surpassed all the other sultans in rank*.³³

According to the mid-17th century narrative of Evliya Çelebi, parts of which should be read with a large grain of salt, Selim, hearing this appellation intoned before his name at the Friday prayer in Cairo, was moved to tears.³⁴ Factual or not, Evliya’s account displays the importance still attaching to this title in the 17th century. According to my classification, holding the privilege of “serving” the two holy cities, for example, engaging in construction projects and securing the pilgrimage routes, was factual support of legitimacy, rather than the creation of a normative basis for it. The Ottomans had to fortify their rather weak connection with matters of sanctity, since the Muslim sector of their subject population increased considerably with the addition of the newly conquered lands.

As has been argued elsewhere, a revision may be necessary of the general perception in scholarship that the treaty of Küçük Kaynarca in 1774 was a turning point in the “Ottoman caliphate,” impelling the dynasty to seek influence among Muslims living outside Ottoman lands. The Ottoman state had used the title “caliph of (all) the Muslims” (*imamü'l-mü'minin ve halifetü'l-muwahhidin* is the wording in the

³² Feridun Bey, *ibid.*, 236. Quoted in Halil İnalcık, “Periods in Ottoman History,” *Essays in Ottoman History* (Istanbul, 1998), 19.

³³ Andreas Tietze, *Mustafa ‘Âli’s Counsel for Sultans of 1581*, vol. 1 (Vienna, 1979), 51, 142; my emphasis.

³⁴ Evliya Çelebi, *Seyahatname*, vol. 10, 116, 124–125. For other usages, cf. Hulûsi Yavuz, “Hâdimü'l-Harameyn,” *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm ansiklopedisi*, vol. 15 (1997), 26–27.

Küçük Kaynarca treaty) in earlier treaties as well.³⁵ What is certain is that a claim to caliphate was one of the more important political symbols in the 19th-century international arena, a means of rallying support among Muslim peoples subject to European colonial administration.

At a time when the prestige of the Ottoman dynasty was plummeting, the normative legitimacy of the dynasty had to be maintained not primarily on the basis of its nobility but on the strength of the caliphate, to which Ottomans had laid claim persistently since the late 18th century. In fact, the caliphate imparted enormous prestige to the Ottoman dynasty in Muslim eyes all over the world during this period. Still, despite the widespread belief in the validity of an Ottoman caliphate throughout the 19th century, the dispute about its legal foundations continued, largely along the same lines as in the 16th century.

Now that the Ottoman dynasty had ruled long and successfully enough to rest on its laurels, its continuity became ever more important. Claims about its antiquity, that is, its pristine continuity since what Weber called the “eternal yesterday,”³⁶ were vital. Any sultan ascending to power had a reservoir of legitimacy simply because of his link to his predecessors and their achievements. Formulas such as “sultan, son of the sultan” (*sultan ibnü’s-sultan*) in official correspondence, and similar references on coins and sultanic monograms, were all indicators of this continuity.

Conflict was not uncommon between different lines of the family, but no sultan went so far as to seek political advantage by renouncing one of his own predecessors. At most a sultan could afford to criticize his forerunner over practices that were obviously to the disadvantage of the subjects—again, with a view to winning quick sympathy and acceptance. In a way, the sultans’ personas as members of the dynasty were treated separately from their individual reputations. That way, the claim to dynastic legitimacy remained firm, whereas political acts would (occasionally) be renounced. Fermans abolishing over-taxation, or promising to rectify the abuses of previous regimes, were implicit rejections of the reigning sultan’s ancestor—but not his ancestry.³⁷

³⁵ Halil İnalcık is quoted in Azmi Özcan, “Hilafet,” *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm ansiklopedisi*, vol. XVII (1998), 546–547.

³⁶ Max Weber, *Politik als Beruf* (Berlin, 1991⁹), 9.

³⁷ See, for example, Mahmud I’s 1730 ferman, issued shortly after the Patrona

For the subjects, a sense of the dynasty's continuity into the future likewise provided a kind of psychological security guaranteeing their habitualities. Monarchy generally results in the people's intense attachment to a person and a dynasty. They perceive the political regime as stable, being fairly certain about who is to come to power. Accordingly, stability meant that the Ottoman subjects would live undisturbed, their customs untouched. Many state ceremonies, some open to public, were symbolic indicators of dynastic continuity. The birth of princes was announced by cannon fire, fireworks, and festivities that lasted for days across the farthest reaches of the Ottoman dominion.³⁸ The auspicious birth of Prince Mehmed, as one document puts it, was to be "spread all around the well-protected domains of the empire so that all the servants of God (i.e., the subjects) may partake [of this joy]."³⁹ Circumcision festivities of princes too were occasionally celebrated with ceremonies lasting several weeks. The security provided by the guarantee of continuity meant a greater likelihood of dynastic legitimacy.

Some Comments on the Ottomans' Normative Legitimacy

An investigation of the normative legitimacy of the Ottoman dynasty yields some rather interesting questions. In retrospect, it would appear that difficulties arising from the poor royal lineage of the Ottoman dynasty might have been addressed through "marriages of legitimation." Why, for instance, did the Ottomans not try to arrange a simple political marriage by "importing" Islamic dynastic royalty, which was the prerequisite for the office of the caliph? The tsars, as we have seen, were certainly not averse to such strategies. Marriage of a sultan to a woman of the Prophet's lineage would have allowed the Ottomans to sanctify their family tree, and within two generations to make a "legitimate" claim of direct descent from the Prophet's line. Such a practice would certainly have been somewhat unusual

Khalil uprising, condemning and abolishing the taxes introduced during the reign of his uncle Ahmed III; M. Münir Aktepe, *Patrona isyanı (1730)* (Istanbul, 1958), 16–17.

³⁸ E.g. in Algeria, Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (hereafter BOA), Cevdet-Saray 11 (B 1239/March 1824).

