

OTTOMAN LANGUAGES*

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The Ottoman Turkish language was a product of empire, a consciously developed political and cultural tool. By around 1600 formal, written Ottoman had evolved from its base in the colloquial Turkish of Anatolia into a prestige language dominated by elements from Persian, the inherited language of early administration and literature, and from Arabic, the first language of religion and scholarship. This amalgam was considered a natural and appropriate reflection of Ottoman imperial status in relation to the Islamic cultural heritage, appearing in varying degrees of complexity in both chancery documents and literary works. By the nineteenth century, however, there was increasing criticism, particularly among reformers in Istanbul, of this official language as an unnecessarily complex and artificial hybrid, understandable only with constant reference to dictionaries. Ottoman Turkish appeared to many as symbolic of an inward-looking, complacent conservatism responsible for late Ottoman decline, and as a barrier to political and social reform. In the post-imperial, nationalist era of the 1920s and 1930s, this language was, by definition, redolent of a failed political entity and had few supporters. Official use of 'Ottoman Turkish' came to an abrupt end in November 1928, when the Republic of Turkey adopted a specially devised alphabet in Latin characters to replace the Arabic script in which Turkish had been written for almost a millennium. Atatürk's language reform movement then proceeded to purge from the written language most 'foreign' Arabic and Persian elements, aiming to produce a vocabulary and grammar as purely Turkish as possible. By the mid-twentieth century, less than fifty years after the end of the empire, Ottoman had become effectively a dead language, its literary and historical works rendered largely inaccessible and alien to subsequent generations of Turkish speakers. So rapidly did the political and cultural outlook change that even the language of *Nutuk*, Atatürk's

definitive address to the Turkish Grand National Assembly given over five days in October 1927, soon had to be simplified and modernized for most readers.

Why Ottoman Turkish assumed the form it did in the earlier period, in what ways and how widely it was used, and to what extent its use promoted or prevented the spread of a specifically Ottoman literary culture, are some of the questions to be raised in this essay. There will necessarily be more questions than answers. The definitive break between Ottoman and modern Turkish, and negative views of the later historical language and its written output, long discouraged serious study of it and exacerbated the historian's usual problem of acquiring appropriate 'cultural literacy'.¹ The tendency still lingers to consider Ottoman implicitly as an artificial idiom in contrast to 'ordinary' Turkish, a view subconsciously reinforced for most western scholars by the usual practice of learning modern Turkish first and then moving backwards into an Ottoman language which initially appears to be more akin to Arabic and Persian than to Turkish. Among the points to be raised below is the potential insight to be gained by a different approach, that of comparing the style and use of Ottoman not with Turkish – modern or otherwise – but with other prestige languages in the early modern world.

Among many other factors rendering the study of Ottoman language and literary culture difficult is the mere range and intimidating number of manuscripts and documents which survive from at least the period after 1500, the majority of which remain unstudied. This is despite the efforts of Turkish scholars over the past half century, particularly in producing critical editions of the *divans* (anthologies) of individual poets.² Equally, over the past twenty years Mehmet İpşirli and other students of Bekir Kütükoğlu in Istanbul have led the way in producing reliable editions of major sixteenth and seventeenth-century Ottoman histories.³ Nevertheless, much groundwork remains to be done. One particular problem is that in some historiography, chancery documentation and other types of prose writing, the Ottoman Turkish language can indeed be a barrier to understanding, particularly in its more

¹ Faroqhi 1999: 27-8, in a guide for new researchers on the problems, pitfalls and pleasures of studying Ottoman topics.

² For an indication of the progress and potential of literary studies, see Aynur 2006.

³ For modern editions, and for certain edited collections of Ottoman documents, see the list of published Ottoman sources in the Reference section of this volume.

elevated registers. Sweeping judgements about tired idioms, over-blown rhetorical prose and meaningless verbiage are easy to make, and sometimes justified. Not all writers wrote well; bureaucratic language often was jargon.

For non-Turkish scholars there have also been other discouragements. From the fifteenth century onwards, constant hostile references in western literature to ‘the Turk’ imposing an alien and barbaric culture upon Christian peoples established a lurking, unappealing stereotype. Nineteenth and early twentieth-century western orientalist studies principally Arabic and Persian languages and literatures, while philologists classified Turkish as a Ural-Altaic language not native to the Middle East and, by implication, of less significance. In the trio of major Islamic civilizations, Ottoman came a poor third, a balance still reflected today in most departments of Middle or Near Eastern studies in western universities. Added to this bias is the fact that for political, nationalist reasons, much twentieth-century historical writing in the empire’s Arab and Balkan successor states inevitably took an anti-Ottoman stance.⁴

Assessing the role played by the Ottoman Turkish language and written culture in the empire as a whole is therefore not easy, and few attempts have been made to do so. Yet, if language was a tool of empire, how successfully did it function as such? What was the balance between practical communication and awe-inspiring propaganda? Was the latter dominant, and the Ottomans seen as ‘other’ because of their mode of expression? It is easy to assume that this was so. Yet, the modern desire for straightforward clarity in government communications was not necessarily matched in the pre-modern era in any culture, particularly in public announcements of military victory or of monarchical largesse, which required an appropriately grand tone. In return, for writers seeking court patronage, striking metaphors and inspiring allusions were usually more effective than unadorned prose. Andreas Tietze’s studies of works by the sixteenth-century historian Mustafa Ali (d. 1600) offer the best guide to the consciously artistic Ottoman Turkish prose style known as *inşa* (lit. ‘creating, construction’), with its parallel, rhymed and sonorous phrasing.⁵ Yet, not all Ottoman Turkish prose was deliberately complex or rhetorical; the extreme has perhaps too

⁴ On the Ottoman legacy and perceptions of it, see Brown 1996, especially the essays by Barbir and Todorova.

