

REVIEW

Adrian GHEORGHE, *The Metamorphoses of Power. Violence, Warlords, Akıncıs and the Early Ottomans (1300–1450)*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2023, XVI+331 p., ISBN: 978-90-04-52666-2.

Based on extensive and laborious research, this well-written contribution aims to provide a general and yet consistent reinterpretation of the various underlying processes that allowed the Ottoman state to take shape during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The institution of the *akıncıs* proves to be an excellent case study for such a daring endeavour, allowing the author to painstakingly explore the many intricacies of violence and politics. Much scholarly ingenuity has been shown throughout the book in combining an effective methodological toolkit with factual arguments displaying a keen understanding of the historical past. It is not difficult to recognise the wide-ranging implications of this formidable feat of erudition, which has indeed the real potential to fundamentally challenge old and new preconceptions about the history of the early Ottomans in Europe.

The introductory chapter (p. 1-35) incorporates every ingredient the studious reader could have expected from a thoughtful introduction — a historiographical overview capable of justifying the author’s own approach, a judicious and balanced discussion of the relevant sources, as well as an uncommonly clear and vivid description of the concepts and methodology to which the author adheres. From a historiographical point of view, the book contrasts two long-established and nationalistic-centred approaches to the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans, which retain strong roots in the current economic and political landscape of the region. On the one hand, there is a traditional perspective embraced by several scholars from the modern Balkan states who saw in the Ottoman conquest of Southeastern Europe the unfair outcome of a fierce and devastating process carried out by fighters often portrayed as overwhelmingly mighty hordes of violent and irrational religious fanatics, fundamentally different from the subjugated native population, who unjustly appropriated local assets and practised a radical policy of forced conversion, laying hence the foundations of the much deplored “Turkish yoke.” On the other hand, the approach followed by several intellectuals from modern Turkey tended to foreground a rather peaceful process of gaining the loyalty of the autochthonous population pursued systematically by the Ottoman elite, who demonstrated political exceptionalism and military superiority and who implemented at central behest a grand strategy, which ultimately succeeded in saving the inhabitants of the Balkans from the political turmoil and the endemic civil war which had previously plagued their lives. According to this narrative, violence became the rightful expression of political pre-eminence, being

justifiably utilised in the context of a well-coordinated, fast and premeditated conquest mostly based on a large-scale strategy, during which the majority of the local population accepted without resentment the protection of the Ottomans, which in turn opened the path for an extended process of transition characterised by generous tolerance, peaceful accommodation, and smooth integration.

Be that as it may, the author persuasively contends that neither of these two predominant approaches offers a comprehensive understanding of the major transformations that unfolded in the Balkans towards the end of the Middle Ages. Furthermore, it becomes clearly apparent that the utilisation of these frameworks of historical interpretation renders any alternative approach more difficult, if not impossible, to formulate. Escaping unscathed from the prevalent reading grids, the author persistently seeks to put forward a more flexible and dynamic framework for analysis. The very concept of “conquest” is deemed to be highly unsuitable for a more in-depth survey, as it commonly implies that the Ottomans adopted a unitary martial strategy in a region as vast as the Balkans. This notion appears to be a post-factual explanation and a grand narrative provided by voices emanating from the triumphant party, since the conquest standpoint generally chooses the representation of key events from a heavily ideologised and teleological perspective of historical development that reads into the past ambitious political agendas of later epochs. In this sense, the readers are persuaded by a compelling plea in favour of the concept of “infiltration,” which, unlike the more self-contained notion of “conquest,” breaks with the traditional view of a grand strategy implemented by a central authority and highlights instead the idea of a gradual, heterogeneous and discontinuous process of penetration into the local nexus of power made possible through a wide range of pragmatic and short-term actions.

When viewed from the perspective of a multifaceted “infiltration” of Anatolian warlords and their followers into Southeast Europe, the scope of the investigation is considerably extended so as to encompass the diverse strategies that enabled this process to occur in the first place. The actions taken were as varied as the reality itself: bold military pursuits, diplomacy that assumes the form of continuous political negotiation, ideological and religious compromises, interreligious collaboration prompted by common interests, values and desires, circumstantial and fluctuating political-military alliances, profitable and competitive patronage, ruthless self-seeking opportunism, buying peace and political loyalties, bribery, pragmatic decisions contrived to meet immediate needs and conscious efforts towards developing a legitimising political discourse. Because the “Ottomans” were in fact composite groups of subjects and collaborators who pledged their loyalty to the House of Osman amid a much larger and intricate world, the author heavily relies on comparative reasoning and, in so doing, advocates for extending the general sphere of research to include the Eastern Mediterranean.

Two more points are worthwhile mentioning here. As made apparent to the reader, one of the main premises from which the analysis commences is that the manifestation of violence (such as in the context of armed conflicts) requires prior knowledge of the parties involved. It is inferred that military competition only takes place where there are already established several communication channels that ensure a mutual understanding of the stakes of the conflict and of the potential enemy's resources. It is, in the author's words, "impossible for outsiders to compete against members of a certain network without becoming part of the said network themselves." As a consequence, "coexistence precedes conflict situations. The network is older than the violence" (p. 33). The second point of utmost importance concerns the network itself. Since most networks of political entities share in many respects similar values and expectations and exercise partial control over limited resources, "all groups (including the Ottoman House) were «prisoners» of the limits of their network, which regulated their power and (re)actions" (p. 35). Besides the highly disputed timeline of actual battles fought by the Ottomans in Europe, this book draws the readers' attention to the fact that there is far more to the European history of the early Ottomans than first meets the eye.