³⁹ BOA, Cevdet-Saray 10 (1812). Festivities were planned for seven days.

in the pantheon of Muslim dynasties—but earlier caliphal dynasties simply did not need genealogical enhancement: they were *already* in the Prophet’s line. The Ottomans, it seems, concluded political marriages quite rarely, and then in the infancy of the Ottoman state.⁴⁰ As their power grew the sultans abandoned inter-dynastic unions.

This enigma to one side, one of the important problems pertaining to normative legitimacy was how inclusive it could be in states with multi-religion populations. To what degree might we expect the non-Muslim subjects, who at times constituted as much as half the Ottoman population, to have recognized such a claim of rule by divine right? Should we understand that the non-Muslim subjects found it possible to acknowledge the sultan’s legitimacy regardless of its foundation on Islamic religious sanctity? Were not the dominant legitimizing supports of the Ottoman sultan irrelevant, if not actually disturbing, for non-Muslim and possibly other subjects?

If a large majority of the people can practice their religion freely, and do not feel that they are living under intolerable oppression, the regime’s factual legitimacy may be sufficient for them to be content. The Ottomans were fairly tolerant of religious minorities; true, non-Muslim subjects had to pay extra taxes and occasionally endure second-class status. But the Ottomans apparently did not follow a policy of forcible change of religion or identity. This was surely an important factor in the regime’s acceptance by its non-Muslim subjects.

I would nevertheless describe such a state of contentment as “tolerated legitimacy,” which lacks the foundations of normative legitimacy. Religious minorities should be regarded as groups over whom a certain authority was established through factual measures, or at times through pure fear or self-interest, but normative legitimacy was never maintained in any thoroughgoing sense. These groups understood that their security and wellbeing depended on obeying the established authority, so they decided to acquiesce.

An Ottoman Orthodox priest would never have said *sincerely*, “The sultan is *the* ruler sent to us by God. Therefore we must obey his rules!” thus conferring true normative legitimacy on the sultan. However, out of genuine belief in Providence he might have said, “God wanted us to be ruled by the sultan. Therefore we must obey

⁴⁰ A.D. Alderson, *The Structure of the Ottoman Dynasty* (Oxford, 1956), 85 f.

his rules!” These two formulas involve a subtle, yet important difference: the second suggests obedience born mainly of fatalism, thus granting merely “tolerated legitimacy” to the state apparatus.

This legitimization strategy is more common at times and in societies where religion plays a central role in people’s world outlook, and the idea of popular participation in the governing process is absent. Those who do not share the official religion of the regime may choose to coexist with it, but in a “state of patience.” Acceptance of this type can easily become untenable if the state’s supports for its factual legitimacy ever break down, or even loosen. Whenever the “appropriate” occasion presents itself, these subjects, who have no choice but to tolerate the rule, might seek ways to be rid of it.

Regarding the Ottoman sultans, another question concerns the potentially destabilizing effect of their failure to make the pilgrimage to Mecca.⁴¹ It is doubly interesting: for one thing, the sultans, not particularly endowed with sacred qualities, did not reap the potential political benefit of performing the pilgrimage; not even in the 19th century, when the caliphate was a vital issue and the sultan by now did travel as far as Egypt. For another, even in the dynasty’s most difficult days this circumstance was never mooted as an argument against eschewing the pilgrimage.

Factual Legitimacy

Another sort of tactic that the political authority uses to preserve its stability and continuity is more pragmatic: it seeks to respond to the demands of the people by providing services, which they generally perceive as positive achievements. All political powers are compelled to demonstrate “de facto successes” to routinize or sustain their authority.

What is the nature of these de facto successes? They occur when a ruler establishes a relationship with the people by any means, and the result is viewed by the people as good. This positive evaluation is made when individuals profit directly from the ruler’s factual steps, or at least see them as justified whatever the reason (e.g., religious) even if no personal profit is to be gained. With the term “success” we should take care not to fall into error: an action deemed suc-

⁴¹ See also my other article in this volume.

cessful by the authority has to be perceived thus by the people over whom the authority claims to be legitimate, and not, for example, according to some current measure or universal norm. The authority's accomplishments, it should be stressed, can be considered "successful" with regard to securing legitimacy if and only if they respond to the demands of the target population, and are also perceived by the latter as such.

Factual measures may bear some resemblance in all political systems simply because they are all intended for human beings. They can however assume slightly different forms in different societies. Some also change their content over time; some lose their validity while others come into being in an attempt to satisfy the requirements of a world in constant flux. And yet, although certain basic demands are expressed by individuals in all societies (e.g., for "justice"), the interpretation and meaning of these demands can vary considerably. The focus must therefore be on the meaning of these concepts for the state and for the people, and how this meaning changed over the centuries. Even though the concepts on which survival of the Ottoman empire depended may appear static, they could not, of course, remain unchanged over time. Attempts were always made to devise novel solutions for the problems and tensions that materialized between rulers and their subjects. Essentially, the bases of factual legitimacy satisfy the wishes and demands of human beings. The demands of the Ottoman subjects were obviously similar to those of any other society.

The normative schema and factual measures that support legitimacy are closely intertwined. A deficiency in either may affect the longevity of the authority. If a ruler's normative legitimacy is insufficiently sound—particularly in the early stages of his reign—other means must be sought for ensuring its continuity. An authority whose normative legitimacy is weak must be propped up by many more measures than required for one whose normative legitimacy is sound. He must stay in power at least long enough for efforts to acquire normative legitimacy to be initiated. But seizing power by brute force and propping it up by factual measures cannot alone create real legitimacy, unless they generate a belief in the subjects about the rule.⁴² If it endures sufficiently long for the populace to feel bound

⁴² Heino Speer, *Herrschaft und Legitimität: zeitgebundene Aspekte in Max Webers Herrschaftssoziologie* (Berlin, 1978), 90.

by inner sanctions arising from such belief it can be “converted” to legitimacy. The ideal situation for a political authority is of course to foster both the normative and the factual elements. In fact, the two usually complement each other. For example, when a ruler enjoys overwhelming military success he may find it less necessary to emphasize the symbolic underpinnings of his normative legitimacy, such as his noble pedigree. Conversely, when military defeats follow in quick succession more stress on normative legitimacy may be made. Again, the ideal situation is that they exist together in harmony.

