

KAYA ŞAHİN, *Peerless among princes: the life and times of Sultan Süleyman*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2023. XIV + 384 pp. – ISBN 978-0-19-753163-1

- ANDRÁS KRAFT, Einstein Center Chronoi ([krafta@zedat.fu-berlin.de](mailto:krafta@zedat.fu-berlin.de))

Süleymān I (r. 1520–66) was the longest-reigning sultan on the Ottoman throne. His eventful and multifaceted life lends itself to various interpretations and approaches. The book under review focuses on contemporary sixteenth-century sources, primarily in Ottoman Turkish and, to a lesser extent, in Italian and French. The selected sources allow for a portrayal of the long-lived sultan as a conqueror and empire-builder, lawgiver and poet. The purpose of the book is to present a source-based biographical account that “restore[s] Süleyman’s place among the major figures of the sixteenth century” (p. 5) and to show him as an individual who struggled to succeed. The book consists of an introduction, conclusion, a bibliography, index, and seven chapters that describe chronologically the pedigree, life, and legacy of Sultan Süleymān.

The first chapter sketches the political history of the Ottomans stretching from ‘Osmān I (d. 1324) to Bāyezīd II (d. 1512), Süleymān’s grandfather. The gradual expansion of the Ottoman realm is shown to have gone hand in hand with changes in the administration and dynastic identity. Initially, the “Ottoman enterprise” (p. 10, *passim*) was characterized by frontier warfare and raiding, but in time it came to rely increasingly on the “successful redistribution of resources to its supporters” (p. 22) and on genealogical claims that connected the Ottomans to the mythical past of the Old Testament and Roman/Byzantine identity. Bāyezīd II created the image of the sultan as poet, patron, gentleman – an image that Süleymān eventually came to epitomize. Notwithstanding innovations in courtly etiquette, Ottoman succession was persistently regulated by two irreconcilable principles: every prince had the same right to succeed his father, yet only one prince could become sultan (p. 33). Those principles translated into the Ottoman practice of fratricide. ŞAHİN asserts that this practice imposed a “psychological burden” (pp. 33, 62, 82, *passim*) on princes, which shaped their competitive characters and actions.

The second and third chapters are largely devoted to Süleymān’s upbringing and the struggles of his father Selim I (d. 1520) in claiming the throne.

Süleymān grew up in remote Trabzon, in the Eastern Black Sea region, which, in the early sixteenth century, was still inhabited predominately by Christians. The chapter gives a vivid description of the rugged terrain, humid climate, and local diet (pp. 41ff), before zooming in on the individuals who had a formative impact on Süleymān's early life, such as his nursing brother Yaḥyā and his tutor Ḥayreddin. Despite the scarcity of sources, ŞAHİN reconstructs the young prince's literary education, his developing fondness for poetry, and the military ethos he imbibed. At his father's request, Süleymān was appointed governor in Caffa (Crimea), which allowed both, father and son, to move out from the political remoteness of Trabzon. ŞAHİN recounts in minute detail Süleymān's household in Caffa (pp. 72–74) and the gifts he received from his father on the occasion of his next governorship of Saruhan (western Anatolia) (p. 84). The detailed accounts of key events of Süleymān's early reign enliven the political narrative of Selim's bid for the throne, which ultimately succeeded in 1512. During his short reign, Selim I (r. 1512–20) achieved much: he defeated the Safavids in 1514, stopping their westward expansion, as well as the Mamluks in the following years, annexing Egypt and taking custody of the Hejaz. Süleymān's father set the bar of sultanic achievements high.

