

# “Set aside from the pen and cut off from the foot”: Imagining the Ottoman Empire and Kurdistan

Christopher Houston

---

Ever since the emergence of the nation-states of Turkey, Iraq, and Iran after World War I, the discourse on Kurdish nationalism has attributed a special significance to the “first division” of Kurdistan, the sixteenth-century incorporation of what is also denoted as the Kurdish regions into the Ottoman system. Some writers have seen the resulting autonomy as a golden age of Kurdish independence, at least in relation to what came afterward. Others have interpreted the event as initiating five hundred years of continuing external—Turkish and Persian—overlordship.<sup>1</sup> Both summaries assume two key tenets of nationalism: first, that the social world is divided into territorial groups on the basis of their nationality; second, that those national groups have the right to self-determination. In examining more closely in this article these and other interpretations of that critical event, at least three related concerns connect vitally with contemporary discourse on Kurdish identity. First is the question of the origins and distinguishing features of the Ottoman Empire—Turkish, Islamic, or something more hybrid—and how those origins are made to explain the Ottoman role in Kurdistan. Second are constructions of the Ottoman *prehistory* of the Kurds. Third is the way these representations of Ottoman Kurdish history and prehistory articulate in turn to key components of official Turkish history, both to *its* account of the Ottomans and to its broader nationalist discourse on Turkishness.

In this article I seek to identify and critique the historiography of Ottoman Kurdistan and, in particular, the interpretation of one of its critical moments, the treaty in the early sixteenth century with the Ottomans that consolidated an extended period of Kurdish rulers’ autonomy in Kurdistan. Although it is clear that the covert (and often overt) interlocutor of this historiography is official Turkish nationalist history, I concentrate on the production of historical knowledge about Kurds.<sup>2</sup> To anticipate my conclusion, I argue that the historical constructions under discussion, while characterized by significant shades of difference among their individual interpretations, are unified by a shared political imagination. In their exploration of the Ottoman Kurdish history of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the histories’ theoretical obsession centers on the meaning and extent of the Kurdish principalities’ *political*

1. See, e.g., Abbas Vali, “The Kurds and Their ‘Others’: Fragmented Identity and Fragmented Politics,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 18 (1998): 82–94.

2. Two of the best descriptions and analyses of official Turkish history are Tanil Bora, “Nationalism in Textbooks,” in *Human Rights in Textbooks: The Turkish Case*, ed. D. Ceylan and G. Irzik (Istanbul: History Foundation of Turkey, 2004), 49–75; and Eugene Copeaux, “*Hizmet*: A Keyword in Turkish Historical Narrative,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 14 (1996): 97–114.

Comparative Studies of  
South Asia, Africa and  
the Middle East  
Vol. 27, No. 2, 2007  
doi:10.1215/1089201X-2007-03  
© 2007 by Duke University Press

autonomy. In other words, current perceptions of the Ottoman history of the Kurdish provinces are refracted through a nationalist prism, both Turkish and Kurdish. As counterpoint, I suggest that the long history of the political autonomy of the Kurdish regions be given an additional meaning, one that seeks to trace the region's connections with and synthesizing of Ottoman society and not only its domination by that society's imperial state.

### Nationalizing the Ottoman Empire

For nearly all writings about Kurds, the four hundred years or more of Ottoman rule (indirect or otherwise) over much of the Kurdish territory is of critical importance.<sup>3</sup> One key way the relationship is represented and politicized is through debates or claims over the genesis (and genius) of the empire itself. This is an interpretive task, given both the lack of extant sources from the fourteenth century and the wildly varied assessments of its origins.<sup>4</sup> For example, in the final days of Britain's "informal" imperialism in the Ottoman territories the historian Herbert Gibbon wrote famously of the empire's non-Asiatic roots. Twenty years later the Turkish historian Fuat Köprülü was sketching out its Turkish ethnic core. In a key essay in the volume *The Ottoman City and Its Parts*, Speros Vryonis notes the Greek influence on the conqueror of Constantinople, Fatih Mehmet, while both Leigh Brown and Halil Inalcik argue in their respective essays in *Imperial Legacy* that the Ottomans were not a Turkish empire, despite this designation by Europe. Bernard Lewis hedges his bets by claiming that no other regime/people submergered their identity in Islam as much as the

Ottoman Turks, although as Michael Meeker notes, such a position allows the nationalism of the Turkish Republicans to be represented as a natural corrective to a somehow unnatural repression.<sup>5</sup>

Although this may appear an arcane controversy, the arguments scholars and writers make vis-à-vis the Ottomans' political heritage are vitally important, connected as they are to a multitude of contemporary claims to identity and sovereignty.<sup>6</sup> As such, they have become part and parcel of many ordinary people's historical knowledge as well. This pertains not only to writings about and by Kurds but to a host of other historiographies that have emerged in the wake of the formation of nation-states in the former Ottoman territories. Perhaps one of the most interesting recent books examining some of the important historiography published on its early years, as well as presenting its own tentative thesis about the Ottoman state's historical evolution, is Cemal Kafadar's *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State*.<sup>7</sup> Kafadar draws attention to the uncanny similarities between the two peninsulas at the two ends of the Mediterranean, or between Iberia and Asia Minor, during the eleventh to fifteenth centuries. In both regions he perceives a competition for political control "between powers that saw themselves as members of different religio-civilizational orientations."<sup>8</sup> The last posts of Christian and Muslim power, Trebizond (Trabzon) and Granada, were captured by the Ottomans and the Catholic king of Spain in 1461 and 1492, respectively. Kafadar goes on to note another similarity: like the Anatolian, Indian, and Balkan cases, "the

3. Much of the Kurdish regions of present-day Turkey, Iraq, and Syria were included within the Ottoman Empire after 1515.

4. However, see Stephen Runciman's survey of Byzantine historians of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and his argument for their importance to fourteenth-century Ottoman history. His conclusion is that "early Ottoman history is not well served by its Turkish sources." Stephen Runciman, "Byzantine Historians and the Ottoman Turks," in *Historians of the Middle East*, ed. B. Lewis and P. Holt (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 276.

5. Herbert Gibbons, *The Foundation of the Ottoman Empire* (1916; London: Frank Cass, 1968); Fuat Köprülü, *Osmanlı imparatorluğunun kuruluşu (The Origins of the Ottoman Empire)* (1935; Istanbul: Ötügen, 1986);

Speros Vryonis, "Byzantine Constantinople and Ottoman Istanbul: Evolution in a Millennial Imperial Iconography," in *The Ottoman City and Its Parts*, ed. I. Bierman, R. Abou-El-Haj, and D. Preziosi (New York: Aristide D. Caratzas, 1992), 13–52; Leigh Brown, "The Background: An Introduction," in *Imperial Legacy: The Ottoman Imprint on the Balkans and the Middle East*, ed. Leigh Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 5–12; Halil Inalcik, "The Meaning of Legacy: The Ottoman Case," in Brown, *Imperial Legacy*, 13–22; Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961); Michael Meeker, *A Nation of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

6. Debate over the political heritage of the Safavids by contrast does not produce anywhere near the same heat. One reason for this is that the Iranian Islamic state in the present (and thus Kurdish intellectuals in Iran) is not continually vexed by the question of its relationship to the Safavids. Another reason is that with the victory of the Ottomans over the Safavids at Çaldıran, the majority of the Kurdish regions passed under Ottoman suzerainty, the border between Turkey and Iran being much the same today. For these two reasons I do not explore in this article Kurdish accounts of Safavid rule.

7. Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

8. *Ibid.*, 19.