The different types of measures I refer to below are meant only as a tentative inventory of de facto successes that can be used to analyze the legitimacy of Ottoman rulers. A theoretical discussion about them seems to have gone on in the Ottoman literature.⁴³ One has to investigate the Ottoman value system itself and determine what was received positively and what was not.⁴⁴ I am more interested in the empirical side, that is, how the political authority represented them to the populace and how the latter responded; in short, how the political authority communicated with its subjects. Apart from being concrete, factual measures must also be presented effectively. Precisely for this reason, expositions of state works by authors close to political power should be approached with caution. They are exaggerated, their real nature usually lost.

The most important stage of this entire activity was undoubtedly its final product: what the subjects thought about these so-called “successes.” Satisfactory data, which would also be representative of different population groups, are often elusive. We can only hope for hints and clues in the historical record. The longevity of the dynasty, for one thing, can of course be regarded as an indication that the Ottoman family was accepted to some degree. But this impression is counterbalanced by the many revolts, which suggest that certain groups were not particularly fond of its rule. A noble house can never hope to receive recognition from *all* its subjects, but a minimal percentage of them must be satisfied into acquiescence.

⁴³ See Gottfried Hagen’s article in this volume.

⁴⁴ To determine these, a good starting point can be Ottoman books on ethics. For example, see the close to 60 items long list of good and bad qualities of human beings in *Mevahibü’l-khallaq fi meratibi’l-akhlak* of Qoca Nişancı Mustafa, d. 1567, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Hs. or. oct. 4162.

Welfare

People do not easily tend to revolt when they are given the chance to live their lives, earn a living, and practice their beliefs. Those who do revolt usually feel a sense of dispossession and see no hope of improvement, or are so motivated by idealism that even the prospect of failure does not frighten them. Frequently, both of these psychological states operate simultaneously. The most effective way for a political authority to ensure obedience in subjects and integrate subordinate groups is to maintain general economic welfare at a certain minimal level. Taxation thus becomes a very delicate issue. The authority must keep a close eye on the social repercussions of its levies. As noted above, sultans sometimes waived taxes instituted under their predecessors as explicit appeals to popular sentiment. Above all, the Ottomans were wary of sowing discontent in newly conquered areas; they usually investigated the pre-conquest state revenue structure and tried to incorporate customary practices into the Ottoman tax system.⁴⁵

Social services were another important means by which they secured the obedience of the population. Certain aspects of modern state theory, such as respect for the “sanctity” of personal property, had close analogues in Ottoman practices. Welfare certainly meant more than mere material satisfaction: it bordered on the realms of justice and security. The concept of justice incorporated material security as well. Whenever the subjects felt that their burden of taxation was too heavy, or they simply refused to pay, it was not unusual for them to say by way of vindication that the taxes were “unjust.”

Justice and Order

The most fundamental pillar of political authority is respect for the rights of the populace and the just exercise of power. A political system guarantees “that which is one’s own” as Kant puts it, namely the subjects’ personal property, by just exercise of its power.⁴⁶ In

⁴⁵ Halil İnalcık, “Resm,” *EF*, vol. 8 (1995), 486.

⁴⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Werke*, vol. 8 (Berlin 1922 [1800]), 59, cited by Herbert Marcuse, “Studie über Autorität und Familie,” in *Ideen zu einer kritischen Theorie der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt, 1969), 84.

exchange for the creation of a secure environment in terms of individual rights, the political system demands obedience. The political authority must be able to prevent arbitrary legal processes by its court apparatus. The rights of individuals, such as the right to complain and appeal in case of suspicion of arbitrariness, or dissatisfaction with the functioning of the justice system, must be guaranteed. Ottoman “registers of complaints” and many other institutionalized procedures for personal redress are good examples of how the Ottoman government preserved the “sacred” realm of “just rule.”⁴⁷ They were following a venerable tradition: just government generally features as one of the first topics in books on the ideal Islamic polity.

In the Ottoman state’s appeal to “world order,” one of the most central duties of the sultan was to ensure justice and order for the subjects. The huge corpus of legislation produced during the Ottoman period is indication enough that efforts were made to get mechanisms of justice in proper working order. In this respect, the Ottoman sultan turns out to be *sui generis*. The rulers of previous Islamic empires had practically no scope to legislate beyond the shari’a. That the Ottoman sultan had the power to make law, that he was indeed the very source of law, is an indication of his sovereignty. The right and ability to make law spoke to his political supremacy.

Existing laws were certified or supplemented from time to time by sultanic decrees, also known as ‘*adaletnames*’ (“rescripts of justice”). The officials of smaller communities were strictly obliged to make these regulations public. The people were also encouraged to organize and act against state officials whom they believed unjust or oppressive.⁴⁸ All of this was intended to give the subjects a veritable sense of the sultan’s support.

As mentioned frequently in Ottoman political writings and sultanic edicts, the subjects were considered entrusted personally to the sultan by God (*cenab-ı Allahın veditasi*). Because of the patrimonial structure of the Ottoman political system, the sultan presented himself to his subjects as undertaking *personal* responsibility for the establishment of justice. The Ottoman system of justice was portrayed as the outcome of his personal efforts.⁴⁹ He personally appeared to be dealing

⁴⁷ Cf. Halil İnalçık, “Şikayet hakkı: ‘Arz-ı hal ve ‘arz-ı mahzarlar,” *The Journal of Ottoman Studies* 7–8 (1988), 33–54.

⁴⁸ Halil İnalçık, “Adâletnâmeler,” *Belgeler* 2 (1965), 86 f.