In the first chapter of the book (p. 36-92), the author breaks away from a strictly chronological line of presentation by discussing the *akıncı* institution as it appears at a later stage of its history, namely during the middle and towards the end of the fifteenth century. In addition to the plethora of sources preserved for this era, which facilitate the formulation of a more nuanced overview, the decision to commence the exposition with a subsequent phase of the institution's evolution also possesses the advantage of enabling readers to contrast it with its initial stages of existence and to draw out similarities and differences (such as the new role played by the central authority in the regulation of violence). The author soundly argues that the dominant view generally endorsed by contemporary scholarship, namely that the *akıncıs* were recruited from nomadic or semi-nomadic groups and had a Turkic and/or Islamic background, is largely based on sources dating from the sixteenth century. Upon closer examination, before the relative homogenisation of the sixteenth century the regional variations appear to be significantly more marked than previously believed. The chapter examines the social categories from the Balkans that traditionally engaged in various military activities, as well as the issues of military equipment, technological acculturation in border regions and the complex question of the ethnicity of such militarised groups. These groups were typically part of larger communities based on multiple networks of subalterns and clientele, revolving around the coveted patronage of prominent regional warlords whose Christian roots were notorious in most cases. Who were the *akıncıs*? Regardless of their religion, they could be "freelancers," *i.e.* men "practising war as private business" (p. 57) or local settlers "with a family, stable household and steady base of income" for whom "war benefits were

additional income” (p. 77). As eloquently set forth by the author, “the *aķıncıs* were a hybrid, heterogenous and multi-layered construction that gathered various (allogeneous and autochthonous), mostly militarised or half-militarised, organisations under the umbrella of common lucrative preoccupations” (p. 90).

The second chapter of the book (p. 93-140) delves into the history of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and proposes a meticulous reassessment of the multiple roles played by the proto-Ottomans within the broader context of the Eastern Mediterranean. According to the author’s main contention, the various political-military associations established among the highly mobile population groups of Western Anatolia were primarily founded on common necessities and benefits rather than on religious and ethnic criteria. Even religious affiliations were more often than not the outcome of active negotiations and opportunistic compromises, which made them an integral component of highly fluid identities and ever-changing solidarities. Against a backdrop of insufficient resources and political fragmentation, these “communities of interest” (p. 124) that have acquired a cross-border character over time mostly engaged in a predatory economy, which fuelled the short-lived charisma of local warlords and encouraged geographic mobility and ethnic mixing of populations. Far from being inexperienced newcomers on the political arena opened around a Byzantium pushed to the verge of collapse, the Turkish mercenaries coming from Anatolia have been a constant presence since the thirteenth century in the military struggles between various regional actors, and even joined forces on several occasions with the famous Grand Catalan Company. The local practices of issuing coins provide another argument for their integration at the periphery of several worlds. As the local production of counterfeit European coins cogently demonstrates, several Anatolian *beglıks* located near the Western coast engaged in the Eastern Mediterranean market. At the same time, some of them minted coins after Ilkhanid models, but also small autonomous silver coins for the needs of the domestic market.

The third chapter (p. 141-191) examines the slow process of the Ottoman penetration into the Balkans. The primary question raised is what led several Anatolian warriors to permanently settle in the Balkans in the mid-fourteenth century, after five decades during which they had been accustomed to returning to Anatolia at the end of the military season (p. 163-164, 179). In this regard, particular attention is paid to the socio-political landscape of the fourteenth-century Balkans. The period is generally characterised by a diminution in resources and a significant “political atomisation” (*i.e.* “the emergence of small politico-military entities” — p. 149), particularly in the border regions between Byzantium and the Slavic states, resulting in the multiplication of opportunistic alliances and the intensification of local conflicts. But the main factor that precipitated major changes appears to have been the excessive use of Anatolian mercenaries, both in the fights between the competing Byzantine factions and in the wars that opposed Byzantines, Bulgars, and Serbs. Certain members of the

Byzantine elite not only advocated for close cooperation with the Ottomans, but also endorsed the permanent settlement of Anatolian warrior groups in Thrace. With the Christian powers occasionally engaging in fierce competition for the military support of the Turks, the gradual infiltration of Anatolian elements into the Balkan networks of power was only a matter of time. The vacuum left by the traditional authorities throughout the Balkans also created new opportunities to expand one's power and to claim political legitimacy.

The final chapter (p. 192-251) traces the formation processes of several autonomous political-military entities in the Balkans, which were ruled by warlords of various origins, among which several leading *aķınca* families stood out. Despite possessing significant power and freedom of action, these regional centres of authority were enshrined within a much more extensive hierarchical nexus of power and tended to loosely align around the House of Osman over the course of time. The author painstakingly discusses the rather controversial chronology of the expansion of warlords' dominions in Thrace, as well as the political strategies used by Sultans Murad I and Bayezid I in order to impose their authority over the various political constellations of Rumelia. A scrupulous examination of the manners in which the Balkan warlords are depicted in Venetian and Ragusan documents enables the author to highlight the influence these warlords held and their prominence in regional politics. Instead of an authoritarian and centrally governed polity led by almighty sultans from Edirne, the political landscape of Rumelia appears to be a heterogeneous confederation of mostly autonomous warlords who reached their peak of political power during the civil war that ensued after the sudden demise of Sultan Bayezid I.

The unique journey the reader takes throughout this book, whose main stages we have tried to summarise above, will assuredly serve to further persuade scholars to reassess the fundamental principles that underlie our comprehension of the genesis of the Ottoman Empire. The author has proficiently succeeded in turning a real conundrum of historical exegesis into an absorbing and illuminating presentation. His thorough knowledge of the bibliography alongside his pervasive and unwavering commitment to unravel the numerous and difficult to grasp rhetorical and factual layers embedded in the written sources are highly commendable. It is no wonder that such an impeccable piece of scholarship will lay solid foundations for future research.

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