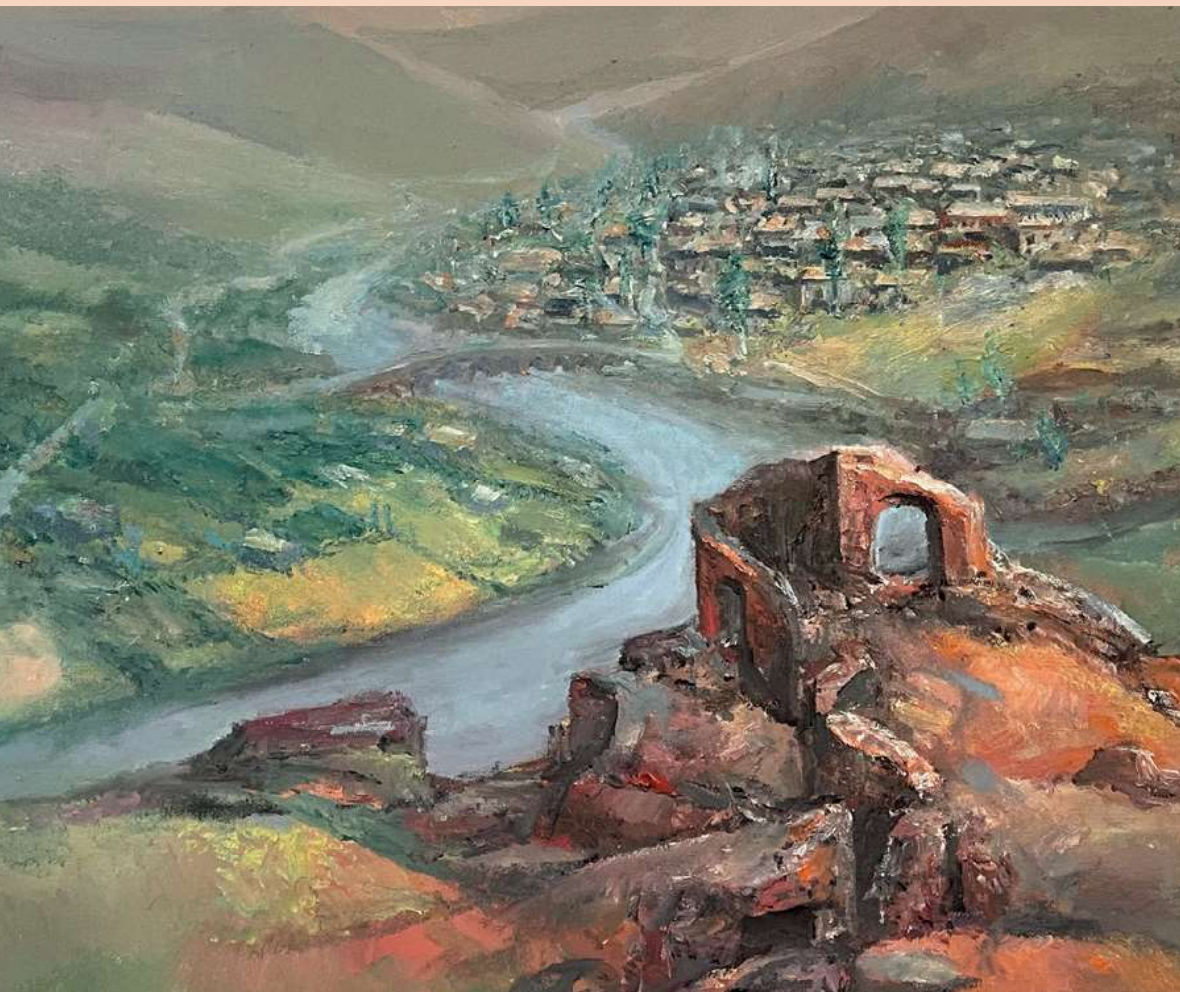


EDINBURGH STUDIES ON THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE



THE KURDISH NOBILITY IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

Loyalty, Autonomy and Privilege

NİLAY ÖZOK-GÜNDOĞAN

**THE KURDISH NOBILITY
IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE**

Edinburgh Studies on the Ottoman Empire

Series Editor: Kent F. Schull

Published and forthcoming titles

Migrating Texts: Circulating Translations around the Ottoman Mediterranean

Edited by Marilyn Booth

Ottoman Translations: Circulating Texts from Bombay to Paris

Edited by Marilyn Booth and Claire Savina

Death and Life in the Ottoman Palace: Revelations of the Sultan Abdülhamid I Tomb