⁴⁹ Hakan Karateke, *Teşrifat-ı cedide: Son yüzyılında Osmanlı merasimleri* (Bamberg,

with problems concerning their rights. Phrases highlighting the personal achievement of justice occur frequently in the imperial rescripts and other official texts: for example, “I have lifted this [tax] effective immediately, having *personally* understood that it was a heavy burden for [my] subjects.”⁵⁰ Such phrasing stresses the role of the sultan as the magnanimous dispenser of justice. The sultan, such texts argued implicitly, did not exercise his authority for his own benefit or selfish advantage, but only on behalf of his subjects, for their moral and material good.⁵¹ In fact, on some occasions the sultan functioned as the court of last instance in providing justice. People sometimes traveled to Istanbul to hand in their petitions when the sultan rode to Friday prayers. These petitions were processed with particular efficiency. The sultan’s abode was promoted as a place of refuge for *mazlums*, those who had suffered injustice and oppression, in Ottoman political rhetoric.

In the same way, the epithets attributed to the sultans reflect the same feeling of assumption of responsibility. Many of them refer to justice or legislation more than any other aspect.⁵² In eulogies for the sultans in the diwan literature they were—clearly following the Persian tradition—commonly compared to historical figures traditionally renowned for their justice, such as Faridun or Anushirvan. On the other hand those who opposed Ottoman sovereignty—not surprisingly—made use of the same populist rhetoric of “just rule.” The Safavid Shah Isma‘il, for instance, was only one of many who charged Ottoman rule with injustice to its subjects, contending that it would be the Safavids who would bring justice.

Along with a functioning justice system, political authority had to leave some room for common people’s pragmatism, if not opportunism. The quiddity of the law, whether sacred (i.e., shari‘a) or secular, was not necessarily of central concern to commoners. Its importance was that it guaranteed their rights. The Ottoman court

1997), 15; see now Boğaç Ergene, “On Ottoman Justice: Interpretations in Conflict (1600–1800),” *Islamic Law and Society* 8/1 (2001), 58.

⁵⁰ *Seyahatname-i hümayun* ([Istanbul], [1262/1846]), 27; cf. İnalçık, “Adâletnâmeler,” 116.

⁵¹ J.H. Burns, “The Idea of Absolutism,” *Absolutism in Seventeenth-Century Europe*, ed. John Miller (Singapore, 1990), 31.

⁵² E.g., *‘Âdil* and *‘Adli*: Bayezid II (d. 1512), Mehmed III (d. 1603), Mahmud II (d. 1839); *Qanuni*: Mehmed II (d. 1481), Süleyman I (d. 1566). Alderson, *The Structure of the Ottoman Dynasty*, 114–116.

system tolerated this pragmatism to a certain degree, especially with regard to the legal mobility of the non-Muslim population. It is well known that each millet and foreign consulate in the Ottoman empire maintained a parallel court system alongside the shari‘a courts. However, thanks to some proceedings edited in the last decade, we have evidence that members of non-Muslim religious communities and *musta‘mins*, or the non-Muslims who had been permitted to stay in Ottoman territory, frequently had recourse to Ottoman shari‘a courts even for internal legal disputes. For their part, Muslims sometimes preferred consular courts simply because their fees were lower.⁵³ Despite many rabbinic opinions that Jews should not sue in Ottoman courts on the grounds that the practice circumvented Mosaic Law, they frequented the government courts. We often see non-Muslim subjects trying to exploit the parallel court system to evade their own communal norms, even to seek legal sanction for polygamy. In other cases the stratagems were even more convoluted, with Christian couples marrying before a qadi to escape the financial burdens of a church wedding, such as the *drahóma*. Yet, there are cases where they petitioned that their own family law apply with respect to the usual dowers (*míhr-i mü‘eccel*, etc.) of an Islamic marriage they had to disburse, in order to be exempt from that payment as well.

Another fundamental support for factual legitimacy was the bestowal on subjects of order, peace, and security. This was the most basic service that the state provided in return for the taxes it collected. Order is even more important to the common people than justice. As Machiavelli pointed out, “so long as old ways of life are undisturbed and there is no divergence in customs, men live quietly.” Long periods of agitation, war, instability, or disorder upset the people’s habitual way of living. It was repeatedly stressed in sultanic rescripts that maintaining his subjects’ peace (*asude-hal*) was the primary desire of the sultan.⁵⁴ The provision of security implied the power and efficacy of the political authority. An authority that can guarantee security and safety is perceived as strong, superior, and informed. Only such qualities can vouchsafe peace.

⁵³ İnalçık, “İmtiyazat,” *EF*², vol. 3 (1971), 1181.

⁵⁴ E.g. İnalçık, “Adâletnâmeler,” 117.

Religiosity, Traditionalism, and “Progressiveness”

Religion is a powerful means of imposing on subjects a self-control mechanism and inward obedience not attainable through external pressure. Religiosity was a fundamental component of the Ottoman sultan's normative legitimacy, and a supportive factor of his factual legitimacy. That is, many of the factual supports bore the same characteristics as those of his normative legitimacy, in that both were intended to keep the people mindful of his “sanctity.” In societies with a monarchical tradition of the ruler's divine right, subjects imagine him to possess divine guidance. The sultan's office was accordingly deemed semi-sacred, and his religious acts helped to secure the obedience of at least some of his subjects. Factual supports of a religious nature were often passive in character, namely manifestations of the religiosity of the sultan himself. Others were fairly active, involving particular measures to facilitate the religious duties of the subjects. An example is the maintenance of a safe route for the pilgrimage.⁵⁵

On the other hand, an important characteristic of traditional societies, such as the Ottoman, is the high value placed on customary activities. The traditions as well as the person or persons believed to possess dynastic legitimacy partake of the sacred, so both the ruler and the traditions used to support his or her rule enjoy great authority. The ruler has to be linked to tradition because it is one of the sources of his prestige. Tradition refers to the past, and the past points to the precedent of his authority. The origins of traditional authority are enveloped in the sacred and in a mythological corpus, leading the people to conclude that it is *rational* to obey the traditional ruler. Although traditions are deemed valuable, they are not at all unchanging entities. They are not necessarily *the same* traditions. It is only the *idea* of “attachment to the traditions” that is important in a traditional society. That society respects traditions simply because they *are* traditions. Even if innovations come into being, most people remain convinced that their traditions have not changed. Reference to the traditions does not disappear.