⁵ Tietze 1975, 1979, 1982; also Tietze 1973.

often been taken as the norm. Major histories such as those by Selaniki (d. 1600) or Hasan Beyzade (d. c. 1636) were composed in an educated but relatively clear register of written Ottoman, and were not court-centred commissions. Koci Bey (d. after 1640) and other seventeenth-century writers of advice literature generally chose clarity over style, even when addressing the sultan. As will be shown below, other writers naturally adjusted their style to suit their intended readership and purpose.

Equally, while composition of the most demanding forms of written Ottoman prose was necessarily limited to very learned stylists and highly trained chancery officials – the literary and bureaucratic elites – it is worth considering how far down and across the social and educational scales such texts and documents might have been read or heard, and thereby in varying degrees understood. Ability to compose in a learned and elegant style is one thing; ability to appreciate it is another, and casts the net much wider. If modern historians working in a cultural vacuum can attempt to master complex Ottoman, a significant proportion of literate Ottoman subjects – native speakers of Turkish or otherwise – could surely have done so too, if inclined, and mostly with much greater success. Indeed, while western sovereigns might have been impressed by the imagery, cadences and self-confidence of the Latin or Italian translations of Ottoman imperial letters, the true force and message of the Ottoman language would have been even more apparent within the empire, among those who could read, half-read or hear the originals for themselves. Such domestic recipients included Ottoman vassals such as the khans of the Crimea and the voyvodes of Wallachia and Moldavia, provincial governors and high-ranking judges throughout the empire, and leading scholars and intellectuals to whom the sultans sent gifts and letters of appointment. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, particular significance would also have been attached to imperial correspondence with the Ottomans' perceived rivals in eastern Anatolia and Iraq, the Safavid shahs of Iran. Not only the Ottoman literary language, but also miniature painting and other arts of the book were thoroughly permeated by Persian influences. Both craftsmen and artefacts were among the war booty taken from Tabriz by Selim I in 1514 and again by Süleyman in 1535, resulting in several decades of intense cultural oneupmanship on the Ottoman part and culminating in the monumental illuminated manuscripts produced by court painters and litterateurs under Murad III (1574-95). An imperial language which incorporated dominant elements of both Arabic and Persian and, by

implication, of crucial aspects of these classical Islamic traditions, carried a clear stamp of political authority and made a cultural statement recognisable both within and without the empire. Without such elements, how seriously would it have been taken?

However, until the nineteenth century, Ottomans referred to their sophisticated written language simply as ‘Turkish’, which implies that they did not perceive unbridgeable gaps between higher and lower language registers, either spoken or written.⁶ Strictly speaking, it is inaccurate to call the pre-1800 language ‘Ottoman Turkish’, although the term remains in use, partly out of habit and partly because it is more specific in its chronological and political referent than the alternative ‘old Turkish’. Its use is also valid linguistically in discriminating between the imperial language and those of the millions of other Turkish speakers over the centuries in Azerbaijan, Iran and Central Asia.

Most studies of what we will continue to call Ottoman Turkish have naturally focussed on its written forms, in particular its literary and chancery use.⁷ However, it is worth considering briefly the properties and broader usage of the language itself. For instance, while it may be impossible to know to what extent the cadences and lexicon of learned Ottoman were reflected even in educated speech, such an additive feature as the Persian *izafet* (‘joining’) construction must have been difficult to resist and relatively easy to use, particularly for the many Ottoman Muslims who had studied Persian as a separate language. *Izafet* constructions produced a word order almost completely opposite to that of Turkish, but had much simpler grammatical rules. Did this also make ‘Ottoman Turkish’ easier for, say, Greek and Serbian speakers to understand than ordinary Turkish? The ever-increasing use of Arabic words must certainly have appealed, no doubt partly intentionally, to the empire’s Arabic speakers. Hence, one consequence of fostering what to some Turks appeared to be an increasingly foreign ‘Ottoman’ language might have been to make it more accessible, one way or another, to non-Turkish speakers than ordinary Turkish, and therefore more of an asset than a liability in terms of imperial communication.

⁶ Iz 1976; Kerslake 1998: 180-1.

⁷ Interest is increasing in other types of text, e.g., Kafadar 1989.

This essay considers firstly the diversity of vernacular language use within the empire, in order to assess the value of spoken Turkish as a medium of communication and hence as a factor contributing to imperial cohesion, rather than militating against it. The assumption here is that (Ottoman) Turkish was a language not only of the cultural and political elite, and that appreciation of its products was not necessarily confined to a narrow, closed circle. Rather, it should be seen as a practical and flexible language working in differing registers, spoken and written, to suit the purpose and the occasion. In view of the once tenacious stereotype of Ottoman rule as an alien imposition in many non-Turkish parts of the empire, it is worth emphasizing the obvious – that in the pre-modern era language was not considered the divisive marker of identity and difference that it is today, that Turkish was relatively widely used, and that Turkish-speaking officials were not necessarily ‘foreign’. Secondly, this essay considers the nature of the ‘Ottoman’ language and its literary culture, not as an unusual, artificial hybrid but as an imperial idiom comparable to others, particularly in the Turkish Muslim world. The focus in what follows is on the period up to 1800, before the combined challenge of print culture, nationalism and conscious modernization. As with the study of many other aspects of Ottoman history, when seen in comparative perspective, linguistic and literary developments turn out not to be unique to the Ottoman case but to derive from the essential nature of an extensive, polyglot and multi-cultural empire.⁸ While ‘Turkish’ will be used here generally for the more informal spoken and written language, and ‘Ottoman Turkish’ for the formal registers, this terminology is not clear cut and should be taken within the Ottoman understanding of a single language spectrum, rather than the post-imperial tendency to perceive divisive differentiation between elite and non-elite language.