Douglas Scott Brookes

Ottoman Sunnism: New Perspectives

Edited by Vefa Erginbaş

Jews and Palestinians in the Late Ottoman Era, 1908–1914: Claiming the Homeland

Louis A. Fishman

Spiritual Vernacular of the Early Ottoman Frontier: The Yazıcıoğlu Family

Carlos Grenier

Armenians in the Late Ottoman Empire: Migration, Mobility Control and Sovereignty, 1885–1915

David Gutman

The Kizilbash-Alevi in Ottoman Anatolia: Sufism, Politics and Community

Ayfer Karakaya-Stump

Çemberlitaş Hamami in Istanbul: The Biographical Memoir of a Turkish Bath

Nina Macaraig

The Kurdish Nobility in the Ottoman Empire: Loyalty, Autonomy and Privilege

Nilay Özok-Gündoğan

Nineteenth-Century Local Governance in Ottoman Bulgaria: Politics in Provincial Councils

Safa Saraçoğlu

Prisons in the Late Ottoman Empire: Microcosms of Modernity

Kent F. Schull

Ruler Visibility and Popular Belonging in the Ottoman Empire

Darin Stephanov

The North Caucasus Borderland: Between Muscovy and the Ottoman Empire, 1555–1605

Murat Yasar

Children and Childhood in the Ottoman Empire: From the 15th to the 20th Century

Edited by Gülay Yılmaz and Fruma Zachs

eupublishing.com/series/esoc

THE KURDISH NOBILITY IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

LOYALTY, AUTONOMY AND PRIVILEGE



Nilay Özok-Gündoğan

EDINBURGH
University Press

To Roza Perî and Azat Zana

Edinburgh University Press is one of the leading university presses in the UK. We publish academic books and journals in our selected subject areas across the humanities and social sciences, combining cutting-edge scholarship with high editorial and production values to produce academic works of lasting importance. For more information visit our website: edinburghuniversitypress.com

© Nilay Özok-Gündoğan, 2022

Cover image: © Nurettin Erkan
Cover design: Stuart Dalziel

Edinburgh University Press Ltd
The Tun – Holyrood Road
12 (2f) Jackson's Entry
Edinburgh EH8 8PJ

Typeset in Jaghuni by
Cheshire Typesetting Ltd, Cuddington, Cheshire,
and printed and bound in Great Britain

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 3995 0861 2 (hardback)
ISBN 978 1 3995 0863 6 (webready PDF)
ISBN 978 1 3995 0864 3 (epub)

The right of Nilay Özok-Gündoğan to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 and the Copyright and Related Rights Regulations 2003 (SI No. 2498).

Contents

List of Figures, Maps and Tables	vii
Acknowledgements	viii
Introduction: Rethinking Kurdish Nobility in the Ottoman Empire	1
PART I A TENUOUS ACCORD	
1. At the Beginning: The Formation of the Kurdish-Ottoman Nobility of Palu in the Sixteenth Century	43
2. Noble Privilege on the Ground, from the 1720s to the 1830s	62
PART II A QUASI-RIFT	
3. The Kurdish Nobility and the Making of Modern State Power in Kurdistan	107
4. A System in Transition: Negotiating Nobility in the Locality	132
5. The Weşin Incident: the Spark that Burnt a Village ... and the Arsonist	157
PART III RESTRUCTURING AND VIOLENCE	
6. After Abdullah Beg: The Politics of Dividing the Kurdish Nobles' Lands	177
7. Provincial Administration after the Palu Nobility	219

The Kurdish Nobility in the Ottoman Empire

8. The Beginning of the Endgame? The Road to the 1895 Massacres in Palu	242
Conclusion: The End of the Nobility in Kurdistan	280
Postscript	286
Glossary	288
Select Bibliography	291
Index	330

Figures, Maps and Tables

Figures

I.1	The ruins of the old city of Palu	21
5.1	A contemporary view from Weşin – now called Erimli	158
8.1	The Palu Memorial	261

Maps

I.1	Palu in the Ottoman Empire	23
1.1	Emirates that were granted <i>hükümet</i> status (c. 1520)	49