In this context, one striking Ottoman political idiom used to justify political actions is the label “ancient custom” (*adet-i qadime*). This

⁵⁵ For further elaboration on the subject see my other article in this volume.

expression mobilized the power of a tradition, namely the custom itself (*adet*), but it also had the added rhetorical force of “time immemorial.” That is why the expression “ancient custom” almost always had a magical effect. Many political and economic decisions, it seems, were justified just because they were labeled as ancient customs. The point, again, is that the political authority was not constrained within a non-changing custom at all. Ottoman “ancient customs” changed substantially over time, although the label attached to them did not vary. It was just by inculcation that an action or tradition came to be accepted as “ancient.” “Ancient customs” were on many occasions invented by the authority for political ends.

The concept of progress is a product of the modern world. It was therefore only normal that before the 19th century even the Ottoman “reformists” couched their proposals in references to the past. In exactly the same way it was normal that the Ottoman reformist rhetoric of “modern” times (read: 19th century) began to refer to “the necessities of the present times” (*ber muqteza-yı vaqt u hal*) to justify their acts.⁵⁶

The Victorious Sultan

A key attribute of the Ottoman sultan was his image as a brave champion of Islam, who captured new territories for the Faith. War always had to have some justification, motivating the people to sustain it. They after all suffered most from its consequences. The icon of a victorious sultan not only emphasized the highly religious valence of the campaigns that he led—a matter of direct interest to the Muslim population—but also drew energy from the obvious economic benefits of conquest. Islamic theoretical treatises on ideal leadership portray the protection of Islamic territories (*darü'l-İslam*) from the infidel and the defeat of those who spurn the call of Islam as two of the most important responsibilities of the imam, or sultan.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Deringil demonstrated how the idea of coping with the modern world was utilized as a factual support during the reign of a sultan in the late 19th century; see Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire 1876–1909* (London – New York, 1998).

⁵⁷ See A. Lambton, “Changing Concepts of Authority in the Late Ninth/Fifteenth and Early Tenth/Sixteenth Centuries,” *Islam and Power*, ed. Alexander Cudsi and Ali Dessouki (London, 1981), 56–57.

This trope of a victorious Ottoman sultan reflected reality in the 15th and 16th centuries, and even to a degree in the 17th. The Ottomans realized an Islamic dream in conquering Constantinople and founded the largest Islamic empire of their time, becoming the single most significant challenge to the European powers. After defeat in one campaign after another in succeeding centuries, however, the Sublime Porte had to revise and redefine this image; precisely because the sultans had exploited the state's military triumphs so heavily, they ran into trouble when the tide of conquest turned. Yet they apparently did not abandon the use of this fundamental support of legitimacy; but as one might suspect, this contradiction eventually reduced its actual value. No wonder that the Ottoman state first opted to modernize its military forces in the 18th century. The sultan was now lacking one of the major supports of his factual legitimacy, a pillar at the very core of the Ottoman state.

A large literary corpus was produced in the effort to promote the Ottoman sultans' martial image: their sacred quest against the infidel, their excellence in the field, the strategic perfection of their command, their enthusiasm in protecting the Islamic lands. These texts range from sophisticated accounts of military campaigns and conquests (*gazavatname*, *fethname*) through modest treatises to school books (at a later period). Imber has demonstrated how the "gazi sultan" image was promoted as the doctrine of the state in early Ottoman history books.⁵⁸ This successful indoctrination omitted hardly any segment of society. To cite only one example, Mustafa Na'ima, an 18th-century official chronicler, compares the Ottoman state and the sultans with other Islamic states in the elaborate introduction to his *History*:

Since the emergence of the Ottoman state, the sultans, combatants in the holy war, in order to glorify the name of God and obtain the Prophet's approval, ventured into tribulations and dangers in military expeditions and extended the [Islamic] dominions, conquering lands and roads . . . The sacred duty of holy war was [also] evident in other Islamic states; the military expeditions and battles they waged from the rise of the glittering star of the religion of Islam to the present time are known to everyone. Biography and history books are full of their descriptions. However, other Islamic states did not have enemies like the cunning and perfidious enemy of the exalted Ottoman state—

⁵⁸ Imber, "Dynastic Myth," 7–12.

that is, the wicked Europeans, who are well-versed in the art of thunderbolt-like cannons, bombshells that rain down fire, maiming muskets, and other arts of war, and who attack impetuously over and over again. Ottoman troops submitted themselves to the divine order and hurried to the obligation of holy war . . . The Ottoman sultans are the crown of all sovereigns and sultans, and the great confidant of all believers. Through the holy war in which they are engaged, they have brought the dignity and might of the Muslims to the level of excellence.⁵⁹

Sheikhs and preachers too had a prominent role in the propaganda effort. Mustafa al-Bakri, for example, a Khalveti sheikh of Morocco, praised the Ottoman sultan as the major protector of Islam in the 18th century. The fact that the sultan waged war against the infidel, Al-Bakri argued, was in itself a sufficient reason to obey him. Al-Bakri did not only stay in his hometown and preach to his disciples, but traveled widely in the Arabic-speaking parts of the empire, and found large audiences for his lectures there.⁶⁰

Even the sultans of later periods, who never themselves went on military campaigns, took great pains to assume the title of gazi through special fetvas. Selim III (r. 1789–1808) assumed the title gazi for his defense of Egypt against the French. The title was now attached to the imperial name, and “the sultan was to be referred to with this title in the mosques and sermons during the Friday and bayram prayers.”⁶¹ Selim was the formal commander of the Ottoman army, but he did not even leave Istanbul during the war. ‘Abdülmeçid (r. 1839–61) was to be remembered in the Friday sermons by this “blessed name” (*lafz-ı mübarek*) of gazi, on account of “having joined in battles *actively* at certain places” during the Crimean War.⁶² Almost

⁵⁹ Na‘ima, *Ta‘rih*, vol. 1, 8–10.

