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ABSTRACT

Helen Pfeifer's *Empire of Salons* employs the tools of intellectual and social history to analyze the role that salons played in the integration of the Arabic-speaking lands into the Ottoman Empire. Based primarily on Arabic and Ottoman Turkish sources, Pfeifer uses the figure of the Damascus-based scholar Badr al-Din al-Ghazzī (1499-1577) and the members of his family and network to demonstrate that salons were of central importance to both Arabs and Rumis as they navigated the new, post-conquest realities of the 16th century.

Keywords: Salons, Arab Provinces, Arab-Rumi Encounters, Intellectual History, Social History.

ÖZ

Helen Pfeifer'in *Empire of Salons* (Mecâlis İmparatorluğu) adlı eseri, Osmanlı meclislerinin (örneğin ulema, şuara, udeba meclisleri) Arapça konuşulan toprakların Osmanlı Devleti'ne entegrasyonundaki rolünü analiz etmek için entelektüel ve sosyal tarih araçlarını kullanır. Pfeifer, temel olarak Arapça ve Osmanlı Türkçesi kaynaklara dayanan eserinde Şam merkezli âlimlerden olan Bedreddin Gazi (1499-1577) ve aile fertlerinin sosyal ağlarını ele alarak meclislerinin, 16. yüzyılda yeni ve fetih sonrası Osmanlı gerçekliklerini yönlendirerek Araplar ve Rumiler için merkezi bir öneme sahip olduğunu göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mecâlis, Arap Eyaletleri, Arap-Rumi Karşılaşmaları, Entelektüel Tarih, Sosyal Tarih.



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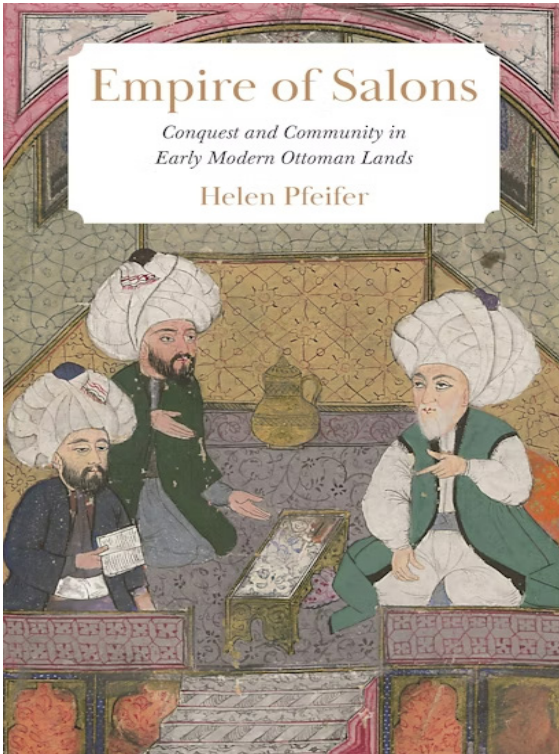
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The years 1516 and 1517 that saw the conquest of the Mamluk Sultanate by the Ottoman Empire are often described as marking a watershed in Islamic history. Numerous publications have examined not only the history of the conquest itself, but also its political, military, economic, and legal consequences for the new Arabic-speaking provinces of the Empire. Helen Pfeifer's *Empire of Salons* takes a different approach to the study of the post-conquest Arab world and employs the tools of intellectual and social history to analyze the role that salons (*majālis*) played in the integration of especially Syria into the Ottoman Empire. Based primarily on Arabic and Ottoman Turkish sources, Pfeifer uses the figure of the Damascus-based scholar Badr al-Dīn al-Ghazzī

(1499-1577) and the members of his family and their network to demonstrate that salons were of central importance to both Arabs and Rumis as they navigated the new, post-conquest realities of the 16th century.

The book features black-and-white 19 figures and consists of an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion, an appendix listing key figures, a glossary, a bibliography, and an index. The Introduction (pp. 1–23) outlines the topic of the book, presents its main arguments, defines its key terms, and provides an overview of its structure. *Empire of Salons* examines Ottoman salons in their broader social and intellectual context to show that these gatherings “functioned as key institutions of empire, contributing substantially to the Ottoman system of governance” (p. 1). Marked by high levels of competition for the material, social, and political rewards that successful participation in salons could entail, these gatherings were according to Pfeifer of great significance for the cultural and social incorporation of the Arabic-speaking provinces into the Empire. Even during the 16th century when the Ottoman centralized and bureaucratic administration was arguably at its peak of efficiency, informal gatherings such as salons were important for the running of the Empire and helped in creating a sense of belonging and social cohesion across its vast territorial expansion. In Pfeifer’s words: “The sociability that salons enabled was a key ingredient of the glue that held the Ottoman Empire together” (p. 23).

Using two travelers as examples, one from the Arab lands and one from Rum, Chapter 1 (“A World Divided,” pp. 24–56) examines the similarities and differences between the Ottoman

and Mamluk salon cultures immediately prior to the conquest. The chapter demonstrates that shared religious characteristics, common intellectual interests, a mutually understandable salon etiquette, and comparable dynamics of patronage established interconnections between the two salon cultures. At the same time, language differences and, as Pfeifer claims, a stronger Persianate orientation among Rumis counted among the factors that set the two cultures apart. Moreover, Pfeifer shows in this chapter that contemporaries considered Rumi and Arab learned cultures to be of unequal standing, with many more Rumis travelling to the Arabic-speaking lands in the pursuit of knowledge than the other way round.