Ottoman languages

It has been estimated that there were around one hundred languages and dialects spoken within the Ottoman empire, a situation probably comparable relative to size to that within the Habsburg and Romanov empires, and reflected to a lesser extent in most western states before 1800.⁹ Until the nineteenth century, only a handful of ‘Ottoman’ languages – primarily Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, Greek, Armenian, Hebrew

⁸ For a broader perspective on Turkish, see Kamusella 2009: 44-61.

⁹ Strauss 1995a: 221-2; Houston 2002: 227-39 on linguistic variety within early modern European states.

(together with the Judeo-Spanish Ladino) and Church Slavonic – were also written languages. Significantly, all of the latter, except Ottoman Turkish and Ladino, were long-established liturgical and scholarly languages with more or less fixed forms. Within each such language a major variation between written and spoken forms was commonplace, giving rise to a form of *diglossia*, where the learned language was virtually unintelligible to speakers of its own vernacular.¹⁰ Dialectical variation within a spoken language could also be quite extensive. The principal and most studied example here is Arabic, which from the 1530s onwards was the mother tongue of perhaps one third of Ottoman subjects.¹¹ Turkish was therefore not the only language in the empire, or elsewhere, with a significant degree of internal variation between registers. Nor was the Ottoman government alone in facing communication difficulties across a variety of languages. To what extent the Ottomans positively encouraged the use of Ottoman and Turkish as tools of integration, rather than simply of communication, is unknown, probably not the same everywhere, and probably as complex a subject as their attitude to conversion to Islam, to which language use is obviously related.

Native speakers of Turkish were not confined to Anatolia and the empire's northeastern provinces. In northern Syria and northern Iraq, Turkish was widely spoken, due to the migratory presence of Türkmen tribes. In Egypt, a Turkish dialect was a common, if not the first, language in Mamluk military households, becoming a *lingua franca* for the eighteenth-century, multi-ethnic Mamluk ruling class of Cairo.¹² In Algiers, the practice of recruiting new janissaries from Anatolia helped maintain a working knowledge of Turkish. Speakers of Turkish were found throughout the Balkans, as a result initially of the policy of settling Türkmen and other Turkish-speaking communities along the principal military and commercial routes, and of the founding of new towns, and subsequently of conversion to Islam.¹³ The seventeenth-century Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi frequently commented on aspects of language in his *Seyahatname*, 'Book of travels', often including brief word lists of lesser-known languages, such as Abkhazian (his mother's native tongue) and

¹⁰ Strauss 1995a; Versteegh 1997: 189-208.

¹¹ Versteegh 1997: 130-72.

¹² My thanks to Nelly Hanna for this point.

¹³ On re-settlement policies, see the essay by Rhoads Murphey in this volume.

Kurdish.¹⁴ While recording that in Ohrid in northeastern Macedonia, Bulgarian and Greek were the local languages, he also noted that ‘they do speak elegant Turkish, and there are some very urbane and witty gentlemen’.¹⁵ In Shköder in north-eastern Albania, ‘they all speak Albanian, which is like no other tongue’ and is ‘a delightful language’. However, he also noted that the inhabitants were all Muslim, and that the town possessed a significant number of mosques and *medreses* (theological colleges).¹⁶ Any urban centre in which a *kadı*, *sancak beyi* and other Ottoman officials were based, and where specifically Muslim buildings such as mosques, *medreses*, tombs or baths were established, would also possess many local Muslims and local speakers of Turkish.¹⁷ Robert Elsie’s study of eighteenth-century Albanian *aljamiado* literature provides further evidence that some inhabitants of these distant provinces had a more than passing acquaintance with the Turkish language and Ottoman culture. *Aljamiado* literature here constitutes verse written in Albanian in the Arabic script, ‘pervaded with Turkish, Arabic and Persian vocabulary’ and with the conceits and style of Ottoman lyric poetry.¹⁸ Almost the reverse of this, and demonstrating another aspect of the complex nature of language use within the empire, is the case of *Karamanlı*, i.e. Turkish written in the Greek alphabet by Turkophone Greek Orthodox Christians in western Anatolia during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁹

Although Ottoman judicial, military and administrative officials conducted their business officially in Turkish, there was probably little systematic attempt to impose this language on local communities in the way that early modern European states increasingly promoted the use of one particular language over others for the ideological purpose of ultimate political unity.²⁰ Ottoman communication clearly

¹⁴ Dankoff 1989.

¹⁵ Dankoff and Elsie 2000: 216-7.

¹⁶ Dankoff and Elsie 2000: 41, 33-5; on early Ottoman buildings in the Balkans, see Kiel 2006; on historiographical interpretations of Islamization in the Balkans, see Zhelyazkova 2002.