Iberian one has been an ideological quagmire of modern historiography.”<sup>9</sup>

Very briefly, what are some of the contending theories that have made the history writing of Anatolia so ideological? And how do the themes informing these histories apply to the discourse on and of Kurds? Gibbons’s study of the origins of the emergent Ottoman state, according to Kafadar the first monograph oriented to just this problem, bears of course the stamp of its time. For Gibbons the rise of the Ottomans and the demise of the Byzantines was not only “illustration of the wrath of God upon the fourth generation of those who had hated and despised Him” but illustration of the wrath of (Darwinized) history as well, the Byzantines proving themselves unfit in the struggle for existence.<sup>10</sup> By contrast the Ottomans led by their founder and chieftain, Osman, were a younger more dynamic force, especially after Osman’s late conversion to Islam. Yet what is interesting in Gibbons’s account is his argument about the creation of a new people—the *Osmanlis* (Ottomans)—through the mingling of Turks and Greeks. In the place of the Byzantines was raised a new “race,” composed “by the fusion of elements already existing at the place of birth” (49). Granted, these elements on the ground “were mainly Greek,” but these new Muslims “were not averse to . . . helping in the founding of a new nation to inherit Constantinople” (49).

Twenty years later Faut Köprülü begins his work *Osmanlı imparatorluğunun kuruluşu* (*The Origins of the Ottoman Empire*) first by summarizing Gibbons’s supporting theses and then by ruthlessly pointing out their flaws. His objections are expressed in the first instance via methodological critique of Gibbons’s use or disuse not only of sources but also of historical analyses that in place of the complexity of historical realities posit single causal explanations. Particularly galling for Köprülü is what he claims is the axiomatically asserted prejudice of Western histo-

rians’, shared by Gibbons, that only Greeks and not Turks were able to create a state. By contrast, Köprülü argues that given the Turkish Selcuk legacy and the developed state of Anatolian Turkish urban life in the early fourteenth century, it would have been easy for the fledgling Ottoman state to find experienced Turkish administrators. Although not denying the presence of Christian converts in the Ottoman population, Köprülü claims Gibbons exaggerates their numbers and influence: accordingly the idea that “this brand new race or people, completely separate from Turkish character, constitutes the nucleus of a great state is a fantasy.”<sup>11</sup> For Köprülü, in brief, the Ottoman state was a creation of Turks. Moreover some of its features might be traced back, via the Selcuks, to central Asia. Here the continuity of pre-Islamic Turkish culture within the emergent Ottoman polity is signaled to, although not elaborated, by Köprülü. These imagined links prove important for both official and more popular Turkish histories.

Another influential interpretation, indeed the explanation that according to Kafadar prevailed for nearly half a century after its formulation in academic circles outside of Turkey, is the so-called ghazi thesis of historian Paul Wittek. Published in 1938, Wittek’s thesis maintained that the driving motivation of the first Ottomans, although sometimes overshadowed in later times by the demands of imperial realpolitik, “was the struggle against their Christian neighbours.”<sup>12</sup> In the fluid frontiers (named the “marches” by Wittek) between the more settled Selcuk and Byzantine populations in the late eleventh century, and then again at the end of the thirteenth century, a special category of mainly Turkish-speaking march warriors developed, living primarily from the booty captured from the more sedentary hinterlands but inspired too by an idealistic resolve to war against the infidel. These ghazi leaders, upon settling down in conquered districts, es-

9. Ibid., 20. See for India the recent analysis of the televised version of the Hindu epic Ramayan, and its representation of Muslims in India as descendants of a nonindigenous and invading force, by Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

10. Gibbons, *Foundation of the Ottoman Empire*, 48.

11. Köprülü, *Osmanlı imparatorluğunun kuruluşu*, 49. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

12. Paul Wittek, *The Rise of the Ottoman Empire* (1938; London: Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1948), 2. Inalcik puts it slightly differently. The intended aim of holy war was “not to destroy but to subdue the infidel world, the *darulharb*.” Halil Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age, 1300–1600* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1973), 7.

tablished ghazi emirates, one of which was the emirate of Osman, “the nucleus from which the Ottoman Empire later developed.”<sup>13</sup> It was this ghazi ethic that drove on the Ottoman state to continue its conquests, most particularly in the Balkans. Nevertheless and somewhat contradictorily, ghazi bands were not closed entities, despite Wittek’s emphasis on their ideology of holy war. Indeed two of their fundamental tendencies included “conversion to Islam and the absorption of indigenous elements” (49). Because the frontier marches produced similar cultural practices among both Byzantine and Turkish warriors, “the mode of life imported by the Ghazis was easily assimilated by the autochthonous element, with which they had much in common. . . . It was really only the Byzantine varnish which vanished, to be replaced later by an Islamic one” (20). Combined with an emphasis on the ghazis’ Turkish identity, mainstream Turkish historical scholarship accepts, explicitly or implicitly, the ghazi thesis.

In brief, and despite those matters on which the latter writers concede some of the arguments of the former, I might simplify again and note one key difference in the three accounts presented above: the Ottoman institution was established by ethnic Greeks, ethnic Turks, or ethnically mixed Muslims. This formulation neglects other dissimilarities of course, but at least it indicates some central fault lines of post-Ottoman nationalist historiographies.<sup>14</sup> Taking a more general view, Kafadar discerns three underlying and still disputed currents energizing the debate over the building of the Ottoman state. First is the question of demographics, made controversial by the ethnic and religious

categories with which the numbers are imbued. How many local people (Greek or Christian) converted to Islam, how many “real” Turks arrived in the form of colonizing Turkish tribes, and in this arithmetic who therefore formed, organized, and staffed the new state and its institutions?<sup>15</sup> Second is the question of the violence or otherwise involved in the invasion (or migration) of the Turkish-speaking groups or Muslims. Did local people welcome the more equitable social arrangements heralded by the emerging new polity? Or was Ottoman rule brutally imposed from above, including via forced conversion? The third live issue is the question of influence, the arguments over the origins of administrative models, or of cultural traditions or practices (like the tree of life motif prevalent on Anatolian carpets, or puppetry and conjuring, or the game blindman’s bluff). The possibility of their status as transnational cultural phenomena is denied. I might add a fourth obsession partly related to this third: the evolutionary assumption that state founding in the first instance is an achievement, attained (attainable) only by certain peoples. Prior to the angst over *whose* achievement the remarkable and durable Ottoman Empire was is the assumption that state building in itself is a civilized activity, as well as the assumption of the inferiority of stateless people presumed unable to develop such higher forms of social organization. That those groups may well be acquainted with processes of state formation and have decided against such arrangements, seeking by doing so to preserve social and political relations they deem to be more desirable, is not considered.<sup>16</sup>

13. Wittek, *Rise of the Ottoman Empire*, 34.

14. There is a large and continuing literature examining the question of the beginnings of the Ottoman polity and its transformation into an empire. One recent study is that by Heath Lowry, based on his research on the Ottoman tax registers in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries for the island of Lemnos. Lowry implicitly dismisses both Wittek’s ghazi and Köprülü’s Turkish creation theses (or combinations thereof), arguing that until the invasion of the Arab Islamic world in the early sixteenth century under Sultan Selim, the Ottoman’s main policy toward its Christian subjects was one of toleration and accommodation. Claiming the primary motivation for expansion was the “financial rewards of conquest,” Lowry sees Ottoman policy as a “reflection of

the fact that the state which was forming was one in which an overwhelmingly majority of the inhabitants were non-Muslims, and that there simply were not enough Ottomans with the administrative experience or, for that matter, linguistic skills, to effectively administer the fiscal exploitation of the growing Balkan entity.” Heath Lowry, *Fifteenth Century Ottoman Realities: Christian Peasant Life on the Aegean Island of Limnos* (Istanbul: Eren, 2002), 43. In brief the Ottoman presence was a veneer, under which continued existing social and financial practices. In a second book, Lowry investigates the “plundering confederacy” of the early Ottomans more systematically, seeing it as a hybrid polity including both high Islamic culture and administrative practices and adoption of earlier Byzantine and Balkan practices. Accordingly,

Lowry describes the early Ottoman entity as a new “Islamochristian synthesis.” Heath Lowry, *The Nature of the Early Ottoman State* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 137.