Chapter 2 (pp. 57–96) explores the theme of “An Empire Connecting” by shedding light on the history of salon culture in the first two decades after the conquest of the Arab lands. It shows that salons were central to integrating Arab notables into the Ottoman imperial system. They served as venues of patronage in which Arabs exchanged local knowledge and recognition of the new political realities for appointments and financial support. In doing so, Arab notables rendered essential services to Ottoman officials, who, to a significant degree, depended on their Arab interlocutors to collect the local knowledge that they needed to guarantee the proper administration of the newly conquered lands. The chapter, moreover, examines the experiences of itinerant Rumis in Damascus-based salons and those of Arabs visiting Istanbul. It shows that characteristics such as a shared orientation towards Sufism facilitated meaningful encounters between Arabs and Rumis, making it possible to establish “relationships between Arabs and Rumis [that] were based on a two-sided, mutually beneficial exchange of resources” (pp. 94–95).

Chapter 3 (pp. 97–132), “A Place in the Elite,” explores salons as arenas where the members’ claims for social status were enacted, challenged, and defended. The chapter sheds light on aspects of etiquette and social conventions, such as how one got access to a salon, how one claimed a physical or symbolic place there, who could host a salon, what this entailed in terms of preparation, and how to dress for a salon. The picture that emerges from Pfeifer’s findings is one in which salons fulfilled vital functions in the maintenance and establishment of social hierarchies among participants who, while bound by expectations and unwritten rules, competed fiercely for the rewards that besting one’s rivals in an elite gathering could entail.

The next chapter (133–165) is called “The Art of Conversation.” It discusses the implications that participation in and mastery of salon conversations had for the attendees. The aspects it explores include the notion of *adab*, the role of poetry in salons, the importance of competition among salon participants, and the connection between what was said and done in salons on the one hand and what was written down in literary works of various genres on the other hand. The underlying question of the chapter is how all these aspects informed the relations between Arabs and Rumis with their, at the outset, different variants of salon culture and their unequal language skills.

Chapter 5 (“The Transmission of Knowledge,” pp. 166–199) examines the roles that salons played in the transmission of scholarly knowledge. It argues that the conquest of much of the Arabic-speaking world significantly impacted the development of Ottoman thought. It shows that due to the conquest and the subsequent encounters between Arabs and Rumis in salons and beyond, new intellectual trends gained a foothold in Ottoman learned culture, for example, in the field of *hadith* studies. Moreover, the chapter examines post-conquest

changes in reading practices and looks at how changing teaching practices contributed to the establishment of an integrated intellectual tradition shared among Arabs and Rumis. It furthermore analyses the consequences that integrating the Arabic-speaking lands into the Ottoman Empire had on literary production, focusing mainly on the genre of biographical dictionaries. Finally, the chapter discusses to which degree the transmission of knowledge was a reciprocal process vs. a one-directional exchange in which Arabs influenced the way Rumis engaged with scholarship and learning.

The conclusion (pp. 234–240) reviews the findings of the book with a focus on current themes in Ottoman Studies such as confessionalization and imperial rule. It moreover briefly discusses the later history of Ottoman salons after the 16th century.

Empire of Salons has several strengths that make it a pleasure to read. Well-written and well-structured, the book includes numerous that are meaningfully integrated into the text and serve to substantiate key points. A glossary makes the book highly accessible to non-experts, while more specialized readers will appreciate the detailed and precise footnotes, which, among other things, demonstrate that the author relied on an impressively broad array of primary sources and secondary literature in multiple languages. The greatest strength of the book, however, lies in its skillful, in-depth discussions of specific gatherings, texts, and debates, which allow readers to immerse themselves deeply into Ottoman salon culture.

While the book constitutes a most welcome contribution to the study of an often marginalized field of Ottoman history, future explorations of the same topic could use relevant theoretical tools and approaches even more. Theoretical insights into the interconnections between communication, speech, and performance as developed, for example, within the theory of speech acts, might have added analytical depth to sections of the book that remain largely descriptive, most notably Chapter 4. Moreover, one might wonder how functional the simplifying dichotomy of “center vs. periphery” that the book frequently invokes really is in analyzing complex processes of transregional exchange. Readers might moreover have wished for a more thorough discussion of the potentially Eurocentric connotations of the essential term “salon” that appears so prominently in the title of the book; however, the author only briefly deals with the term’s context of origin in early modern France is dealt with only very (pp. 12–13).¹ Finally, specialists in other periods of Islamic history might have reservations about statements that deal with pre-Ottoman history, such as the claim that in Egypt, “the cultivation of Islamic learning had begun in earnest under the Fatimids” (p. 43) or that “at no point were salons more important than after the Ottoman conquest of the Mamluk Sultanate in 1516–7” (p. 13) – a statement that is phrased in such absolute terms that experts in, e.g., ‘Abbasid or Mamluk salon cultures might beg to disagree.

These observations notwithstanding, there can be no doubt that Helen Pfeifer has gifted Ottoman Studies with an excellent book on a largely understudied aspect of Ottoman intellectual, social, political and imperial history. The gatherings that Pfeifer studies were often as delightful as they were highly instructive and the same can be said about her *Empire of Salons*.

1 For a discussion of the applicability of the term “salon” to Islamic history also see, Christian Mauder, *In the Sultan’s Salon: Learning, Religion and Rulership at the Mamluk Court of Qānisawh al-Ghawri* (r. 1501–1516) (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 70–72.