¹⁷ For Bosnian merchants from Sarajevo and Mostar petitioning the Doge of Venice in Turkish in 1636, see Murphey 2002: 151-2, 167-8.

¹⁸ Elsie 1992: 292.

¹⁹ Balta 1999; Strauss 2003: 53-5. This example supports the argument that because Turkish was not a liturgical language too closely identified with another religion, there would have been less reluctance among non-Muslims to using it.

²⁰ Houston 2002: 232-3, esp. re France; Anderson 2006: 40-2 on administrative vernaculars.

relied heavily on bilingual intermediaries, drawn both from the subject populations and from among government officials. For example, much recent research has shown how Christians regularly had recourse to the judicial court of the Ottoman *kadı*, the proceedings and records of which were held in Turkish. A study of *şeria* courts in seventeenth-century Cyprus shows the appointment of Turkish-speaking local Greek Christians as official interpreters.²¹ More broadly, if the pace of conversion to Islam in the Balkans continued to increase into the eighteenth century, such that by the 1831 census Muslims might constitute anywhere between 40 per cent and 70 per cent of the population of a given area,²² this must also have involved a significant level of language acquisition and more people – men in particular – becoming bilingual to a degree.

For all state employees, however, Turkish was a compulsory language of business. The first requirements for *devşirme* recruits from the Balkans and Anatolia were conversion to Islam and learning Turkish; the same applied to slaves acquired for government service through capture or purchase. However, given that *devşirme* recruits were usually taken at around twelve years of age or more, the majority probably retained a working knowledge of their original language which could later be used to advantage.²³ Many fifteenth and sixteenth-century grand vezirs are known to have kept or revived strong links with their families and home regions. Among the more striking examples is that of Mehmed II's grand vezir Mahmud Paşa Angelović (d. 1474), originally a captive from a Serbian noble family, who in the late 1450s and 1460s negotiated regularly with his brother Michael Angelović, a high-ranking Serbian official, for Serbia's incorporation into the Ottoman empire.²⁴ Lesser Ottoman *kul* administrators must also have retained such local links and languages. It is likely, for instance, that the janissary officers and their scribes appointed to carry out *devşirme* recruitment in the Balkan provinces were allocated to their region of origin,

²¹ Çiçek 2002; see also the essays by Rossitsa Gradeva and Evgenia Kermeli in this volume.

²² Minkov 2004: 28-63.

²³ On educated captives employed as Ottoman interpreters, see the essay by Tijana Krstić in this volume.

²⁴ Stavrides 2001, which also assesses Mahmud Paşa's reputation as the exemplary 'sultan of vezirs' on account of his cultural patronage and Muslim piety. See also Murphey 2002: 142 for a 16th-century account of Sokollu Mustafa Paşa's visit to his home region in Bosnia.

where they spoke the local language. In the seventeenth century two rival groups emerged in the Ottoman military-administrative establishment – recruits of eastern, Caucasian origin and those of western, Albanian or Bosnian origin – each characterised by linguistic and local ties.²⁵

In short, a significant proportion of Ottoman military-administrative officials, particularly those posted to the Balkan provinces in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, must have been effectively bilingual. Thus there was not necessarily a language barrier between Turkish-speaking officials and others. The situation appears subtly different in the Arab provinces. Although here too Turkish was officially the language of government and the political elite, in the predominantly Muslim world it was also just one of several local colloquial languages, all of which were eclipsed in usage and cultural prestige by Arabic. Many urban Arabic-speakers – administrators, merchants, artisans and scholars – who needed to communicate professionally with Ottoman officials or who sought patronage in Istanbul certainly learned Turkish. On the other hand, before the nineteenth century, relatively few native Arabic speakers were appointed to significant posts in the central administration in Istanbul, and no *devşirme* and few *kul* officials appointed from Istanbul in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had Arabic as their native tongue, or family ties with any areas in Syria, Iraq or Egypt.²⁶ The chief *kadis* of major cities such as Damascus, Mecca and Cairo were learned Istanbul Ottomans thoroughly competent in scholarly Arabic but who did not necessarily speak a vernacular form; most of their deputies and probably all their court staff, including translators (here, for the benefit more of the *kadi* than the petitioners?), were local Arabic speakers.

Hence the nature and degree of linguistic integration in the Arab provinces differed from that in the Balkan provinces. Although Arabic speakers perhaps had a cultural prestige, they were not drawn into the central government and did not have the same potential for influence upon Ottoman policy as did speakers of Greek and Balkan languages. However, as Ehud Toledano has shown, the growth during the seventeenth

²⁵ Kunt 1974. On language use in Ottoman Hungary, see the essay by Gábor Ágoston in this volume.

²⁶ But see Ze'evi 1996: 39-41 for the *devşirme* origin of the Ridwan dynasty of governors of Gaza in the 16th and 17th centuries.

and eighteenth centuries of ‘Ottoman-local’ elites and their households in Arab towns and cities promoted much stronger social and cultural links between, on the one hand, janissaries and centrally appointed officials and, on the other, a variety of local notables. Among such groups, a significant level of everyday bilingualism resulted,²⁷ although to what extent such ‘Ottomanization’ extended into literary culture is another matter.²⁸

Despite these variations, it is likely that Turkish was a workable tool of oral communication throughout the greater part of the empire, operating as an essential *lingua franca*. The linguistic classification of Turkish as a language of Altaic origin unrelated, and implicitly alien, to the Indo-European and Semitic languages spoken by Ottoman subject peoples is irrelevant when examining its practical use among contemporaries. Loan words for essential items were common in both directions and in virtually all languages, as any survey of terms particularly for food, dress and other items of material culture would show.²⁹ The use of more abstract Arabic and Persian vocabulary in the formal written language simply parallels in a different sphere the borrowing of such practical, everyday terms.