15. These questions still vex the minds of scholars; see, e.g., Kiel’s recent essay “Ottoman Sources for the Demographic History and the Process of Islamization of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bulgaria in the Fifteenth to Seventeenth Centuries: Old Sources—New Methodology,” in *Ottoman Bosnia: A History in Brief*, ed. M. Koller and K. Karpat (Madison: University of Wisconsin, Center of Turkish Studies, 2004).

16. See Pierre Clastres, *Society against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology* (New York: Zone, 1987).

Are these radically contested constructions of the Ottoman state's institution also of importance for writers on Kurds? Despite Kafadar's siting of these disputes in the nationalist *raison d'être* of Ottoman successor states, discourse on Kurdishness is not particularly invested in the first issue, the numbers and ethnic composition of the founders of the Ottoman state. Indeed, in general it assumes the Turkishness of those founders. Nor is it vexed over the question of forced conversion, although it readily speaks of a more generic oppression of Kurds by "external" elements, including the Ottoman Turks. By contrast, however, the discourse is concerned with the question of cultural influence over others, appearing anxious to defend the cultural autonomy of the Kurds. And equally important for much discourse on Kurdishness are the assumptions underpinning claims over state founding or statelessness, especially as they are connected with the rise of civilization. These differences then between the concerns of Kurdish nationalist histories and the issues identified by Kafadar as important for mainly European post-Ottoman nationalisms relate in the first instance to the ethnic Muslim status of Kurds.<sup>17</sup>

### Nationalizing the Ottoman Prehistory of the Kurds

But before discussing Kurdish constructions of the Ottoman interlude in more detail, it will be useful at this point to take a slight detour and sketch out briefly some of the ways that the Ottoman *prehistory* of Kurds has been represented. That is to say, how do various recent narratives about Kurds construct the origins of Kurdish commonality?

In his study of the debates conducted by Kurdish intellectuals in the Istanbul newspaper *Özgür gündem* in the years 1994–97, Konrad Hirschler analyzes one recent attempt at composition of a Kurdish prehistory.<sup>18</sup> He argues

that the longest continuing controversy in the newspaper centered on the pre-Islamic period, involving in particular narratives of Kurdish "ethnogenesis, homeland, resistance and national character."<sup>19</sup> The reconstruction of Kurdish *ethnogenesis* (or the "when" of Kurds) involved the claiming of a direct ethnic link to ancient peoples better attested in the Near Eastern literature and posited as the original inhabitants of the Kurdish regions. Meaningful in the context of Turkish nationalism's denial of Kurdish difference—that is, in the light of the official claim that Kurds are of Turkish origin, hence members of the same race and therefore candidates for assimilation—the ancestral people of the Kurds are identified as the Aryans and/or the (Aryan) Medes. Alongside this genealogical link, *homeland* narratives (the "where" of Kurds) sketch out a stable geographical reference for the Kurdish region, identified as eastern and southeastern Anatolia but also sometimes as Mesopotamia. Present-day Kurds are direct descendants of the region's indigenous people before the invasion and occupation of the homeland by outsiders, including most importantly Persians, Arabs, and Turks. *Resistance* narratives posit a consistent opposition to these attempts and experiences of foreign rule, minimizing their influences on indigenous traditions and ensuring therefore the uncontaminated continuity of Kurdish national character. The narrativizing of *national character* closes the circle of Kurdish history, with the Kurds—or their direct ancestors, the Aryans—constructed as producers of Near Eastern civilization, including the domesticating of horses, farming of wheat, building of settlements and temples, introduction of mathematical and geometric principles, and the invention of the telescope.<sup>20</sup> Civilization builders are contrasted with harbingers of barbarism, represented as uncivilized outsiders to the Mesopotamian region and its people.

17. Somewhat typically, Kafadar is concerned more with European revisionings of the Ottomans and is uninterested in Kurdish accounts or in their relationship to Turkish imaginings of the Ottomans. It would be important to compare differences and similarities between Kurdish accounts of the Ottoman experience with Arab nationalist writing on the Ottoman era of Arab history, especially given their parallel incorporation into the administrative structures of the empire under Sultan Selim. The lack of material

on Kurdish perceptions of Ottoman rule stands in sharp contrast to the much greater research on Arab historiography. For just one example, see Karl Barbir, "Memory, Heritage, and History: The Ottomans and the Arabs," in Brown, *Imperial Legacy*, 110–32.

18. *Özgür gündem* (*Free Agenda*) has been subject to severe state censorship and was closed down in 1994. The analysis is mostly based on its successor newspapers, which were also progressively banned.

*Özgür politika* is currently published from Germany. See Konrad Hirschler, "Defining the Nation: Kurdish Historiography in Turkey in the 1990s," *Middle Eastern Studies* 37 (2001): 148–49.

19. Hirschler, "Defining the Nation," 152.

20. *Ibid.*, 155.

Central to the emerging schema is the idea that the Kurds did not come from anywhere else but have always lived, even if known under different names, in what is now called Kurdistan. This narrative is in stark counterpoint to official and popular constructions of Turkish history and character, wherein Turkish genius is narrated as a history of migratory state founding. Thus there is Atatürk's famous phrase: "The Turks have always moved from east to west." In its earliest phase, Turkish nationalist historiography represented this migration not as the corrupting but as the bestowing of civilization, in this case the dispersing of state-building traditions to people with whom the Turks have interacted.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, the historical vista sketched out above is more properly the product of what Hirschler calls the *monopolists* among Kurdish historians, whose work as shown posits the autochthonic creation of localized Kurdish cultural characteristics. Not surprisingly, their theses have been subject to revision by writers Hirschler identifies as *inter-activists*.<sup>22</sup> Inter-activist narratives, although accepting the ethnic specificity of Kurds, expose Kurdish history to the possibility of "outside" cultural influence. Outsiders accordingly are not necessarily barbarous. The most biting critique of "monopolist" history, and its resemblance both thematically and methodologically to Turkish nationalist historiography, is made by Gürdal Aksoy. In his book *Tarihi yazılmayan halk Kürtler (Kurds, the People Whose History Is Unwritten)*, a title commenting more on the status of existing rather than absent texts, he analyzes recent Kurdish history writing, including the work of many of the contributors to *Özgür gündem*. He lists their most striking characteristics as:

I. Nationalist-centralism . . . Historical events and personalities are examined from a Kurdish centre; II. Romanticism; III. Populism; IV. Their combining of history and myths; V. The dominance of the "cut and paste" research method; VI. The over-influence of the mythology of the Aryan Race; VII. Reactiveness and an event-driven focus; VIII. Their a priori nature . . . Before examining an event properly, the historian knows what it means; IX. Methodological eclecticism . . . Rather than constructing a convincing synthesis, the historian incorporates whatever material they stumble upon; X. Captivity to and shaping by daily politics.<sup>23</sup>