Chapter four describes how Süleymān contended with his father's overshadowing legacy, whose reign contemporaries compared "to the afternoon sun: it was short-lived, yet it cast a long shadow" (p. 105). After taking up residence in the New Palace (known today as Topkapı Sarayı) in Constantinople, Süleymān ordered the execution of allegedly corrupt dignitaries to vindicate his credentials as a just ruler (p. 107). In need of a martial reputation, he quickly quelled a rebellion in Syria in 1520 and went on to invade the Kingdom of Hungary, taking Szabács (not Szábacs, pp. 113–115, 138) and Belgrade in 1521. Süleymān's military exploits early on in his reign surprised Western potentates, who had expected him to be less of a menace than his father (pp. 105f). The image of the Turk in the West is briefly discussed (p. 119), before the narrative explores Süleymān's personal life, his household, and harem. Süleymān is presented as a man who sought intimacy in unusually close relationships, first and foremost with his concubine Ḥürrem (Roxelana) (pp. 120–122, cf. pp. 171ff, 222) and his mother Ḥafsa, but also with İbrahim, his personal choice of grand vizier. ŞAHİN sees in Süleymān's uncustomary affection a response to his emotionally unavailable father and the constant fear of death in his youth (p. 122).

The fifth and sixth chapters recount Süleymān's intermittent wars and abid-

ing ideological struggle with the Habsburg and Safavid empires. The failed siege of Vienna (1529) meant that Süleymān had to contend with Emperor Charles V (r. 1519–58) for most of his reign. At the same time, the sultan had to compete with the Safavid shah, first with Shah Ismā‘īl I (d. 1524) and then with his son Ṭahmāsb I (r. 1524–76). Süleymān’s Persian campaign (1534–36) failed to produce definite results. Ultimately, the two theaters of war in Hungary and Mesopotamia had ambivalent outcomes. While they further entrenched Ottoman rule to the extent that they could “claim[] to act as the guarantors of peace within Europe” (p. 146), they were inconclusive in settling the ideological struggle that raged among the three emperors of the early to mid-sixteenth century, Charles V, Ismā‘īl I, and Süleymān I. All three vied for the mantle of the universal monarch, a messianic figure who was expected to bring spiritual and political unity to the inhabited world. ŞAHİN acknowledges the apocalyptic Zeitgeist of Süleymān’s age. He repeatedly refers to apocalyptic expectations and beliefs throughout the book (pp. 27, 39, 76, 99, 136f, 152, 157f, 162f, 196, 201, 242, 249; more generally on prophecies, cf. 1, 7, 117, 182, 189, 226), but he offers little in terms of new insights, nor does he specify how exactly “apocalyptic and messianic expectations played a prominent role in shaping the agendas of the empire-builders of the sixteenth century” (p. 137). The abundant but generic references to apocalyptic ideas leave the reader with more questions than answers and with a sense of ambivalence. On the one hand, ŞAHİN follows CORNELL FLEISCHER, who coined the term ‘Mediterranean Apocalypse’,<sup>1</sup> and emphasizes the general importance of messianism as a common denominator in the transregional discourse of imperial ideology. On the other hand, he seems to downplay its role in influencing actual policies at the Ottoman court, e.g., in view of the motivations behind the conquest of Hungary (p. 201) and with regard to Süleymān’s later reign, when the emphasis on universal rule is said to have abated (pp. 216, 242). The implicit assumption is the sultan gradually grew out of a juvenile enthusiasm for grandiose messianic ambitions.

The last chapter focuses on Süleymān’s pursuit to leave behind a positive legacy by patronizing the arts and architecture and by exhibiting public displays of pious behavior. He commissioned the *Sulaymānnāma*, a versified and illustrated account of his reign in emulation of the Persian *Shāhnāme* epic. In it, Süleymān is depicted as the typological antitype of Solomon

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1. CORNELL H. FLEISCHER, *A Mediterranean Apocalypse: Prophecies of Empire in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*. In: *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 61 (2018) pp. 18–90.

and as the Renewer (*müceddid*) of Islam, whose reign marks the pinnacle of providential history (p. 249). He also sponsored the construction of the *Süleymaniye* Mosque, which comprised a vast complex that included schools and charitable institutions (pp. 244f). Late in life he was keen to be seen as a promoter of pious behavior. ŞAHİN notes that he forbade music in the palace, avoided using precious cutlery, and closed drinking establishments while patronizing Qur’ān scribes and financing public building projects (pp. 263f). The preoccupation with his legacy-building is presented as a counterweight to the disease-stricken and tumultuous last years of his life. While he continued to campaign against the Safavids (1554–55) and the Habsburgs (1565–66), he also had to contend with critical voices at home (pp. 259–262) and address domestic issues that led to the execution of his grand vizier, Kāra Aḥmed, in 1555 (p. 252) and two of his offspring. Süleymān had his oldest son Muṣṭafā murdered in 1553 to preempt a succession struggle (pp. 228–237) and years later, in 1562, he had another son, Bāyezīd, killed for the same reason (pp. 252–258). Süleymān’s image-building was successful insofar as he is remembered not as a filicidal father but as a lawgiver, empire-builder, and defender of Sunni orthodoxy (p. 275).