Differences in spoken language, because they were so common and relatively flexible, were not necessarily an obstacle to understanding. However, oral communication was one thing; reading documents and texts, and participating in learned culture, was another. Understanding of written language within the empire was obviously limited in all areas and all cultures to small literate minorities. Literacy rates in any of the major languages spoken in the Ottoman empire before 1800 were probably as variable at any given time as they were in the major languages of Europe, higher in urban areas where schools were founded and government officials, merchants and community leaders recorded transactions on paper, and barely measurable in rural areas, where 80 per cent to 90 per cent of the population lived a largely paper-free existence. Oral and aural capacity to transmit and receive information remained dominant; the content of

²⁷ See the essay by Ehud Toledano in this volume.

²⁸ For 18th-century views, see Barbir 1996: 202-4; Rafeq 1999.

²⁹ E.g., Lewis 1996. Cf. Kahane *et al.* 1958, the classic study of Greek and Italian borrowings in Turkish nautical vocabulary from the early Ottoman period onwards. Zack 2009 shows how far Turkish vocabulary had penetrated spoken Arabic by the 17th century (my thanks to Nelly Hanna for this reference).

written documents was routinely amplified by a courier's oral message, useful at the time but not for the later historian.³⁰

Ottoman literary culture

In accordance with long-established Muslim practice, the Ottomans recognized the religious, legal and cultural autonomy of Christian and Jewish confessional communities within the empire, both in the Balkans where non-Muslims were initially in the majority and in Anatolia and the Arab world where a myriad of ancient Christian churches and small Jewish communities survived.³¹ Compulsion in either Islamification or Turkification of whole communities would have been counter to the Islamic governing ethos, unnecessarily antagonistic and impractical in numerical terms.

At a popular level, Christians and Muslims often shared elements of religious practice, both revering the same saint or holy place and participating together in seasonal rituals.³² However, among the literate, religious and therefore literary cultures remained distinct and non-Muslim learned traditions were maintained separately under Ottoman rule. A recent study of Belgrade, a major Ottoman administrative centre in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, indicates that despite much social and occupational interaction in this confessionally mixed and relatively cosmopolitan city, there was nevertheless 'no hint of intellectual communication between Muslim and non-Muslim religious communities'.³³ On the other hand, a study of literature printed in Istanbul during the nineteenth century suggests that, in this era at least, it was possible for Turks, Greeks, Armenians and other groups to participate to some degree in a common literary culture.³⁴ Printing, translation, the inspiration provided by French and other western models, plus the sophisticated cultural environment of Istanbul in the *tanzimat* reform era, must all have influenced this participation. However, such a development raises questions about where the

³⁰ Houston 2002 on pre-modern European literacy generally; 245-59 on 'oral and aural culture'. See also Nelly Hanna's discussion of literacy among Egyptian artisans elsewhere in this volume.

³¹ On the so-called '*millet* system', see Masters 2001: 16-67.

³² Cf., Hasluck 1929; Ocak 2006: 400-5.

³³ Fotić 2005: 54.

³⁴ Strauss 1995b and 2003; see also essays on earlier non-Muslim book production within the empire in Hitzel 1999.

distinction between popular and learned literatures really lay in earlier periods, and whether the cultural dichotomy which appears so clear in Belgrade tells the whole story. Leaving aside the liturgical and theological aspects, in terms of storytelling, of heroic and edifying tales, where did shared popular culture end and differentiated learned culture begin? The Alexander legend, for example, was familiar to sultans and peasants alike, in a variety of languages and registers, as were the exploits of the Christian Aya Yorgi (St George) and his alter ego, the Muslim popular hero Hızır İlyas.³⁵ What role did literate converts play in the transmission of culture? Cross-cultural interpretations such as those discussed by Tijana Krstić may not have been unusual, albeit on a different level.³⁶ What might the situation have been if Ottoman printing – and with it, more accessible evidence of reading habits – had been introduced sooner? Further study of pre-1800 ‘Ottoman’ reading habits and cultural appreciation could yield surprising results.³⁷

Leaving aside such broad speculations, the remainder of this essay focusses on ‘Ottoman literary culture’ in its usual meaning of the verse and prose forms of initially court-centred literature produced by and for the *Osmanlılar*, ‘the followers of [the House of] Osman’, the political and learned elites. Although only one of several written cultures within the empire, it was the one consciously developed to project Ottoman values and self-image among those who mattered. The following discussion asks both how this literary culture might be viewed in a comparative perspective, and how we might assess the possible extent of its appeal. Ideally, in terms of the Ottoman world in general, we should also consider the significance of Ottoman literary culture beyond Istanbul and in the reverse influence of Muslim scholarly culture upon the Ottomans.

There is currently no major modern ‘history of Ottoman literature’ in any western language. The nearest are the nineteenth-century, multi-volume studies of Ottoman

³⁵ On the Alexander legend, see Stoneman 2008; on St. George/Hızır, see Ocak 2009: 402 and Brotton 2005.