Yet are the themes mapped out by the monopolists also found in the work of other writers in their histories or analyses of Kurdish identity? The earliest reference to the Medes as possible Kurdish ancestors appears to have been made on linguistic grounds by Victor Minorsky in the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*.<sup>24</sup> Ninety years later a new book on Kurds in Iraq begins by repeating some of the same elements of the monopolist narrative. Citing an online *Encyclopaedia of Kurdistan*, it notes that "the Kurds are native inhabitants of their land and as such there are no strict 'beginnings' for Kurdish history and origins. In modern times, Kurds as an ethnic group are the end product of thousands of years of evolution stemming from such tribes as the Guti, Kurti, Mede, Mared, Carduchi, Gordyene, Adianbene, Zila and Khaldi, and the migration of Indo-European tribes to the Zagros mountain region some 4,000 years ago."<sup>25</sup> Other influential writings on the Kurds also stress their indigenous status, including İsmail Beşikçi, who connects Xenophon's "Karduklar" (*Carduqi* in English), mentioned in Xenophon's work *The Retreat of the Ten Thousand* (400 BCE), to the Kurds.<sup>26</sup>

21. Although the major planks of this nationalist history were put together in the early 1930s, its reassertion, elaboration, and refinement continue in many Turkish universities today. See, for example, Istanbul University's Ayhan Bıçak's recent study in which he seeks to explain the origin and structure of the Turkish "system of thought." Despite admitting the difficulties in such a task—such as the close relationships of Turks with other great civilizations and their spread over huge geographical areas, without having left much sign of their presence there—he is confident that the Turkish conceptual system left its mark on those civilizations. In brief, "it [Turkish culture] is a culture which spread throughout the largest continent, Asia, affected Europe a great

deal, and made important changes in the basic values of the civilizations it had relationships with." Ayhan Bıçak, *The Idea of the State in Pre-Islamic Turkish Thought* (Istanbul: İsis, 2004), 18. In the book he repeats an older nationalist claim that before conversion to Islam the Turks had independently arrived at a monotheistic religion.

22. Hirschler, "Defining the Nation," 150.

23. Gürdal Aksoy, *Tarihi yazılmayan halk Kürtler (Kurds, the People Whose History Is Unwritten)* (Istanbul: Avesta, 1996), 63.

24. Victor Minorsky, "Kurdistan" and "Kurds," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1927).

25. Kemal Yildiz, *The Kurds in Iraq: The Past, Present, and Future* (London: Pluto, 2004), 7.

26. İsmail Beşikçi, *Doğu Anadolu'nun Düzeni: Sosyo-Ekonomik ve Etnik Temeller (The Order of Eastern Anatolia: Socioeconomic and Ethnic Foundations)* (1969; Ankara: Yurt Kitap-Yayın, 1992), 106–7.

Other writers in this selective survey are more circumspect: Martin Van Bruinessen casts some doubt on the sustainability of the connection with the Medes, but he nevertheless begins his essay on Kurdish identity in the book *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey* by writing that “most Kurds in Turkey have a strong awareness of belonging to a separate ethnic group. . . . There is, however, by no means unanimity among them as to what constitutes this ethnic identity and what the boundaries of the ethnic group are.”<sup>27</sup> He goes on to note that it might be more accurate to think of the Kurds “not as one, but as a set of ethnic groups (for instance Sunni, Alevi, Yezidi).”<sup>28</sup> David McDowall too is rather careful: although Kurds have “existed as an identifiable group for possibly more than 2000 years . . . it was only in the early years of the twentieth century that they acquired a sense of community as Kurds.”<sup>29</sup> These varying statements can be brought together only by conceding that despite their appeal to common linguistic, cultural, and religious similarities among Kurdish people, one would do better to focus on the various ways that such similarities are or are not imagined as significant markers of a shared translocal or national identity. In that case the construction of Kurdish identity derives from particular narrative/discursive agendas, rather than from supposedly objective shared cultural traits.

### Imagining the Ottoman Empire and Kurdistan

Given then that discourse on Kurdishness attributes to Kurds prior to their incorporation into the Ottoman Empire minimally an awareness of a Kurdish distinctiveness (recognized by themselves and others) and maximally a consciousness of their own distinct national character, how is this incorporation and its afterlife imagined? Almost in passing Hirschler notes that the so-called monopolists in *Özgür gündem* summarily dismiss the Ottoman period as yet one more experience of an oppressing outside force. His comment on their position is worth quoting:

27. Martin Van Bruinessen, “The Ethnic Identity of the Kurds,” in *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey*, ed. P. Andrews (Frankfurt: Wiesbaden, 1989), 613.

28. *Ibid.*, 615.

29. David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000), 2.

The uncivilized Other is represented in the Islamic period almost exclusively by the Ottomans—a term used interchangeably with “the Turks.” [For the monopolists], they [the Ottomans] built their society, in the framework of a “plunder ideology,” merely on military bases. After the external expansion had ended, they turned after Sultan Suleyman I (d. 1566) to internal plundering of the conquered territories. Consequently, the cruelty of the present-day Turkish army “is a heritage of the Ottomans.”<sup>30</sup>

Here rather than presume an Ottoman-Kurdish pact or even the possibility that the Kurdish princes may have wooed Ottoman statesmen in order to establish enhanced authority or new networks and supports, the monopolist stance toward Ottoman Kurdistan takes for granted the control and manipulation of its parts via a divide and rule policy of imperial Istanbul. The critique of such a policy is predicated on the assumption of the really existing and morally desirable unity of the Kurds, if obstructed until now by the fragmentation inherited from the Ottoman ruling strategy. Put this way, the Ottoman experience is represented as an interruption, even an aberration, in the longer and still unravelling thread of indigenous Kurdish history. Yet not altogether extravagantly, and perhaps more in line with the sentiments of the inter-activists, one might transfer Maria Todorova’s bon mot for the Balkans to Kurdistan: “It is preposterous,” she says “to look for an Ottoman legacy *in* the Balkans. The Balkans *are* the Ottoman legacy.”<sup>31</sup>

Have many writers on Kurds conceived of Kurdistan as the legacy of the Ottomans? In general the overwhelming interest in the long nineteenth-century dissolution of the empire has meant that in comparison the integration of the Kurdish regions into the Ottoman system in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries has received much less historical attention. In the first place, it was under the Ottomans that Kurdistan became a relatively coherent entity, despite the Selcuk empire’s creation

30. Hirschler, “Defining the Nation,” 156.

31. Maria Todorova, “The Ottoman Legacy in the Balkans,” in Brown, *Imperial Legacy*, 46.

of a province named Kurdistan (the land of the Kurds) in the mid-twelfth century. “It was not until the sixteenth century . . . that the phrase ‘Kurdistan’ came into common usage to denote a system of Kurdish fiefs generally, and not just the [Selcuk]-created province.”<sup>32</sup> Second, in this process the Ottomans reestablished and in some places even brought into being Kurdish tribal confederations under the control of selected ruling families, who were allowed—or demanded—the exceptional privilege within the Ottoman administrative system of that time of hereditary succession. Third and equally influential in terms of constituting Kurdish identities, the sixteenth-century sectarian struggle between the Safavids and the Ottomans, particularly in the formation of “oppositional” Alevi and “establishment” Sunni identities in the Ottoman Anatolian territories, still resonate and are imagined today.

