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Edhem Eldem, L'Empire ottoman [The Ottoman Empire]

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Edhem Eldem, *L'EMPIRE OTTOMAN* [The Ottoman Empire], Paris: Humensis, 2022, 128 pages.

To write a very short study of anything notoriously demands a very long preparation and a very good narrative. Even more so, when you write a study to be included in the famous French *haute vulgarisation* series Que sais-je? In the case of the short history of the Ottoman Empire, published in December 2022, the readers in French have the good luck to enjoy the pen and the expertise of the excellent scholar Edhem Eldem, professor at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul, Turkey (still a leading university in Turkey despite the efforts of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the AKP government to control its administration), and lecturer at the College de France from 2017 to 2022. This short review, given the special character of the Que sais-je series, will make an effort to review the historiographical choices of the expert author, especially in the introduction ("Une histoire de l'Empire ottoman: Pourquoi, comment?") as a commentary on the state of the art in the historiography of the Ottoman Empire of our days.

The author starts his survey by pointing out the auspicious publication of an impressive number of new sources in Ottoman Turkish, since the 1980s, from the super-rich Ottoman archives, especially in Istanbul. When, at the same time, Edward W. Said was challenging the "Orientalist" narrative in the field of social sciences (1978), sources in Ottoman Turkish were expected to balance the historiography of the Ottoman Empire, which until then was based mainly on sources in Western European languages. However, the sources cannot speak for themselves: they were almost entirely biased products of the Ottoman state and religious institutions. Thus, as Eldem remarks, the historiography of the Ottoman Empire has been dominated by a Turkish version of nationalism. This is an important remark by a scholar living and teaching in modern Turkey: in Turkey itself, Ottoman history has been dominated by an irredentist and anti-Western Turkish nationalism, which has been instrumentalising "our ancestors, the Ottomans" (especially as revenge against the Kemalists). At the same time, outside Turkey, it is of paramount importance as well to not identify Ottoman history with Turkish history. The Ottoman Empire was a multiethnic and multireligious empire and society, not a Turkish nation-state.

According to Eldem, if we might hope one day to understand better the Ottoman Empire, this will be through descriptions

of other voices, outside the palace, outside or in the margins of the capital, challenging its chroniclers, the central bureaucracy and its subdivisions in the provinces. The conventional state-centred approach, the author remarks, has been under challenge by studies in Bulgaria, Greece, Israel, Europe, the United States and, of course, Turkey. These new approaches have made considerable efforts to circumvent, especially through peripheral views, the biases of the imperial centre in Ottoman history.

We are not, however, yet, according to Eldem, in the position to revise the conventional narrative of the history of the Ottoman Empire. A great historiographical shift of our days is that in Ottoman historiography we do not write any more about the Ottoman *decline* after the second half of the sixteenth century: the *decline* narrative has been more or less successfully rejected, being teleological rather than a historical reality. Since we know that the Ottomans finally collapsed in the beginning of the twentieth century, every earlier difficulty they had becomes a seed of *decline*. In its place, Eldem writes about the *challenges of modernity* (chapter 7: "Les défis de la modernité"), *crises and transformations*, putting a question mark at the end of the title of his chapter about the golden age of Suleiman the Magnificent (chapter 4: "Un siècle d'or?"); at the same time, however, Eldem, like most of us Ottoman historians, still describes the early centuries as the *rise* of the Ottomans (chapter 1: "Naissance et essor d'un Etat") and their last centuries as their *collapse* (chapter 9: "Une fin interminable").

Like many of his colleagues, Eldem makes a considerable effort to enrich the more or less conventional narrative of Ottoman history, emphasising the relations of the Ottomans with Western Europe and establishing parallel developments in the Ottoman Empire, especially with France, since the author is writing for a French audience. This is not a reading about the exotic Orient but rather a careful analysis of the Ottoman institutions, including the economy (chapter 6) as well as society and culture (chapter 8).

Is it possible to get rid of the conventional periodisation of Ottoman history? If we make an effort to rewrite the history of the Ottoman Empire anew, Eldem aptly remarks, we might risk, as a result, losing our object of study as a whole: is it legitimate for historians to retain as an object in their historical analyses the same old Ottoman Empire as the same polity from the fourteenth to the early twentieth century, just because it kept the same ruling family at the head of the state? Taking into account the great transformations of the empire during the seventeenth century, one of the more influential books in Ottoman historiography recently was Baki Tezcan's *The Second Ottoman Empire*.[1] Given the fundamental changes which were introduced during the Reform years (*Tanzimat* in Ottoman Turkish) of the nineteenth century, it is without any doubt that there was at least a third Ottoman Empire as well.

In conclusion, thanks to Eldem's experience and masterful ability, the

[1] Baki Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

reader of this study in French is lucky enough to read a really concise history of more than half a millennium of Ottoman history, including all the must-know events and institutions. I found only two errors in dates in the book, which must have been typos and can be easily corrected in the second edition: On p. 30, Jannina (Ioannina) is said to fallen to the Ottomans in 1431, instead of 1430, when the town actually surrendered to Sinan Pasha. On p. 99, Crete is said to have been taken from the Venetians in 1668, instead of 1669, the date of the surrender of the fortress of Candia to the Ottomans (the island of Crete had been actually conquered with the exception of the fortress of Candia already in the first years of the Cretan War, 1645–1650).

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