Tables

I.1	Total male population of Palu in 1841	24
6.1	Latif Efendi's account of the lands sold by the Treasury in Abrank village (c. 1860)	196
6.2	Muhtar Efendi's account of land sales	200
6.3	Amount of money collected from all the non-Muslim villages of the Palu district	205
6.4	Amount of money collected from all the Muslim villages of the Palu district	206

Acknowledgements

Writing this book was a long and arduous journey across institutions, libraries and countries. I am grateful that many people supported me during this time. My late adviser Donald Quataert had an unconditional belief in the significance of a project on the socio-economic history of Kurdistan. He was a great mentor who encouraged and supported his students with endless patience, and I feel deep regret that he did not live to read the final product of this project. The late Rifa'at Ali Abou-El-Haj was a source of scholarly inspiration. His unrelenting critical approach to conventional histories of the Ottoman Empire, his insistence on bringing the society back into historical analysis and his call for comparative approaches enormously enriched my historical thinking. I owe gratitude to Nancy Appelbaum, who opened the door to the exciting world of Latin American history. She kindly stepped in to chair my dissertation committee after we lost Donald. Her support and mentorship over the years have been invaluable. Fa-ti Fan guided me through the rich historical scholarship on rural societies in Qing China. I have also had the privilege of working with Raymond Craib from Cornell University. I thank him for reading and sharing his helpful insights with me on this project.

This project would not have been possible without Kent Schull's support. I have been fortunate to have had him as a mentor, colleague and friend. Our afternoon coffee hours brightened the gloomy Binghamton winters and gave me much-needed hope and strength. Janet Klein has left an indelible mark on this project. It was her work that triggered my interest in the history of Ottoman Kurdistan. She is an inspiring scholar and also a generous mentor whose example I can only hope to follow.

At Cornell College, where I spent a year as an ACM-Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow, I had the pleasure of working with Phil Lucas, Catherine Stewart and Michelle Herder. I also had supportive colleagues

Acknowledgements

at Denison University. I owe an enormous debt to Trey Proctor and Megan Threlkeld for their friendship, care and support. I also thank Adam Davis, Karen Spierling, Barry Keenan and Mitchell Snay. I am grateful to have wonderful friends in Granville: Rebecca Futo Kennedy, Jo Tague, Kyle Bartholomew, Hannah Weiss Muller, Hanada al-Masri, Rana Odeh, Michele Stephens, Olivia Aguilar, Yadi Collins and Nida Bikmen. I also thank Nurten Kilic-Schubel and Vernon Schubel for their friendship. Sohrab Behdad, a caring colleague and friend, and I have had inspiring exchanges about life with all of its colours and shades.

The writing process of this book witnessed many important life events. I had a child, and my family moved back to Turkey from the United States. Shortly after this, Turkey witnessed one of the biggest political crackdowns of its history, and unexpected circumstances forced us to leave the country again, facing an unknown future. Many people and institutions made it possible for me to have a safe place to continue my academic work back in the United States. I am grateful to the Institute of International Education Scholar Rescue Fund (IIE-SRF) for providing me with a grant that allowed me to continue working on this project. Danielle Alperin, Emily Borzcik, James King and Sarah Willcox are more professional, caring and supportive than I can express in words. Kent Schull and Mostafa Minawi generously helped during my search for a host institution. My alma mater, Binghamton University, welcomed me back into a vibrant and collegial academic milieu where I worked on this book. I thank Nathanael Andrade, Dina Danon, Heather D. DeHaan, Sean Dunwoody and Ekrem Karakoç for their collegiality. The late Jean Quataert supported me in numerous ways during this time in Binghamton. I would also like to thank the president of Denison University, Adam Weinberg, and the Provost Kim Coplin for their generous offer to provide me with an academic home after I left Turkey. I owe a special debt of gratitude to four formidable women – Aslı Iğsız, Aslı Bâli, Beth Baron and Gaye Özpınar – who supported me enormously during this process. My valiant lawyer Helin Beştaş also deserves heartfelt thanks.

I have been fortunate to be a part of the History Department at Florida State University and work with wonderful colleagues. I am grateful to Will Hanley for his mentorship and friendship, and for his unrelenting efforts to make justice, equality and solidarity an integral part of human relations in and outside of academia. I would also like to thank Rafe Blaufarb for providing me with invaluable insights which helped me to think about Ottoman history from a comparative historical perspective. Special thanks to Edward Gray for the support and encouragement he provided as the department chair. Thanks are also due to Cathy McClive,

The Kurdish Nobility in the Ottoman Empire

Jennifer Koslow, Claudia Liebeskind, Suzanne Sinke, Annika Culver, Laurie Wood, Charles Upchurch, Maximillian Scholz, Jonathan Grant, Kurt Piehler, George Williamson, Ben Dodds, Nathan Stoltzfus, James Palmer, Sam Holley-Kline, Hadi Hoseiny, Adam Gaiser, Aline Kalbian and Peter Garretson for their collegiality.