⁶⁰ Cf. his *Al-firq al-mu‘dhin bi t-tarab fi l-farq bayna al-‘Ajam wa l-‘Arab*, Tarih 4766, Dar al-Kutub, Cairo, 44 f. I thank Ralph Elger for informing me of this source and providing me with a copy of the relevant pages.

⁶¹ BOA, Cevdet-Saray 861 (17 Cemaziyelahir 1216/25 October 1801). Cf. BOA, Cevdet-Hariciye 4615 (5 December 1801), quoted by Thomas Naff, “Reform and the Conduct of Ottoman Diplomacy in the Reign of Selim III, 1789–1807,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 83 (1963), 314. ‘Abdülhamid I (r. 1774–89), ‘Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909), who had the title gazi displayed next to his imperial monogram, and Mehmed V (r. 1909–18) also assumed the title through fetvas, although they did not take part in any war actively.

⁶² BOA, A.AMD 49/95 (18 Muharrem 1270/31 October 1853). It can also be argued that the term gazi changed its content over time, and “being in the battlefield in person” ceased to be a prerequisite. It came to be accepted that the sultan, as

all the 18th- and 19th-century sultans were referred to as *gazi* in poems or elsewhere. When a committee of deputies informed him of his deposition, ‘Abdülhamid II retorted that “he had won the Greek War of 1896” as the most outstanding service he had done for his country.⁶³ This may be regarded as an expression of his subconscious, a desperate effort to identify with an achievement that was perceived highly positively in the Ottoman collective memory.

For centuries the Ottoman population had certainly been made accustomed to the routine nature of military triumphs, of which they were informed by way of elaborate processions in the cities and festivities that lasted days, or even weeks.⁶⁴ After he captured Syria in 1516 Selim I wrote a letter to the qadi of Edirne describing the course of the battle in a very detailed way. He did not forget to add that the judge should arrange victory celebrations and make this happy news known to surrounding regions as soon as the letter arrived.⁶⁵ In this way the notion that the Ottoman sultan was a triumphant commander came to be taken for granted.

The idea of a world-conquering sultan imparted enormous prestige to the sultan in respect of his prowess on the battlefield. But beyond this, the vastness of the terrain he ruled was a plain indicator of his authority and prosperity. In the pre-industrial world land ownership, even if not directly connected with political power, was a source of renown.⁶⁶ Süleyman the Magnificent’s letters to Christian rulers testify eloquently to this consciousness. Responding to the plea by François I for military support against the king of Hungary (1526), he opens thus:

I who am the Sultan of sultans, Sovereign of sovereigns, Distributor of crowns to monarchs over the surface of the globe, God’s shadow on earth, Sultan and Padishah of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, of the Balkans and Anatolia, of Karaman and the countries of

the nominal commander of the army, did have the right to assume the title. Important here, however, is the fact that it kept its legitimizing quality until the end of the empire.

⁶³ [Galip Paşa], “Galip Paşa’nın hâtıraları: Sultan Hamid’in hal’i,” *Hayat tarih mecmuası* 20 (1966), 77–84. For a similar expression of ‘Abdülhamid II cf. İbnülemin Mahmud Kemal Inal, *Son sadrazamlar*, vol. 3 (Istanbul, 1982³), 1275.

⁶⁴ Cf. Suraiya Faroqhi, “Die Legitimation des Osmanensultans: zur Beziehung von Religion, Kunst und Politik im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert,” *Zeitschrift für Türkeistudien* 2 (1989), 55.

⁶⁵ Feridun Bey, *Münşe’at*, vol. 1, 424.

⁶⁶ Patricia Crone, *Pre-Industrial Societies* (Oxford – Cambridge, 1989), 25–26.

Rum, Zulkadir, Diyarbekir, Kurdistan, Azerbaijan, Persia, Damascus, Aleppo, Cairo, Mecca and Medina, Jerusalem, all Arabia and so many other lands besides, greet you, François, King of the land of France, who have sent a letter to my Sublime Porte.⁶⁷

Even in the middle of the 19th century, after many decades of unsuccessful Ottoman wars, the ordinary Ottoman Muslim imagined that European monarchs were the vassals of the sultan. A.D. Mordtmann, a German journalist who lived in Istanbul for some time in the 19th century and assembled his invaluable observations in a two-volume book, writes that many people believed that the British and French troops who were then disembarking in the Ottoman capital on their way to the Crimea had arrived to fight the Russians at the command of his majesty the sultan.⁶⁸

In traditional societies, when the state loses its coercive power it has an unsettling impact on the subjects. The Ottoman peoples regarded the state and the sultan as the highest authority on earth for every kind of concern they might have. A militarily unsuccessful state meant more than just the fading of expectations: it was a stunning disappointment in an entity in which immense belief was invested.

Prosperity, Magnanimity, Modesty

Since the lands the Ottoman sultan ruled belonged to him personally, he was materially beyond compare relative to his subjects. Although this perception was engraved in the collective consciousness, it still had to be demonstrated visibly. To this end, members of his household paid special attention to their attire at public ceremonies such as royal marriages and circumcisions, appearing bedecked in gorgeous clothing and priceless jewels. The ceremonies themselves were grandly elaborate and often lasted days, if not weeks. The subjects, dazzled by this display of wealth, found in the pomp and circumstance a cause of pride in their ruler.

Prosperity, however, makes a positive impression only insofar as its possessor is also generous.⁶⁹ Otherwise it can provoke a decidedly

⁶⁷ Andre Clot, *Suleiman the Magnificent* (London, 1992), 131.