What Hirschler does not add is that monopolist Kurdish *disinterest* in the Ottoman polity mirrors many Turkish historians’ ignoring of Kurdish Ottoman history and the region’s four-hundred-year experience as part of the empire. Even the doyen of Ottoman historians Halil İnalcik in his classic study *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age, 1300–1600* does not mention Kurds in his discussion of Sultan Selim’s eastern enlargement of the empire. Revealingly, he describes the incorporation into the Ottoman Empire of the region from Erzurum to Diyarbakir after the battle of Çaldıran in 1514 as a process whereby “local dynasties and tribal chieftains” recognized Ottoman suzerainty.<sup>33</sup> Here for whatever reason—a lack of historical sources, a deliberate disinterest, or a nationalist bias—the Kurdish history of the empire is made invisible. Much more problematic is the gloss put on the campaign by Feridun Emecen in his essay in the book *Osmanlı devleti and medeniyeti tarihi (History of Ottoman State and Civilization)*, a massive two-volume work collectively authored by a group of

Turkish historians. Talking about the defeat of the Safavids, Emecen writes that

the victory consolidated Ottoman rule in eastern Anatolia. The lands of the Dalkadiroğlu (at Maras) were conquered in June 1515, and after Diyarbakir recognized Ottoman authority the rest of the cities in the region passed under Ottoman rule. Ever since the Selcuks, Diyarbakir in particular has been the cradle and centre of numerous Turkish states founded in eastern Anatolia. . . . The Sunni-Shafi tribes in the region known as “Kara-Ulus” remained loyal to the Ottomans and played an important role in the struggle with Iran.<sup>34</sup>

Despite Emecen’s claims however, Diyarbakir has been as much a Kurdish city as a Turcoman one. In 1515 it was mainly a Kurdish city, and its inhabitants declared their allegiance to the Ottomans despite the opposition of its Safavid governor (see the *Şerefname* of Sharafuddin of Bitlisi below). The term *Sunni-Shafi tribes* is a synonym for the obviously unspeakable word *Kurds*; the Kurds in fact did not “remain loyal” to the Ottomans but negotiated a special arrangement with Istanbul. The “Kara-Ulus” (Black People), by contrast, were Kurdish nomads, outside of the arrangements negotiated by the resurgent Kurdish lords.<sup>35</sup> And there was not of course an “Iran” for the Ottomans to be in conflict with. In fact these two volumes scarcely mention Kurds, clear indication that the difference of Kurds as constructed by Kurdish discourse is rejected.

In sum, more secular and monopolist Kurdish accounts of what is condemned as the Ottoman interlude incline toward a narrative of Ottoman exploitation of Kurdistan and ceaseless local resistance. By contrast, many Kurdish Islamist narratives deny the alienness of the Ottoman system, sensing in its dissolution instead the origins of present-day problems in the region.<sup>36</sup> The contrariness of these positions attests to the nationalist desire to uncover—as well as the difficulty of assessing—the relative

32. Yıldız, *Kurds in Iraq*, 7.

33. İnalcik, *Ottoman Empire*, 33.

34. Feridun Emecen, “Kuruluşta Küçük Kaynarca’ya” (“From the Foundations to Little Kaynarca”), in *Osmanlı devleti and medeniyeti tarihi (History of Ottoman State and Civilization)*, ed. E. İhsanoğlu, 2 vols. (Istanbul: Research Center for Islamic History, Art and Culture, 1994), 1:29–30.

35. McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, 29.

36. See, e.g. Mufit Yüksel, *Kürdistan’daki Değişim Süreci (The Process of Transformation in Kurdistan)* (Ankara: Sor Yayıncılık, 1993).

influence of external and internal centers of power on the identity of the region and its social relations. Kemal Karpat describes the perceived problem rather succinctly when he writes that Ottoman studies has usually treated the Ottoman borderlands “in terms of their political relations to Istanbul rather than . . . view [them] as cultural-social units with their own identity and internal dynamics.”<sup>37</sup> This difficulty is not avoided if one reframes the analysis and talks instead of one single imperial social system, as one is still left with questions of historical change, regional variation, concentrations of power, and processes of resistance. If, as Karpat suggests, historical analysis has tended toward an overemphasis of the influence of the center, anthropological analysis has had a bias toward the autonomy of the periphery, minimizing the imperial constitution of society as well as transnational institutions and cultural practices that indicate much wider networks of social influence and relations. A related problem is how to connect political developments to the borderland or frontier economy, both to local relations of production and to the wider political economy of the empire as a whole.

For the remainder of this article I examine more closely a number of different accounts of what the discourse on Kurdishness often describes as the first division of the Kurdish regions, or those regions’ incorporation into the Ottoman and Safavid spheres of influence in the early sixteenth century. I begin by giving a brief historical chronology of events to contextualize the discussion. In 1512 the newly proclaimed Ottoman sultan Selim Yavuz began a campaign against “heterodox” Shi’i Muslims

in eastern Anatolia that would result in the extension of the empire beyond its core provinces of western Anatolia, Thrace, and the Balkans and conclude with his occupation of Cairo five years later. For the first time, the Ottomans were now rulers of much of the Sunni Arab lands of Islam. Somewhat by contrast, heterodox Shi’i and nomadic elements (Turkish and Kurdish speaking) in central and eastern Anatolia were disinclined to submit to the authority of a state now proclaiming itself to be a defender of “orthodox” Sunni Islam. These *kızılbaş* groups—so named for their red head coverings—were also courted by Shah Ismail, leader of the newly emergent Safavid Shi’i empire based in Tabriz. Sultan Selim engaged Shah Ismail at Çaldıran (midway between Erzincan and Tabriz) in 1514, defeating his army there and going on to occupy his capital. For the next two years he suppressed Safavid influence in southeastern and eastern Anatolia, partially through war and partially through negotiation. To quote Colin Imber, in 1515 Selim sent Kurdish notable Idris of Bitlis “to secure the allegiance of the Kurdish chieftains of southeastern Anatolia and northern Iraq. . . . By the end of the year, all except one had recognized Selim’s overlordship.”<sup>38</sup> The Kurdish princes retained de facto control of their lands, and some continued to mint their own coins: at the same time their recognition of Ottoman suzerainty formalized their barrier status barring “the Safavid Empire from access to the Kızılbaş populations further within Ottoman territory to the west and northwest.”<sup>39</sup> From the point of view of Istanbul, the Kurdish regions were now vital frontier provinces of the empire, with all the insecurities such status involves.<sup>40</sup>

37. Kemal Karpat, “Comments on Contributions and the Borderlands,” in *Ottoman Borderlands: Issues, Personalities, and Political Changes*, ed. Kemal Karpat (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 1.

38. Colin Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300–1650: The Structure of Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 45.

39. Trevor Sinclair, “The Ottoman Arrangements for the Tribal Principalities of the Lake Van Region of the Sixteenth Century,” *International Journal of Turkish Studies* 9 (2003): 121.

40. Following the massive increase of territory in the wake of Selim’s military conquests, a 1527 list showed eight provinces in the empire. In addition to the much older administrative units of Rumelia (capital Edirne), Anatolia (Kutahya), Rum (Amasya), and Karaman

(Konya), the document lists the four new provinces of Egypt, Syria, Diyarbakir, and Kurdistan. See Imber, *Ottoman Empire*, 179. The Kurdish regions were reorganized more definitively after further conquests of Safavid territory in the 1530s by Sultan Süleyman (Selim’s son), this time into the provinces of Diyarbakir, Ezurum, Van, Shahrizur (in Iraq), and Mosul (also in Iraq). In the process “Kurdistan” as an administrative entity appears to disappear. Özoğlu notes that in 1515 all territory south of Ezurum and Sivas fell under the authority of the Diyarbakir provincial governor. See H. Özoğlu, “State-Tribe Relations: Kurdish Tribalism in the Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Empire,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 23 (1996): 14. He also tries to clarify the relationship between the provinces of Kurdistan and Diyarbakir as listed in the 1527 document: according to Özoğlu,

there was in fact only one province (Diyarbakir), made up of tax-paying and non-tax-paying regions. The document “makes a clear distinction between the directly and indirectly governed parts of Diyarbakir. The former consisted of 10 sancaks, whereas the latter (called *vilayet-i Kurdistan*) [province of Kurdistan] included 7 major and 11 minor emirates” (ibid., 21). Thus Kurdistan appears to refer to the autonomous Kurdish principalities within the Diyarbakir province. The status and geographic extent of the province of Kurdistan is unclear, however, as it is again listed as a province in a separate document in 1567. See Ahmet Akgündüz, *Osmanlı Kanunnameleri ve Hukuki Tahilleri: 4. Kitap Kanuni Devri Kanunnameleri (Ottoman Law Codes and Legal Interpretations)* (Istanbul: Fey Vakfı Yayınları, 1992), 21.