Numerous other people and institutions assisted me during the research and writing processes of this book. Derya Satır, Elif Feyyat, Nışan Güreh, Abdusselam Ertekin and Ben Goff provided research assistance. My friend and colleague Jelle Verheij generously shared documents and always made himself available to answer my questions about place names. I am indebted to him for his help. I also thank the staff of the Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi in Istanbul, Glenn Bartle Library in Binghamton, Denison University Library, and Florida State University Libraries. A summer research grant from Denison University Research Foundation (DURF) allowed me to conduct research in Palu. The First-Year Assistant Professor (FYAP) award from Florida State University granted me funds to conduct further research. Also, I would like to extend a big thank you to my brilliant editors, Martha Schulman and Allison Bramblett.

My undergraduate and graduate students have been a constant source of inspiration, especially Dena Sutphin, Chelsi Arellano, Jill Hopkins, Adam Hunt, Daniel Zylberkan, Sibel Alçı, Ömer, Topal, Ahmet Yusuf Yüksek, Bahadin Kerborani and Timur Saitov.

Writing is a solitary experience, but friendship is one of the best things to enjoy in life. Can Nacar has supported me in many different ways during this long journey. I am grateful to have him as my *ahretlik*. Mostafa Minawi has been someone I would describe as a *can yoldaşı*, a friend with whom I can walk down any path no matter what. Our writing sessions, to which we have been religiously committed every day, produced two books (as I write this acknowledgement, my writing companion is crafting the acknowledgement to his book). David Gutman has been a great friend and an inspiring scholar. Yiğit Akın has always been a supportive and caring friend. I have been blessed to have had wonderful women as friends/sisters: Hillary Gleason, Zülâl Fazlıoğlu-Akın, Canan Tanır, Sezen Bayhan, Suzan Bayhan and Sandrine Bertaux. Thanks are also due to Ege Özen, Sinem Silay Özen, James Parisot, Alper Ecevit, Ümit Kurt, Murat Akan, Ebru Öztürk, Emma Buckthal, Laura Warren Hill, Heather Laube, Jennifer Alvey, Rushika Patell Lipp, Hişyar Özsoy, and the late Ananth Aiyer. Josie Fliger, Jeremy Deese and Morgyn Elizabeth Fliger Deese made my life in Tallahassee more colourful and joyful. I would also like to thank Teagan Dunn for her support and for the cups of tea she offered while I was writing this book.

Acknowledgements

I have been fortunate to work with an outstanding team at Edinburgh University Press. Kent Schull and Rachel Bridgewater have generously given their support and invaluable advice. I also thank the two readers for the helpful comments they provided on the manuscript. I have no words to express my gratefulness to Nurettin Erkan for the gorgeous cover image he made. The beauty of his painting of Palu that he generously shared with me is beyond my imagination. I also owe gratitude to the descendants of the Palu begs, especially Mehmet Karacimşit, for their hospitality and for sharing their family archive with me.

My family has always been a source of unconditional support. My late father, Süleyman İrfan Özok, instilled in me the love of books and left his legacy as a person committed to equality and justice. My mother, Nadide Özok, taught me the significance of education for a woman's self-realisation and continually supported my efforts to this end. My brother, Özyay Özok, supported and encouraged me with his love. The moments that I spent with İrfan Rüzgâr Özok reminded me of the beauty of life. I would also like to thank the members of my now-expanded family, Meral Gündoğan, Yaşar Gündoğan and Ceren Cevahir Gündoğan, for their warmth, care and encouragement. I am grateful to Yaşar Gündoğan for the stunning pictures that he took of Palu and its vicinity.

Last but not least, my deepest thanks go to my team at home. Seeing me lost in documents written in different scripts or sitting at a desk for hours at a time, my daughter Roza found creative ways to get into my world. In a confident voice, she would say, 'Mom, in the late Ottoman Empire, people liked pizza.' She wrote 'Play with Roza' in my calendar with her glitter markers. 'When your book is finished ...' became the standard opening for any sentence about the future. My only consolation is that maybe this book dedicated to her name will inspire her one day to feel the extraordinary pleasure of writing as a woman in a room of her own. Azat – my husband, colleague and comrade – and I started the academic journey together. He read every page of this book, guided me with his *good sense*, and reminded me of what I was trying to achieve when I felt lost in the complexity of the historical material that I was working with. Without his love and compassion, this venture would have not been possible.