⁶⁸ [A.D. Mordtmann], *Stambul und das moderne Türkenthum*, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1877), 240.

⁶⁹ Cf. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan or the Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil* (Oxford, 1955 [London, 1651]), 56.

negative reaction. General economic conditions in his domain aside, it was essential for the sovereign to respond to individual requests for material assistance. Generosity and charity figured high on the list of characteristics of the ideal sultan, and were articulated in Islamic and Ottoman political theory. To shield himself from charges of self-interest and extravagance, the sultan had to highlight his generosity. This was accomplished through several practices, real and symbolic.

For example, during some ceremonies and processions gold coins were distributed among spectators and the palace household. This was symbolic gesture intended to create an image of bounty. The majority of petitions submitted during the Friday prayer processions were far more tangible: requests for money. The palace distributed cash to virtually everyone who submitted a petition. This kind of gesture made the people develop personal hopes in the sultan. The palace also periodically had tens of sheep slaughtered, sometimes as often as every Friday, and the meat was distributed to the poor. Finally, sultans made financial contributions to victims of natural disasters, to hospitals, and to other charitable organizations. Such philanthropy not only created an image of generosity, it was also a symbolic expression of sovereignty. Every single occurrence confirmed the ruler's superiority. He was the one who bestowed, and every act of bestowing reaffirmed his prosperity. "Man is a slave of benevolence," declares the 17th-century scholar Katib Çelebi, describing the desperate situation of soldiers in Erzurum during the Yerevan campaign. "A shortage in generosity and bounty can result in a wilderness of hearts".⁷⁰

On the other hand, generosity also served as a means to co-opt bureaucrats, intellectuals, and other public figures who could wield social or political influence. Providing patronage to scholars, literati, and artists by bringing them together at the court or supplying them with their material needs was also listed among the sovereign's duties in the mirrors for princes. It was undoubtedly an effective way to undermine potential opposition or critical voices. Had Mustafa 'Âli, a 16th-century bureaucrat, received the attention he longed for and not become so frustrated in his career, his criticism of the regime would likely have been muted. 'Âli veiled his pique over this only

⁷⁰ Cited in Na'ima, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 3, 238–239.

slightly in his *Counsel for Sultans* where he argued that “the sultan should in particular not evoke worry among the representatives of the educated class, and disturbance in the enlightened minds of the venerable men of religion.”⁷¹

Apart from cash, the sultan often made grants of expensive horses, precious clocks, jewelry, swords, orders, and many kinds of robes of honor. We might also place promotions and employment of dissidents as palace officials or in high bureaucratic posts in this category. For example, it was a custom of Sultan ‘Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909) to employ potentially restive individuals in his chancellery or elsewhere at the palace. He won them over with salaries up to 20 times higher than what might have been available from similar jobs outside the palace. ‘Abdülhamid ordinarily invited such people to his office before they started working and told them that he personally had chosen them for the post, aiming to create a sense of indebtedness. On one occasion, İbrahim Bey, a physician not particularly sympathetic to the sultan, was brought to the palace as the monarch’s private doctor, with five years’ rent paid on his new villa by the sultan. İbrahim Bey wrote in his memoirs:

My family was very pleased at moving [to the new villa]. The feelings of attachment which are planted in *every* Ottoman individual towards the sultan and caliph (now) also existed in me and the members of my family.⁷²

It is nevertheless interesting that some sultans of the 19th century opted to wear modest costumes at public ceremonies, in contrast to the pretentious embroidered uniforms of palace and military officials. Occasionally they would have only a few orders on their uniforms. ‘Abdülhamid II, for example, usually wore a frock coat. This choice of dress was certainly not accidental. It called to mind his being sated with wordly wealth and his modesty, both qualities being a barrier against the evils of prosperity bereft of generosity in the eyes of commoners. On the day of his accession ‘Abdülhamid walked into the military barracks and ate food cooked for the soldiers at the same table with some of his officers and officials. This was an unprecedented act.⁷³

⁷¹ Andreas Tietze, *Mustafâ ‘Âli’s Counsel for Sultans of 1581*, vol. 1 (Vienna, 1979), 41.

⁷² İbrahim Paşa, “Özel doktoru sultan Abdülhamid’i anlatıyor: Yıldız sarayında 11 sene,” ed. Cemal Kutay, *Son havadis*, 26 October 1978.

⁷³ Ahmed Midhat, *Üss-i inqılab*, vol. 2 (Istanbul, 1295/1878), 11–12.

Mahmud II (r. 1808–39) and the later sultans occasionally wore a military uniform during processions. Military dress highlighted his service to the state. Likewise, the orders he wore had been awarded in recognition of his services to the state. The idea that the sultan should not rule his lands with absolute and unquestionable power, but must be a servant of his people, was consonant with the norms of constitutional monarchy that became prevalent during the 19th century.

Ceremonies

Pre-modern sovereigns came into contact with their subjects face-to-face only rarely. Generally barred from personal encounters, the governed mostly did not know what their sovereign lord looked like. One practice that bridged this divide to a certain extent was public ceremonies, but these were quite limited in duration. The ruler had little time to define and represent the ideals of the authority, so symbols and highly symbolized means were needed for the authority to represent itself in condensed form.

Ceremonies may serve to reinforce social identity, to gloss over disharmonies, or to buttress the hierarchical position of the authority figures vis-à-vis the general public. They allow the political authority to engage the people in continuous reference to their sacred values. People's sensibilities are heightened during such group rituals, facilitating the dissemination of agreed values. Ceremonies, then, ultimately help to secure the subjects' compliance with authority.