What the perspective of the Kurdish princes might have been, not to mention that of other people in the region, is another question.

I jump straight into just two of the more important documents detailing the “treaty agreements” in Ottoman Kurdistan.<sup>41</sup> The first is a declaration in the Imperial Law Code, its precise date unknown, but according to Ahmet Akgündüz certainly prepared during the reign of Sultan Süleyman (1520–66).<sup>42</sup> The second is an imperial decree (*ferman*) issued by Sultan Süleyman in 1533. In the first document, the legal status of the autonomous Kurdish principalities is clarified:

There are nine *hükümet*s, which were given under administration and property of their holders in return for their service and obedience. They govern (their districts) by way of free-holding. Moreover, their countries are set aside from the pen and cut off from the foot. All of their revenues were not included in the sultanic register. There is no one person from the Ottoman governors and servants of the Sultan within these areas. Everything belongs to them. And, in accordance with their charters (given by Ottoman sultans, regarding their rights and privileges) they are not subjected to dismissal and appointment. However, all of them are obedient to the orders of the Sultan. As other Ottoman district governors, they attend to campaigns together with the province-governors of whichever province they are subjected to. They own people and tribes as well as other soldiers.<sup>43</sup>

According to Mehmet Öz, the striking phrase “set aside from the pen and cut off from the foot” refers to the *hükümet*s’ (literally, governments’) independence from taxation surveys and outside military intervention.

The second document fills out some of the same details, but it describes a second type of political-administrative arrangement, the *yurtluk* and *ocaklık*:

[Kanuni Sultan Süleyman] gives to the Kurdish *beys* who, in his father Yavuz Sultan Selim’s times, took position against the *Kızılbaş* and who

are currently serving the State with faith . . . both as a reward for their loyalty and courage, their applications and requests being taken into consideration, the provinces and fortresses that have been controlled by each of them as their *yurtluk* and *ocaklık* since past times . . . under the condition of inheritance from father to son . . . as their estate. . . . In case of a *bey*’s death, his province shall be given, as a whole, to his son, if there is only one. . . . If the *bey* has no heir or relative, then his province shall not be given to anybody from outside. As a result of consultation with the Kurdistan *beys*, the region shall be given to either *beys* or *beyzades* suggested by the Kurdistan *beys*.<sup>44</sup>

These same documents are cited by later Ottoman writers when discussing problems with the varied provincial administrations of the empire. Thus in 1609, for example, the chancery clerk Ayn Ali Efendi repeats the distinction between the two systems, writing that

when their [*yurtluk* and *ocaklık*] governors die, these districts are given to their sons, not to outsiders. However, their revenues are registered like ordinary sanjaks; there are *timar* and *zemets* within them. . . . But the *hükümet*s have not been surveyed, and there is no *zemet* or *timar* in them. Their rulers keep and govern them through freeholding. They are “set aside from the pen and cut off from the foot” and all their revenues, whatever they might be, belong to them.<sup>45</sup>

Clearly, the *hükümet* and *yurtluk ocaklık* arrangements elaborated in the imperial decrees and repeated thereafter in bureaucratic discourse meant that the Kurdish provinces were an exception to the much more typical and highly centralized administrative pattern (the *timar* system) often described as perfecting the empire’s “classical” institutions in the very same decades. Nevertheless, the *significance* of their particular difference needs to be interpreted and assessed, as does the potential dissonance between the imperial decree and the historical development of actual power and influence in the region. In other words, what I next establish more clearly

41. The phrase is taken from Aziz Efendi’s 1632 advice to the sultan. See Aziz Efendi, *Kanun-Name-i Sultan li Aziz Efendi (Legal Advice of Aziz Efendi in Relation to the Sultan)* (1632; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

42. Akgündüz, *Osmanlı kanunnameleri ve hukuki tarihleri*, 22.

43. Cited in Mehmet Öz, “Ottoman Provincial Administration in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia: The Case of Bidlis in the Sixteenth Century,” in Karpat, *Ottoman Borderlands*, 146–47.

44. Cited in Özoğlu, “State-Tribe Relations,” 18.

45. Cited in Öz, “Ottoman Provincial Administration,” 146.

is what the discourse on Kurdish identity has stressed as the vital issues emerging from the constitution of the Ottoman Kurdish region.

To do so, and using Gabriel Piterberg's idea of a "historiographical corpus," I compare a number of longer and shorter analyses of the integration of the Kurdish regions into the Ottoman Empire.<sup>46</sup> By historiographical corpus Piterberg means a group of texts representing or interpreting a series of events that when read in relation to one another "brings to the fore differences not only in narrative events but [also] in the minutest interpretive nuances."<sup>47</sup> Apart from their subject matter, what makes the selected texts a sort of corpus is their use of a number of common documents, including the *Şerefname* of Şeref Khan, the travel epic of Evliya Çelebi, and of course the legal documents cited above.<sup>48</sup> What I hope to show is that the textual corpus under discussion, while characterized by significant shades of difference among its individual parts, is unified by a shared political imagination. In its exploration of the Ottoman Kurdish history of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the corpus's theoretical obsession centers on the meaning and extent of the Kurdish principalities' *political* autonomy. Why were the Kurdish princes offered—or able to negotiate—special privileges? How did these privileges change over time? In the granting or taking of this autonomy, how important was the geopolitical position of Kurdistan as a buffer zone between the Ottoman and Safavid spheres of influence? Connected to the judgments made in answering these problems is a series of related questions generated by the center/periphery distinction. Who truly exercised power in Kurdish regions? Where did the determining agency reside, with the Ottoman state or with the regional actors? How and who did

actors resist? Finally and often unstated, the findings of the individual texts are articulated with (interpretations of) the present situation in the Kurdish regions. Thus the corpus is also latently concerned with what the contemporary consequences of the historical political dynamic should be.

Öz's history is a cautious account that attempts to track the changing balance of political authority in the *hükümet* of Bitlis in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Nevertheless, the article's express aim is to delimit the apparent autonomy of the *hükümet*s as described in the legal decrees, by arguing that the power of the central government or its provincial appointees was the dominant force unless otherwise obstructed or appropriated by Kurdish lords in "temporary period[s] of decentralization."<sup>49</sup> However, Öz also draws attention to the resilience of the powerful pre-Ottoman families throughout the period. Osman Kılıç too seeks to investigate the extent to which the formal features of the *ocaklık* category were applied in the regions denoted as such. His claim, much less cautious, is that the bestowal of autonomy was a dead letter, the Ottoman state only ever extending the privileges of formal autonomy to regional lords (he is careful never to mention the word *Kurdish*) for instrumental reasons. Similarly he is concerned to stress that the state's apparent devolving of authority to powerful local families should be thought of not as revealing administrative weakness but on the contrary as being merely a precaution to secure their obedience and strengthen central authority in areas where for various reasons it did not have total control. His conclusion should be quoted:

The *ocaklık* and *hükümet sancaks* only had responsibility in times of war, and the *beys* and their men were always in turn under the authority of

46. The texts under discussion are Mehmet Zeki, *Kürd ve Kürdistan Ünlüleri: Meşahiru Kurd u Kurdistan (Famous Kurds in Kurdistan)* (1947; Ankara: Özge Yayınları, 2005); Martin Van Bruinessen, *Evliya Çelebi in Diyarbekir* (Leiden: Brill, 1988); Özoğlu, "State-Tribe Relations"; Osman Kılıç, "Yurtluk-Ocaklık ve Hükümet Sancakları Üzerine Bazı Tesbitler" ("Some Proposals about the Yurtluk-Ocaklık and Hükümet Fiefdoms"), *OTAM* 10 (1999); R. Özkan, "17 Mayıs 1638 Qesr-i Antlaşması" ("The 17 May 1638 Treaty"), *Özgür politika*, 18 May 2001; Sinclair, "Ottoman Arrangements"; Öz, "Ottoman Provincial Administration"; Mustafa Çem, "Dersim: 1923–1938," *Munzur* 23–24 (2005).