Introduction: Rethinking Kurdish Nobility in the Ottoman Empire

In the last days of August 1848, the inhabitants of Weşin,¹ a village nestled in a secluded valley on the banks of the eastern Euphrates, woke early. The men met at the village mosque to perform the pre-sunrise prayer marking the beginning of a three-day Muslim holiday celebrating the end of Ramadan. Just before the prayer began, they heard the sound of distant gunfire. As the noise approached, the prayer-goers saw that it was being made by Abdullah Beg, the *hâkim* (ruler) of the Palu emirate and at least six hundred armed men. They were coming to collect 1.5 tons of clarified butter from the villagers in payment for four years of back taxes owed to Abdullah Beg. The villagers responded by opening fire. *Eid* turned bloody, with three villagers dead and four wounded. The despairing villagers then fled to the surrounding hills. The next day Abdullah Beg came back with his men and set the village on fire, burning sixty-five houses and buildings to the ground, along with stored grain, animals and their fodder, poplar trees and vineyards.²

On the surface, this event seems like just one among many conflicts about agrarian surplus extraction the world over. What neither Abdullah Beg nor the villagers knew was that the incident would trigger a series of events that would break up the Kurdish begs' hereditary rule.³ Abdullah Beg was a descendant of the Palu *ûmera* (pl. of *emîr* – alternatively *begs/beys* or *mîrs*)⁴ that had ruled the emirate for more than three centuries. Successive Ottoman sultans recognised the Palu begs' hereditary rulership over the emirate from the 1500s – the time when it came under Ottoman suzerainty – onward. Within a year, this violent encounter would cost Abdullah Beg his position as *hâkim*, his landholdings and, when the Ottoman state exiled him to Tekfurdağı in Rumelia, 900 miles away from the lands that his ancestors had ruled for centuries, his bond with his homeland. And with the end of Abdullah Beg's career came the end of the begs' hereditary rule in Palu.

The Kurdish Nobility in the Ottoman Empire

Kurdish emirates and the elite families have been the cornerstones of both popular and academic historical renditions of the Kurds and Kurdistan. From the late medieval era through the modern age, the rise and fall of the Kurdish emirates has constituted a key aspect of Kurdish history. But, although the emirates feature in popular notions of Kurdish history, they are barely addressed in actual historical research. The scant existing scholarship has focused on the most powerful Kurdish ruling houses, namely the Baban (based in Sulaimania), Bohtan (based in Cîzre/Cızîr) and Soran (based in Rawanduz).⁵ All three disappeared from the political arena in the second half of the nineteenth century as a result of Ottoman military campaigns. Bedir Khan Beg of the Botan emirate has attracted the most attention from historians, not least because his descendants constituted the leading cadres of the budding Kurdish nationalist movement at the turn of the twentieth century.

Abdullah Beg, who wreaked havoc on Weşin village on that hot August day, was also a member of an elite Kurdish family, the leaders of the Palu (Palo in Kurdish; Balu in Armenian) emirate. This emirate was geographically smaller and politically less significant in the nineteenth century than the previously-mentioned emirates. The Palu begs did not respond to the Ottoman state's mid-nineteenth-century centralisation policies with large-scale uprisings. It is true that Abdullah Beg, like the emîrs of the three formidable emirates, was exiled by the Ottoman imperial state at around the same time period. The rest of the family, however, stayed in their historic homeland and continued to claim rulership of the emirate for several decades after Abdullah Beg's exile. Thus, the Palu begs' modern history does not fit with the nationalist interpretations of the Kurdish past in which the Kurdish ruling families represent heroic resistance to the Ottoman state's military and political encroachments during the long nineteenth century.⁶ Additionally, unlike Bedir Khan Beg's sons and the Babans, who became the flag-bearers of Kurdish national identity, the majority of the Palu begs' descendants were integrated into the mainstream Muslim-Turkish identity.⁷ In the nineteenth century the family's relationship with Kurdish identity was debatable. In their dealings with the Ottoman state, the begs hardly ever mentioned being Kurdish, and when they talked about tribes or other groups they perceived as recalcitrant or unlawful, the begs referred to them as '*ekrad* and *aşair*' (Kurds and tribes). This derogatory tone echoed the Ottoman state's dominant usage towards these groups. While distinguishing themselves from Kurdishness as such, the Palu begs embraced and emphasised the claim that they were a family of begs descended from Cemşîd Beg, who was granted this position by Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent.