³⁶ See her essay in this volume, including comments on Ottoman use of the Alexander legend.

³⁷ On the emergence of ‘a non-religious dimension to culture’ in 18th-century Cairo, see Hanna 2003: 107-8; on books listed in Damascus inventories c. 1700, see Estabiet and Pascual 1999.

poetry by the Austrian diplomat and scholar Joseph von Hammer (d. 1856) and the British Orientalist E. J. W. Gibb (d. 1901), published in the 1830s and the 1900s respectively. In Turkish, the broader, encyclopaedic works of scholars such as Mehmed Fuad Köprülü and Ağah Sırrı Levend, both writing in the mid twentieth century, remain essential references, although the volume of publications on specific elements of Ottoman literature is now increasing rapidly.³⁸

Until relatively recently, writing a general survey of pre-nineteenth-century Ottoman literature was fairly straightforward. It would begin with texts in ‘Old Anatolian Turkish’, the colloquial-cum-written language of thirteenth and fourteenth-century Anatolia which remained the natural and most widespread idiom in ordinary communication, factual reportage and popular culture in Turkish-speaking communities throughout the Ottoman period. This continuity is illustrated by the poems attributed to Yunus Emre (d. 1310) which, in contrast to fourteenth-century texts in English or French, need relatively little commentary for modern native readers. Our survey would then chart how, for well over a century, sultans from Mehmed II (1451-81) onwards sought to align Ottoman literature with the prestigious Perso-Islamic culture by attracting Persian poets and writers to their court and by encouraging the influence of Persian styles through translations and imitative works, particularly of poetry, metrical romances and historiography.³⁹ This resulted by the late sixteenth century in Ottoman-Persian verse and prose texts of considerable linguistic and conceptual sophistication. Incorporation of the Arab world into the empire after 1517 and the foundation of more *medreses* under Ottoman patronage, also produced a steady increase in knowledge of written Arabic and the more widespread use of Arabic words and phrases within the Ottoman-Persian written language. The pride taken in this aesthetic style is neatly encapsulated in the following declaration by Mehmed Nergisi (d. 1635), one of the most revered (and later most reviled) Ottoman prose stylists of the early seventeenth century, all of whose written work is located firmly at the complex end of the Ottoman language spectrum:

... the Turkish [*sic*] language of pleasing expression [*is*] distinguished by its

³⁸ As indicated in Halman *et al.* 2006, a 4-volume multi-contributor history of Turkish literature.

³⁹ Sohrweide 1970; Woodhead 1983.

gathering from the surrounding green meadows of various languages the choicest flowers of meaning approved by men of eloquence and, through collecting thence the fruits of clarity, admired for its natural qualities of pure and sound measure agreeable to the palate.⁴⁰

The Ottoman text of this passage contains around 5 per cent vocabulary of Turkish origin, 20 per cent Persian and 75 per cent Arabic; it is held together, typically, by the Persian *izafet* grammatical construction. Such rhyming, rhetorical prose, was closely related to chancery style and bears comparison with other *belles lettres* traditions, including those of the Byzantine empire and Italian Renaissance states, and ultimately with its Arabic and Persian models.⁴¹

The resulting Ottoman Turkish ‘high style’ helped give a cohesive cultural definition to Ottoman learned and ruling elites of very diverse origins, and provided a suitable vehicle through which to voice imperial cultural and political aspirations: ‘a facility with Ottoman, as opposed to simpler Turkish, came to be one of the hallmarks of membership in the Ottoman ruling class’.⁴² The Ottoman empire could thereby be presented as the Muslim civilisation which incorporated, superseded, and outshone its predecessors. Proponents of *Turki-i basit*, the ‘simple Turkish’ style closer to the colloquial, always existed. With regard to court poetry, they appear only as a small minority, with occasional notable figures, such as the poet Nedim (d. 1730).⁴³ In prose, however, relatively simple Turkish remained a valid option for writers seeking a wider audience, as seen in some writings by the learned polymath Katib Çelebi (d. 1657).⁴⁴

Finally, our survey would suggest how from a high point somewhere in the seventeenth century, from which the empire was thought to be ‘in decline’ generally, literature was also considered to be gradually stagnating. A damning verdict by Gibb encapsulates the late nineteenth-century view: ‘that great race to which the Ottomans

⁴⁰ Woodhead 2007: 55.

⁴¹ On *inşa* style and letter-writing in Arabic, see Gully 2008. On the Arabic and Persian content in literary Ottoman, see Buğday 2009; cf. also Tietze 1973.

⁴² Fleischer 1986a: 22; Necipoglu 1991: 111-22 on the curriculum of the palace school for the future political elite.

⁴³ Silay 1994; Murphey 2002: 152-3.