If the impact of the ceremony were confined to the audience actually present, its goal would certainly not be fully achieved. Indeed, no ceremony of importance can be said to have been so restricted in influence. As the Ottoman example shows us, important official ceremonies held in Istanbul were announced in every corner of the empire, to allow individual subjects to show fealty to the sovereign who ruled the lands they jointly inhabited, and who—insofar as the subjects were Muslims—was the titular head of their shared religion. Individuals were bonded by quite subtle means, such as referring to the sultan as *padişahımız efendimiz* (“our lord the Padishah”). Through such practices a spiritual connection was forged among individuals who felt drawn to together by the many things they had in common. The attachment to a sultan known to his subjects only through their imaginations, an attachment that operated mostly in an unconscious

manner, was strong enough to engender a similar attachment among individuals in society at large. One of the most profound effects of the Ottoman sultan's legitimacy, then, was the social cohesion of his dominion.

Construction of Charitable Buildings and Insignia

As we have seen, generosity and charity appeared high on the list of characteristics of the ideal sultan. Charitable buildings were also partly aimed at realizing this idealized image, which provided his rule with factual support. The Ottoman sultans were certainly not alone among monarchs in seeking acceptance of their rule through public works. Political authorities in the pre-modern world frequently used such visual elements as ceremonies, monumental buildings and other material expressions in communicating with their subjects. Because of the high value placed on charity and almsgiving in Islamic societies, expenditures on charitable structures had very high priority with the Ottoman sultans.

Moreover, the sultan was expected to maintain and improve the infrastructure of the lands he ruled. Among various buildings that the sultans erected or repaired were hospitals, bath-houses, mosques, soup kitchens, dervish lodges, schools, caravanserais, bridges, and public fountains. Many such buildings were of direct benefit to the people, or were perceived as charity given for the good of society. With these enterprises, the sultan on the one hand fulfilled a duty that was already expected of him, and on the other, he profited from the highly supportive value of performing a charity.

The role of the Ottoman imperial mosques as symbols expressing the power of the dynasty—hence as elements in the maintenance of imperial legitimacy—has been analyzed elsewhere.⁷⁴ Some bureaucrats and wealthy individuals, not members of the Ottoman family, also erected charitable buildings in Istanbul. But those built by the sultan were usually distinguished by their sumptuousness and magnificence. Furthermore, charitable buildings financed by the sultan and his

⁷⁴ Howard Crane, "The Ottoman Sultan's Mosques: Icons of Imperial Legitimacy," *The Ottoman City and Its Parts: Urban Structure and Social Order*, ed. Irene Bierman et al. (New Rochelle – New York, 1991), 173–243.

court were more numerous than those financed by his prosperous subjects, and this undoubtedly helped to encode the intended message in the collective memory of the people. Among the recommendations in a 16th-century mirror for princes treatise was the statement that a minister or upper-echelon bureaucrat should not be allowed to build more than one mosque.⁷⁵

Imperial mosques and other monumental structures built by the sultan were too colossal to escape the eye. They advertised themselves by their appearance and the buzz that circulated in the cities about their benefactors. In smaller imperial constructions and repairs the *tugra* played a crucial role. The *tugra*, or imperial signature, was traditionally inscribed on imperial orders and edicts to prove that the document was authentic. An interesting development occurred after the first quarter of the 18th century, when it began to be imprinted on the façade of all structures constructed by the sultan. This development undoubtedly signaled the palace's intention to use the *tugra* as a symbol of power and helped it to gain public importance in this period.

The sophisticated and aesthetically pleasing calligraphy of a *tugra* was so complex and stylized that not even a literate person could easily decipher the words on it. Nevertheless, even illiterate people could recognize that it *was* the imperial signature. For a society in which literacy was not prevalent, the *tugra* was more useful than a dedicatory plaque. Inscriptions mean nothing to someone who cannot read: if one wants to deliver information to him or her, signs and symbols must take the place of words. The *tugra* symbolized the continuity of the Ottoman lineage and made it known even to the illiterate passerby that the sultan had ordered and funded the construction of the building he saw: no person other than the sultan could use such a sign. Where the *tugra* appeared, there the sultan was, *in effigie*, declaring that he, the sultan, was the creator and the protector of that building and that site. The construction of or the repairs to charitable buildings ordered by the sultan were traditionally listed in state chronicles.⁷⁶ *Taqvim-i veqayî*, the official newspaper, started to publish them routinely in a special section with the heading

⁷⁵ Anonymous, "Hırzû'l-Mülûk," *Osmanlı devlet teşkilâtına dair kaynaklar*, ed. Yaşar Yücel (Ankara, 1988), 178–179.

⁷⁶ For example, see Na'ima, *Ta'rih*, vol. 2, 154–155.

asar-ı hayriyye (charitable works) after 1831. All this certainly served the sultans' aim of creating a favorable collective memory, as did the simple fact that these charitable buildings were of practical use: the practical utility of an object or building is positively correlated with encoding and memory formation.

In the same vein, some of the imperial insignia served symbolically to depict the supports for the legitimacy of the sovereign. By employing these symbols, the authority laid more or less continuous claim to its rightfulness. As we have seen, the Central Asian and Islamic legacies were essentially the two most important sources of Ottoman sultan's normative legitimacy, and both of them were alluded to quite prominently in the insignia. Being the symbols of sovereignty, insignia were strictly confined to sultanic use, and those who violated this rule were punished severely. The insignia contained references not only to normative legitimacy, but also to factual supports. For instance, the coat of arms of the Ottoman state, created in the 19th century, depicted both archaic and modern weapons, the foundation of the empire's military power throughout the centuries. It also included two standards, one green in reference to Islamic roots, one red in reference to Ottoman dynastic origins. A scale symbolized justice, two books the sources of law: the *shar'ı* and the *'öfi* codes. There were flowers representing peace, and a shield for the protection and security offered to the subjects. A turban, no longer in use by the sultans by this time, referred to the glorious past. In the middle was a legend in Arabic, which emphasized the most fundamental pillar of the Ottoman sultan's legitimacy: "The sovereign of the exalted Ottoman state rests upon the divine guidance of God."