Introduction

This book is the first comprehensive account of the transformation and eventual disappearance of a Kurdish elite family's hereditary privileges in the Ottoman Empire. It focuses on the Palu begs and examines their changing position in the locality and vis-à-vis the Ottoman imperial state from the eighteenth through the end of the nineteenth century. What attracted my interest in this family were the events of Weşin in 1848. As I read the archival documents, I was puzzled by the drastic consequences of this seemingly ordinary happening. Because the event resulted in the deaths of villagers and the destruction of the village, the villagers' insistent appeals eventually brought about a criminal investigation that led to a court case and Abdullah Beg's eventual exile. But how and why did this incident culminate in the abolishing of the Palu begs' hereditary privileges, privileges that had existed in the Ottoman politico-economic system for over three centuries? The documents about the incident revealed a fierce underlying negotiation between local and imperial actors about the economic, political and military privileges of the Palu elites. For the begs, these privileges were legitimate hereditary rights bestowed upon them because of their noble position. From the Ottoman state's perspective, however, these old claims were invalid, a remnant of the past. One thing was clear: the Palu begs saw themselves as a noble family, and while that nobility preceded the Ottoman entry into Kurdistan, it was bolstered by the family's acceptance of Ottoman suzerainty in the sixteenth century. Their identity was not based on a negation of or antagonism towards the Ottoman imperial state. It was the Ottoman sultans who recognised the family's entitlement to their privileges, who reinforced and legitimated their noble claims. Notwithstanding ups and downs in their relationship, their noble identity connected the Palu begs to the Ottoman imperial centre from the mid-sixteenth century through the empire's end.

This book tells three intertwined stories about the Palu begs. First, it describes the transformation of the relations between the Ottoman imperial state and the begs from the time they came under Ottoman rule through the late nineteenth century. Second, it considers the Palu begs as an elite group whose wealth derived primarily from land. The book examines the transformation of land tenure in the Palu countryside in relation to the Palu begs' changing fortunes. Third, it uses this backdrop of the Palu begs' changing economic and administrative power to consider the ways in which their relations with the local population changed. The book offers a granular account of the Palu begs' changing position in the locality and their relations with local actors including provincial Ottoman administrators, cultivators, Armenian creditors (*sarrafs*) and Kurdish

The Kurdish Nobility in the Ottoman Empire

tribes. In doing so, the book demonstrates how local socio-economic structures and relations changed in relation to the changing position of the Kurdish nobility vis-à-vis the Ottoman state while highlighting the role played by local actors. These locals were not passive observers; they were actively involved in the negotiations over the Palu begs' hereditary privileges, using the newly-established *Tanzimat* (Re-organisation) institutions, especially the provincial councils, to challenge the Palu begs.⁸ We will see how the transformation of land ownership and local power configurations set the ground for the ethno-religious clashes between the Armenians and Muslims that plagued Palu in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

The Question of the Autonomy of Kurdish Emirates in the Ottoman Empire

Questions about the autonomy of the emirates ruled by the Kurdish begs have constituted a common underlying theme in studies on Kurds and Kurdistan – historical or otherwise.⁹ This interest stems from a presentist agenda related to the Kurdish population's current statelessness. In their search for the origins of the Kurdish plight, nation-state-centred renditions of Kurdish history rely on an oft-cited schema of the degree of autonomy the Ottoman Kurdish emirates held. According to the standard narrative, Kurdish emirates came under Ottoman rule in the sixteenth century when they received privileges that accorded them autonomy vis-à-vis the Ottoman central state. The narrative then shifts to the mid-nineteenth-century *Tanzimat* era, when the Ottoman state destroyed their autonomy via large-scale military operations and centralisation policies. The period between is described as a static time during which the political system of Kurdistan remained unchanged.¹⁰ This picture has come to constitute the standard 'historical background' or 'Ottoman background' part of almost every book written on Kurdish history and politics in the past century.¹¹