⁴⁴ Cf. Katib Çelebi 1956.

belong ... has never produced any religion, philosophy or literature which bears the stamp of its individual genius'.⁴⁵

Such a survey and conclusion could no longer stand scrutiny. Even in Gibb's unequivocal statement – which prefaces his immensely detailed six-volume study of classical Ottoman *divan* poetry, the premier literary genre – the inconsistency is evident. While roundly condemning the Ottomans for slavishly following Persian exemplars, Gibb yet managed to celebrate several centuries of a highly artistic and meaningful idiom. His difficulty lay in reconciling the poetry which clearly fascinated him with the dismissive views of his Ottoman acquaintances in London during the 1890s, men eager to develop new styles of Ottoman literature under western influences. They considered pre-1860 Ottoman literary culture, including poetry, as largely imitative even when strikingly expressive and to have been, from around 1650 onwards, 'mumbl[ing] the dry bones of a long-dead culture'.⁴⁶

However, just as the assumption of a long political 'decline' no longer dominates Ottomanist studies, the tenacious notion of Ottoman cultural sterility arising out of statements such as that by Gibb is now being steadily undermined, from several angles.⁴⁷ Hatice Aynur's presentation of current Turkish scholarship on seventeenth and eighteenth-century Ottoman poetry emphasizes two significant points. First, it shows Ottoman poetry to have been a varied and constantly evolving art form, rather than one which had become fossilized by the early seventeenth century. Second, her survey suggests that over the centuries thousands of men, and a few women, must have contributed to the genre.⁴⁸ Although the most well-known poets are generally those who attracted court patronage, composing and reciting verse was a highly regarded activity throughout Ottoman society.⁴⁹ Men from all walks of life composed verse. Istanbul, with its concentration of wealthy patrons, remained the centre of

⁴⁵ Gibb 1900: I, 6.

⁴⁶ Gibb 1900: I, 132.

⁴⁷ Cf. Bauer 2005 for the 'deplorable' state of study into Mamluk literature, resulting partly from the similarly deleterious influence of 19th-century 'Western prejudices'.

⁴⁸ Aynur 2006: 507 notes 1,322 poets recorded just in 18th-century Ottoman biographical dictionaries of poets; Andrews and Kalpaklı 2005: 195-216 discuss 16th-century Ottoman women poets.

⁴⁹ Aynur 2006: 499-507.

poetic activity, but not the only one. Mustafa Ali noted in 1562 ‘more than twenty poets’ at the court of Prince Selim (later Selim II, 1566-74) in Kütahya in western Anatolia, and ‘found some thirty poets in residence’ in Baghdad (not a centre of princely government) in the mid 1580s.⁵⁰ The ‘urbane and witty gentlemen’ of Ohrid admired by Evliya Çelebi, and the *aljamiado* poets of Albania were not isolated examples of provincial participation in the so-called ‘elite’ Ottoman culture. Comparatively little work has been done on the social context and reception of Ottoman poetry, as opposed to the technical aspects of composition and the inner world of influence of one poet upon another. It is nevertheless clear that the close association of *divan* poetry with Sufi mysticism, the itinerant tradition of sufi learning, and the popularity of taverns and coffeehouses among poets and dervishes from various backgrounds ensured that Ottoman *divan* poetry was far from an elite, Istanbul-based preserve.⁵¹

The names of many poets and writers indicate strong provincial connections, whether places of origin or of association,⁵² indicating that echoes of Ottoman culture could both filter down the social scales and radiate through provincial centres, particularly in Anatolia and the Balkans. The extent to which provincial governors and their ‘pasha households’ reflected the cultural as well as the organizational and clientage aspects of the Ottoman centre deserves closer study, especially the degree to which they connected with local communities and thereby conveyed elements of specifically Ottoman culture. Much of Mustafa Ali’s literary output was dedicated to the provincial governors and commanding generals whom he served outside Istanbul; Evliya Çelebi’s position of educated companion to his kinsman Melek Ahmed Paşa enabled him to undertake many of his extensive travels during the pasha’s provincial appointments.⁵³ As indicated above, both writers appear to have found congenial company in the provinces. In the Arabic-speaking parts of the empire, Ottoman cultural elements were apparently evident to some degree even in such prestigious centres of Arab culture as Damascus and Cairo.⁵⁴ Dina Rizk Khoury, in observing

⁵⁰ Fleischer 1986a: 38, 123, and passim for the late 16th-century cultural milieu generally.

⁵¹ Andrews and Kalpaklı 2005: 69-72.

⁵² E.g. Aynur 2006: 502, 506-7.

⁵³ Fleischer 1986a; Dankoff 1991.

⁵⁴ Winter 2005.

how the eighteenth-century Jalili governors of Mosul sought to create their own court culture, draws attention to Mosuli intellectuals' close interest in political developments in Istanbul, and to shared cultural values.⁵⁵ Whilst such values may have been as much Muslim as Ottoman, and the political dimension cannot be overlooked, this connection is nevertheless indicative of a certain Ottoman cultural influence.

Notable among the innumerable aspirant literary figures drawn to Istanbul from the provinces is the poet Nabi (d. 1712), whose output also exemplifies many of the points already made about Ottoman literature. The son of a learned and religious family in Urfa, southeastern Anatolia, in the mid 1660s Nabi travelled independently to Istanbul, where he spent some twenty years and through his literary ability gained the patronage of a close companion of Mehmed IV (1648-87). Most of his later life was spent in Aleppo, writing in semi-retirement. His ten major works range in style from the complex *inşa* prose of the account of his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1678-9 written for presentation to the sultan, to the relatively simple verse of the book of advice written in 1701 for his seven-year-old son. Other works include two anthologies of *divan* poetry, one Turkish and one Persian, a verse account of the circumcision festival of 1675 given for the sons of Mehmed IV, a translation into 'simple Turkish' of a popular collection of forty sayings concerning the Prophet Muhammed, and a collection of Nabi's own letters to Ottoman friends and statesmen.⁵⁶ In other words, Nabi composed in a variety of genres, in two languages, and in differing registers of written Ottoman for a relatively diverse range of readers, adapting his style to suit the purpose of each work.