47. Gabriel Piterberg, *An Ottoman Tragedy: History and Historiography at Play* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 53.

48. Şeref Khan, *Şerefname: Kürt Tarihi (Şeref Han: The Kurdish History)* (1597; Istanbul: Hasat Yayınları, 1990). See Richard Dankoff, *Evliya Çelebi in Bitlis: The Relevant Section of the Seyahatname* (Leiden: Brill, 1990).

49. Öz, "Ottoman Provincial Administration," 153.

the provincial governors. Apart from this they had no responsibilities and in contemporary terms did not possess autonomy. . . . Because of certain political needs, the Ottoman state thought to benefit from the dominance of these local lords, and therefore initiated this form of administrative unity. However the lords were never allowed the scope to act without the central authority's supervision. . . . In order to establish security, political stability and military order the local lords were officially authorized to perform the state's duties as part of their service to the state. Thus in these regions the tribes were generally prevented from creating internal strife, and like the classic authorized governors of the provinces, the majority of them performed faithful service to the state.<sup>50</sup>

For Kılıç, then, the sole actor with political agency was the Ottoman state, which delegated at its discretion and under close supervision some of its authority to local notables. In his account the power (and the Kurdishness) of the region's actors are eliminated, as is their autonomy. Local *bey*s faithfully obeyed the well-intentioned and all-powerful central authority. Kılıç makes no mention of the diplomacy of Idris Bitlisi or of the agency of Kurdish lords in switching their allegiance from Ottomans to Safavids or vice versa for money or titles. Writing from the perspective of the centralized state, Kılıç's is a history of regional obedience that equates the political agency of local notables with treachery.

In fact, depending partly on the years of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries under examination, most of the texts of the corpus (barring Osman Kılıç and Ramazan Özkan below) find evidence for both regional independence *and* the influence of Ottoman provincial appointees. Trevor Sinclair and Hakan Özoğlu are more nuanced in their discussion of the relative autonomy of the Kurdish principalities. Sinclair's article discusses the Kurdish principalities of the Lake Van region (and after 1548, of the new Ottoman province of Van), in particular the *sancak* of Bitlis throughout the sixteenth century. He argues that apart from the

city of Bitlis itself, the land of the Kurdish principalities in Van was never surveyed, and thus that despite the designation of some of the Van *sancaks* as *ocaklık*, they were in fact all *hükümet* in "respect of rights granted and exercised."<sup>51</sup> Yet Sinclair also notes that in certain circumstances the power of the princes was undermined, most particularly by the interference of the *beylerbeyis* in the hereditary succession. His considered conclusion on the integration of the Kurdish regions is that "the attempt to marry the *sancak* system with the tribal principalities and their hereditary institutions resulted in something unstable and difficult to control."<sup>52</sup>

Quite apart from the struggle over political hegemony, however, Sinclair also finds that *kızılbaş* insurrections throughout the sixteenth century in Anatolia meant the Kurdish regions took on the nature of an ideological barrier between the Safavids and non-Sunni elements farther to the west. Accordingly the Ottomans tolerated the Shafii legal school of the Kurds, and the mufti of Bitlis was not of the Ottoman Hanefi school of jurisprudence but of the Shafii rite, appointed by the Kurdish ruler.<sup>53</sup> By contrast, Mustafa Çem's construction of the incorporation of the regions populated by Kurds into the Ottoman Empire denies their buffer status, at least as regards the region of Dersim. Indeed for the Dersim Kurds, the Ottomans were a "foreign, repressive and colonial power."<sup>54</sup> The autonomy sought by Dersim's Kızılbaş Kurds occurred not because of a religious affinity but because of a religious antagonism: "The language of the state was not their language; its religion was not their religion; [nor were] its culture and law theirs" (23). For Çem the essentially oppressive and always resisted politics of the Ottomans toward Kurds in Dersim were continued after the institution of the Turkish Republic, and moreover now extended to all the Kurdish regions. Indeed, founded by Ottoman cadres and through Ottoman institutions, the Turkish Republic for Çem is a continuation of the empire, not a new state. "From that perspective, it is not wrong to call [them] the new Ottomans" (24).

50. Kılıç, "Yurtluk-Ocaklık," 136–37.

51. Sinclair, "Ottoman Arrangements," 138.

52. *Ibid.*, 142.

53. Van Bruinessen, *Evllya Celebi in Diyarbakir*, 27.

54. Çem, "Dersim," 23 (author's translation).

Özoğlu like Sinclair focuses on the question of the “tribalness” of the Kurdish emirates, although he too does not examine the anthropology of the “hereditary institutions.” More explicitly than Sinclair, Özoğlu argues that Idris Bitlisi’s linking of selected Kurdish principalities to Ottoman rule not only contributed to the strengthening of those princes’ positions vis-à-vis rivals and subjects but was the determining factor in the very formation of the powerful Kurdish tribal confederacies. Describing the Ottomans’ strategy as a unite and rule policy, the centralized confederations of tribes were at least partially created by the state. Consequently, the authority of their Kurdish lords was reinforced through state patronage. Perhaps most significantly, Özoğlu’s history gestures to the “Ottomanization” of the principalities (although he does not use this term), noting that their elaborated forms of stratification replicated the structure of the Ottoman state. Beyond this, however, the internal and external dynamics constituting the confederations are left disconnected.

Van Bruinessen’s long introduction to the English translation of Evliya Çelebi’s visit to Diyarbakir in 1655, some 140 years or so after the city’s Ottoman “conquest,” covers the greatest range of topics in the corpus, with sections on the ethnic composition and population of the city, its economic life, and its religious education. However, it too begins its discussion with an examination of the administrative arrangements of the province and of the degree of autonomy of the Kurdish rulers. Van Bruinessen’s reading of Evliya’s description of his visit to the five *hükümler* of the Diyarbakir province is that despite the century and longer incorporation of the emirates into the Ottoman administrative system, the autonomy of the hereditary Kurdish princely families was “still quite considerable.”<sup>55</sup> For Van Bruinessen the longevity of the emirates was mainly due to ongoing Kurdish resistance to Ottoman interference, whereas for Kılıç delegation of authority was only ever a utilitarian Ottoman strategy. Interestingly, both Özoğlu

and Van Bruinessen draw attention to the role of Idris Bitlisi in “winning the Kurdish rulers for the Ottomans,” thus emphasizing accordingly their voluntary assent to the Ottoman project rather than their forced incorporation within it via military conquest.<sup>56</sup> The agreement brokered by Bitlisi is seen as mutually benefiting both the sultan and the Kurdish princes. Özoğlu writes that Idris “used his intermediary position productively for both the Ottoman state and the Kurdish chieftains. Kurdish *bey*s, becoming part of a larger and stronger political structure, secured and consolidated their political power over their subjects.”<sup>57</sup> Mehmet Zeki’s reference to Idris Bitlisi in his bibliography of famous Kurdish figures is also worth repeating:

Idris of Bitlis was the famous Kurd who engineered the internal administration of Kurdistan. This was also advantageous to the Ottoman state. He established a federation (the unified *hükümler* and the unified provinces) that prepared the foundations of Kurdish nationalism. In the process he also protected the regional Kurdish emirates. Despite this, he was unable to prevent these emirates from quarrelling and eventually from going to war with each other. If cooperation and an alliance between those emirates had occurred, a much more secure future for the Kurds would have been ensured.<sup>58</sup>

Finally, not all the writings in the corpus that mention Idris Bitlisi’s mediation are equally enamored with his achievement. In a long article in the newspaper *Özgür politika* written on the anniversary of the 1639 treaty (17 May) between the Safavids and Ottomans, Özkan argues that with its signing Kurdistan was split in two, as well as turned into a colony (colonized). The motivation for the “incorporation” of Kurdish territory into the Ottoman Empire was not only to produce a buffer zone limiting the ability of the Safavid state to incite *kızılbaş* rebellion in Anatolia; it was the occupation and exploitation of Kurdistan itself. Logically, therefore, Idris Bitlisi acted as an agent of the “Ottoman-Turks,”

55. Van Bruinessen, *Evliya Çelebi in Diyarbakir*, 27.

56. *Ibid.*, 14.