At the centre of this schematic portrayal of the Kurdish emirates' autonomy is the hegemony of the nation-state paradigm in the historical accounts of an imperial setting. This portrayal sees the emirates' history during the Ottoman era either in terms of their autonomy from and resistance to the Ottoman state or as a precursor of the twentieth-century nationalist movements. Either way, the relationship between the Kurdish elites and the Ottoman state is described primarily as a zero-sum game. I am not the first to take issue with the nation-state fallacy in the analysis of the provincial elites. Albert Hourani's conceptualisation of politics of

Introduction

notables opened up a significant strain in the historiography of the Arab provinces by situating provincial elites of the Arab provinces within the Ottoman imperial context.¹² Deploying the Weberian notion of the patriciate, Hourani argued that what he described as the ‘politics of notables’ was key for understanding the urban politics of Ottoman (specifically the Muslim) provinces.¹³ The urban notability’s political influence rested on their intermediary position between the imperial state and the local population. They had access to authority and held social power of their own that was not dependent on the ruler. In Hourani’s account, the concept of ‘notable’ was a political, not a sociological one: different groups with varying forms of social power could play this intermediary role between the state and the provincial society.¹⁴ In this sense, the framework Hourani presented was prescriptive than descriptive. Nevertheless, he also provided a description of the groups which he thought constituted the notability in the Arab provinces (i.e. the ‘ulama, the leaders of the local garrisons, and the secular notables – a’yan, aghas and amirs).¹⁵ Regardless of which group ended up seizing the leadership position, and notwithstanding the varying socio-economic bases of their power, they played this role as intermediaries between government and people. Hourani’s notability paradigm found great resonance among the historians of the Arab provinces in different time periods from the medieval era to the twentieth century.¹⁶

More recently, historians working on different parts of the empire sought a comprehensive analytical framework to examine the provincial elites in Ottoman imperial formation. The distinction between elite formation and elite incorporation was replaced by a more relational perspective that emphasised ‘the interactive process of *localization* and *Ottomanization*’. This relational process of elite formation produced what Toledano describes as ‘*Ottoman-Local elites*’¹⁷ who benefited from the Ottoman presence in the locality by seizing administrative and military posts and fiscal opportunities. In this way, ‘provincial elites “localised” the hegemony of the state’.¹⁸ More recent studies questioned historians’ over-emphasis on Arab provincial elites and brought a more comprehensive and comparative approach to the study of Ottoman provincial elites.¹⁹ Examining local power-holding families in the Balkans and Anatolia, Ali Yaycıoğlu described their relationship with the Ottoman state as ‘partnership’.²⁰

These epistemological interventions in the study of the provincial elites in the Ottoman Empire were echoed in scholarly work on the Kurds and Kurdistan later and to a lesser extent. New generations of Kurdish historians complicated the ethno-national and teleological accounts of Kurdish history by considering it within an imperial context.²¹ Janet

Klein's work is one of the earliest attempts to debunk the nationalist and ethnic-conflict-centred accounts of Kurdish history. In her study of the Hamidiye Light Cavalry, Klein examined the emergence of this armed militia group from the Kurdish tribes within the conceptual framework of Ottoman colonialism in Kurdistan.²² Similarly, Sabri Ateş's study of the making of the Ottoman–Iranian borderlands considered the changing relations between the Kurdish local elites and the Ottoman state within the context of the tension between the territorialisation of the state-space and local desires for autonomy.²³

This book contributes to this line of thinking by situating the question of the Kurdish emirates' autonomy within the Ottoman imperial framework. It contends that the relationship between the Ottoman state and the Kurdish elites was shaped within the context of the political, economic and military exigencies of the imperial setting rather than by a preconceived antagonism between the two. In this light, there was nothing unusual about the Palu begs or the Kurdish elites more generally. Just like other ethnically, religiously and linguistically different local notables, Palu begs were a provincial elite group operating in an imperial context. Nevertheless, we must avoid any temptation to disregard the specificity of each region or group in terms of their position within the Ottoman political system and the privileges, prerogatives and obligations this position accorded them. As Dina Houry states, it is 'impossible to make blanket generalizations about political power-holders applicable to the whole of the Ottoman Empire'.²⁴

One key characteristic of the Kurdish begs that distinguished them from the majority of the elite groups that became the subject of these revisionist historiographies following Hourani's conceptualisation of the politics of notables: their *de jure* hereditary control over their land, and the security of property it gave them despite constant threats of state confiscation.²⁵ This *de jure* recognition was based on the Ottoman state's acceptance that the Kurdish begs' rights over the land preceded the Ottoman arrival in the area and its recognition of their hereditary privileges within a specific type of politico-administrative organisation – one that granted autonomy to the Kurdish elites in various fiscal, military and administrative realms. This book situates the Kurdish elite formation within the context of this specific administrative model.