An alternative and intriguing insight into the compilation of at least some Ottoman texts and into the use of language is offered in the recent publication of the 'autobiographies' of the sixteenth-century chief architect Sinan (d. 1588).⁵⁷ Five texts are presented, all by one author. The introductions to each of the first four are sequential elaborations of the same basic account, compiled originally from Sinan's dictation. They present a rare opportunity to study the process of composition, such as

⁵⁵ Khoury 1997: 160-78, esp. 168.

⁵⁶ Aynur 2006: 485 ff.; Coşkun 2000.

⁵⁷ Crane and Akin 2006.

how simple statements were gradually elaborated, in what form, where and why prayers and poetry were introduced, the relationship between prose and verse and the varying vocabulary and imagery used as the text was developed. The fifth text is a work of consciously literary *inşa* prose, different in format to the other four, but obviously dependent upon them for content. Together, they show an Ottoman text literally under construction.

Finally, it may also be useful to re-evaluate the significance of the Ottoman relationship to Arabic and Persian cultural models. Given that major Ottoman engagement with this cultural heritage occurred at roughly the same time and in similar ways to the early modern engagement with the Greek and Latin heritage in the west, why is only one of these movements considered a renaissance with positive outcomes?⁵⁸ Equally, there are many parallels between the Ottoman relationship to the Perso-Islamic heritage and that of other Turkic ruling dynasties, which undermine the notion of an imitative, relatively unimaginative Ottoman attachment.

Not only did the Persian influence upon Turkish courtly culture in Anatolia begin with the Seljuks in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and thus pre-date the establishment of the Ottoman emirate, it was also dominant in the other major Turkic empires – Uzbek, Mughal and Safavid – of the early modern era. More generally, some degree of cross-influence between the Turkish and Persian languages had existed for centuries in northern Iran and Central Asia. One particular cultural model for sixteenth-century Ottomans was the court of the last Timurid sultan of Herat, Hüseyin Baykara (d. 1506), patron of the Persian poet Cami and of the vezir Mir Ali Şir Nevai (d. 1501). The latter's 'Evaluation of the two languages' held that his own literary language, Çagatay Turkish, was richer than Persian, which it subsumed. Çagatay Turkish remained the written and spoken idiom of the successor Uzbek state until the early twentieth century.⁵⁹ In northern India, the Mughal empire founded by the Çagatay-speaking Timurid prince Babur (d. 1530) took adherence to Persian much further. By around 1600 Persian had been adopted as both the written language of literature and administration and as the preferred spoken idiom of the elite. As

⁵⁸ Andrews and Kalpaklı 2005 strongly advocate further comparative study of Ottoman and European literatures.

⁵⁹ Eraslan 1993.

Mehmed II had tried to attract Persian scholars and poets to Istanbul in the mid fifteenth century, so too did the Mughal emperor Akbar (1556-1605) a century later.⁶⁰ In Iran, the Turkic dynasty founded by Ismail Safavi in 1501 grafted a Turkish-speaking political-military elite onto indigenous Persian-speaking literary and administrative groups, resulting in a third variant on the Turkish-Persian cultural relationship.⁶¹ Seen in these broader perspectives, the Persian influence upon Ottoman appears much less dominant and prescriptive. Persian did not become the first language spoken at the sultan's court, as it did in Muslim India; nor from the late sixteenth-century did it remain a language of choice for much literary composition beyond certain types of poetry. Ottoman was a form of Turkish considerably enriched by Persian elements, but – arguably – not overtaken by them.

The influence of Arabic upon written Ottoman was also profound, although in comparison with Persian few literary works were composed entirely in this language. However, until at least the late seventeenth century, most works of religious and judicial scholarship were composed in Arabic and facility with the written language was compulsory for *medrese* students, from amongst whom the learned elite were drawn.⁶² Rudiments of Arabic might also be gleaned by many from Koran classes and elementary education in boyhood. In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, an ambitious Ottoman student from Anatolia or the Balkans might follow the well-established tradition of travelling for his education, spending several years with highly-regarded teachers in Damascus and Cairo and often combining study in the Hijaz cities of Mecca and Medina with performance of the pilgrimage. With the establishment in the 1550s of the Süleymaniye colleges in Istanbul as the highest level of Ottoman religious education, there was less incentive to travel and more reason to focus on the centre of patronage and employment in the capital. Although after 1517 it was easier to visit the major Arab cities, paradoxically a scholar's need to do so was largely diminished.

⁶⁰ Alam 1998; see also Dale 2010.

⁶¹ See, e.g., Perry 2001.

⁶² Cf. Katib Çelebi 1956: 135-56 and Chambers 1973 on courses of study for high-flying students in the 17th and 19th centuries respectively.

As the study of Ottoman literature gathers pace, our understanding of it can only become more nuanced. That there was a natural need to develop, on paper at least, an imperial idiom to serve political purposes and to provide a badge of cultural identity is generally accepted as a feature of the fifteenth and especially the sixteenth-century Ottoman world. Thereafter, as membership of 'the Ottoman group' began to expand in the seventeenth century, it drew into its cultural orbit a much greater range and number of people of varying levels of education, outlook and political commitment. What effects this greater participation had upon the use of language and the production of literary work is a major topic for study, which will usefully move away from the traditional focus on official texts and the contents of the sultan's library.

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