ŞAHİN is well aware of the necessary limitations of any biography and “invite[s] the readers into the story [,] leav[ing] certain things open to their judgment and interpretation” (p. 7). One such thing that is left open and unaddressed are the striking similarities with the Byzantine past, for instance, with Emperor Justinian I (r. 527–65). The forceful promotion of Sunnism as a key element in Süleymān’s imperial ideology (pp. 185f) recalls Justinian’s advocacy of Neo-Chalcedonian orthodoxy as a perceived vector of political and religious unity. Likewise, Süleymān’s patronage of poetry and his aspiration to be viewed as a gifted poet (pp. 54f, 170) echoes Justinian’s reputation as a theologian and his adamant support for theological arbitration. More importantly, the sultan’s commission of the *Süleymaniye* Mosque as a new and ultimate temple of Solomon bears striking resemblance to Justinian’s *Hagia Sophia*. Another parallel is Süleymān’s grand military campaigns to the West and East of the Ottoman dominion, which were as costly and inconclusive in establishing universal rule (pp. 176, 217) as had been Justinian’s Gothic and Persian wars. Also, the appointment of talented outsiders, such as İbrahim, whom Süleymān promoted from being a household slave to his closest ally and commander-in-chief (*ser’asker*) only to have him hastily killed in 1536, calls to mind Justinian’s meritocracy and ostensible capriciousness, which allowed, for instance, Belisarios

to grow into the emperor's most accomplished field commander only to fall into disgrace unexpectedly in 543. Lastly, the uncustomary, intimate affection that the sultan conceived for his concubine Hürrem (p. 221) is reminiscent of the emperor's life-long devotion to the erstwhile courtesan Theodōra. Parallels with the Byzantine past, although occasionally alluded to in passing, are left unexplored. The reader has to be content with demographic estimates, which stress that Trabzon (p. 45), Caffa (p. 70), and the Ottoman Empire on the whole were inhabited predominately by Christians (p. 105), and with generic references to the apocalyptic anxieties that the Ottomans inherited from the Byzantines (p. 242, *passim*).

In conclusion, ŞAHİN's biography gives a compelling narrative that succeeds in standing clear of romanticizing Süleymān. Instead, the reader is offered an empathic portrait of a man of both virtues and vices, ambitions and anxieties. The greatest strengths of the book lie in the wealth of contemporary sources – including historical and diplomatic, epistolary and epigraphic, administrative and visual evidence, as well as extracts from the sultan's own poetry – and in the panoramic exposition of Süleymān's age and entourage. The sixteenth century is shown as a time when the Habsburg, Ottoman, and Safavid empires were locked in a colossal yet inconclusive struggle for universal monarchy, which gradually gave way to institutionalization, consolidation, and coexistence. At the same time, ŞAHİN pays great attention to Süleymān's companions, his favorite concubine and later wife Hürrem and his mother Hafsa, on the one hand, and the architect Mi'mār Sinān, chancellor Celālzāde Muştafā, and the grand viziers İbrahim, Lütfi, Rüstem, and Sokullu Mehmed, on the other. The proclivity to describe key events in minute detail, like the young prince's education (pp. 51–62) or his allegiance ceremony in 1520 (pp. 101f), fleshes out a portrait that is sound even when it goes beyond the historical evidence. The result is a "great man" history, which is a testament to the irresistible power of sultanic image-making and the abundance of Ottoman sources that can be studied to that end.

#### **Keywords**

Ottoman Empire; Süleyman I