57. Özoğlu, “State-Tribe Relations,” 14.

58. Zeki, *Kürd ve Kürdistan Ünlüleri*, 151.

who also wished to use the Kurdish princes against the Safavids. In Özkan's words: "Idris Bitlisi played a major role in creating and relaying propaganda favorable to the Ottomans [against the Safavids]. Sultan Selim needed someone who was both very familiar with Kurdish customs and traditions as well as with their internal social relations, and who was also well respected by the Kurds. For this reason Idris Bitlisi was given the duty of and rewarded for constructing a Kurdish alliance against the Safavid state."<sup>59</sup> As with a number of the texts, Özkan then goes on to summarize the main points of the legal treaty struck between the Kurdish emirs and the Ottoman Empire. Unlike Öz, Kılıç, and Özoğlu, however, Özkan directly "ethnicizes" the treaty: hence his interpretation that "Kurds will help the Turks in their wars," and "Turks will protect the Kurds from all outside attacks."<sup>60</sup> Like Kılıç, but for very different reasons, Özkan too emphasizes state action and minimizes Kurdish agency or self-interest, the Ottomans gaining despotic control over Kurdistan by deceitfully promising its princes not to interfere in their internal affairs.

To conclude then, I think it clear that the overwhelming concern of this somewhat arbitrarily put together textual corpus has been on the *political* consequences of the Ottoman-Kurdish encounter. Yet in the process, and despite the importance of this issue, the corpus's constructing of the Kurdish Ottoman history of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has also obscured a number of other vital social processes. Indeed, even on the political level, the focus of the corpus is strikingly narrow. The political fault line of interest is that between imperial center and peripheral elite, nearly always envisaged as a zero-sum relation. There is there-

fore no consideration of, say, farmer resistance to fief holders or princes, or of peasant compliance to codified rights and obligations, or of revolts other than those of the princes of the emirates.<sup>61</sup> Neither is there any use of provincial court records as an entrée into local forms of governance and political negotiation or as a way into the construction and practice of gender issues involved in the relations of domination and affection that characterize marriage, divorce, sexuality, inheritance, and so on.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, none of the articles even mentions the *kadi* or takes an interest in the workings and decisions of Islamic institutions in the Kurdish regions like the Sharia court. Again, the corpus's narrow presentation of the local elites evinces little curiosity over whether or how Kurdish princes sought to become Ottoman or about their interpretation and appropriation of Ottoman legitimacy. But why is there not also interest in Kurdish Ottomans or an Ottomanist provincial society?<sup>63</sup> The assumption of their polarity leads to a focus on *either* the power of the Ottoman sultans *or* that of the Kurdish princes, Ottoman identity *or* Kurdish identity. Further, apart from Van Bruinessen, there is little interest in social relations or institutions that transcend the Kurdish regions or link them with other places, such as in the travels of Kurdish scholars or *ulema*, or more broadly in what Suraiya Faroqhi calls the inhabitation of a common world, given the similarity of trade and petty commodity production all over the empire.<sup>64</sup> Finally, the perspective of the corpus is determinedly macro, in which the understandings, practices, and capacity for agency of individuals are of little account or interest.

Why is this the case? Why is the imagining of Kurdish Ottoman history and identity reduced in the texts to an obsession with the

59. Özkan, "17 Mayıs 1638 Qesr-i Antlaşması," 2.

60. *Ibid.*, 3.

61. Amy Singer's 1994 analysis of the tax surveys (*tahrir*), imperial decrees (*ferman*), and court records (*sijill*) involving rural social relations in the province of Jerusalem in the very same period shows how the "weapons of the weak" might be studied. Amy Singer, *Palestinian Peasants and Ottoman Officials: Rural Administration around Sixteenth-Century Jerusalem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

62. Here I have in mind Tucker's exemplary study of marriage and divorce in Syria and Palestine as an example. Judith Tucker, *In the House of Law: Gender and Islamic Law in Ottoman Syria and Palestine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). But see also H. Gerber for a study of the Bursa *kadi* records in the 1600s in relation to women's economic status. H. Gerber, "Social and Economic Position of Women in an Ottoman City, Bursa," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 12 (1980), 231–44.

63. See Meeker's research on the appropriation of Ottoman military and religious institutions, and equally importantly of an Ottoman political culture by the eastern Black Sea local lords (*derebeys*) in the late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century period of decentralization. Meeker examines the "migration of power" from provincial appointees to regional lords, describing them as "usurpers" of the tactics of political power of the Ottoman center. Michael Meeker, "Concepts of Family, State, and Society in the District of Of, Trabzon," in *Social Practice and Political Culture in the Turkish Republic* (Istanbul: Isis, 2004).

64. Suraiya Faroqhi, *The Ottoman Empire and the World around It* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 211.

extent of and reasons for the emirs' political autonomy? Clearly many of the writers hope or fear that the historical status of the Kurdish regions, whether independent of or loyal to "outside" authority as the case may be, is paradigmatic for the present. Thus if the Kurdish rulers have always been fiercely independent, what of the Turkish Republic's claims to hegemony over the region? Or if they have always been loyally obedient, what of Kurdish nationalism's claims for a separate status or state? There is thus a nationalist anxiety—Turkish and Kurdish—revealed in the corpus. That this anxiety reflects the post-Ottoman nation building that has violently restructured the region is clear. Indeed the *significance* of the *autonomy* of the Kurdish emirates (however relative) derives from the linking of the concept to the wider vocabulary of nationalism as a political ideology. Yet the nationalist imaginary that informs the corpus also reduces the richness and suffering of the lives of Kurdish men and women to power relations organized through the state. In this concentrating of the political imagination, other relations of domination and resistance are obscured. What these insufficiencies suggest is that current perceptions of the Ottoman history of the Kurdish provinces are refracted through a nationalist prism. What is needed is a denationalization of the dominant constructions of Ottoman Kurdish history, so that it might be repoliticized in other ways.<sup>65</sup> If it is true that the violence of nation building in Turkey and Iraq has conditioned Kurdish memory and history, it is also true that a richer historiography of Ottoman Kurdistan would provide additional resources for Kurdish political practice. §

65. I realize that this may appear a quixotic recommendation, given the current historic process of Kurdish nation building occurring in southern Kurdistan (northern Iraq). But practical solutions to the Kurdish question in Turkey will not be the same as in Iraq. Indeed, it is misleading to talk about Kurdistan as anything more than an imagined category; social relations in Kurdistan have no anthropological integrity of their own, for since the 1920s its respective parts have been articulated with the political order of the nation-states of Turkey, Iraq, and Iran.