Ottoman political formation is characterised by the diversity of the administrative arrangements through which different elite groups were incorporated into the Ottoman system. Geo-strategic location, local socio-economic characteristics and the existing power configuration in a newly-conquered area determined its administrative position in the

Introduction

Ottoman realm.²⁶ In the areas where the classical Ottoman military and fiscal regimes were not implemented, local elites were incorporated into the Ottoman imperial realm through administrative arrangements that accorded them varying degrees of autonomous rule. However, the major discussions of the Ottoman provincial elites have centred on areas where the classical Ottoman military and fiscal regime was implemented. But as Adanir states, ‘the complex issue of provincial elites in the Ottoman Empire cannot be studied adequately without due attention to pre-Ottoman leadership groups’.²⁷

When Kurdistan came under Ottoman rule in the sixteenth century, the Kurdish elites of the existing principalities in the area were incorporated into the Ottoman realm mainly through a system that recognised their hereditary rulership. Palu was one of five emirates that were granted a special position as *hükümet* (lit. government).²⁸ *Hükümet* was how the Ottoman state recognised the hereditary rights of the Kurdish begs over their dominions. What separated the *hükümet*s from the more typical Ottoman sanjaks and other hereditary Kurdish estates (*yurtluk-ocaklıks*)²⁹ was that they were designated as *mefrûzü’l-kalem* and *maktû’ü’l-kadem* in the administrative system. *Mefrûzü’l-kalem* refers to the *hükümet*s’ protection from *timars* – fiefs granted to cavalymen by the state in return for military service. With this immunity came another: Palu and the other Kurdish *hükümet*s were free of *tahrirs*. Literally meaning ‘enregisterment’, *tahrir* was the ‘Ottoman system of periodical surveying of populations, land and other sources of revenue’.³⁰ Once a new region was annexed, detailed surveys were conducted and the data was recorded in detailed registers.³¹ *Maktû’ü’l-kadem* meant that both military and civilian Ottoman administrators were barred from having any authority in the emirate; this meant both tax collectors and the Janissary troops.³² This left the begs free to maintain private forces and to seize the agrarian surplus from the areas under their dominions. Together these designations meant that *hükümet*s had extensive administrative and fiscal autonomy within the Ottoman system.

To varying degrees, precedents for the Ottoman state’s recognition of local dynasties’ rule existed outside Kurdistan. Early Ottoman sultans had granted lands to the frontier lords from the newly-conquered lands in Rumelia with *mefrûzü’l-kalem* and *maktû’ü’l-kadem* status that gave them fiscal and administrative rule over these lands. After the conquest of Trabzon, Christian elites there were granted hereditary landownership – continuing an established practice from the pre-Ottoman Byzantine era.³³ Similarly, members of the prominent Mihaloğulları family were granted lands in Pleven (modern Bulgaria) by Sultan Bayezid I (r. 1389–1402).³⁴

The Kurdish Nobility in the Ottoman Empire

There were cases of entire regions being granted along with similar immunities and privileges to ruling families present in the area before the Ottoman conquest. By the end of the sixteenth century, Transylvania, Wallachia, Moldavia and the Crimean Khanate were ruled by native dynasties.³⁵ These areas, previously described as ‘vassal states’, have recently been renamed in Ottoman historiography as ‘tributary states’, evoking the Ottoman concept of *haraçgüzâr* (tributary) – even though some of them, like Crimea, did not actually pay tribute.³⁶ We can also add other configurations of autonomous rule, including Hejaz, Tunis, Algeria, Tripolitania, Yemen and Egypt – to name just a few. Ottoman historians have examined the extent and nature of the autonomy these ruling families had vis-à-vis the Ottoman state.³⁷ In a recent volume on the European tributary states of the Ottoman Empire, scholars scrutinised the historicist, nation-state-centred assumptions of autonomy in these areas. For instance, Viorel Panaite warns about the ahistorical usages of ‘autonomy’ in an imperial context since ‘autonomy could exist only within another state – in this case, the Ottoman Empire – and not outside of it’.³⁸ The *mefrûzü'l-kalem ve maktû'ü'l-kadem* formulation attests to the de jure position of Wallachia and Moldavia *within* the system of what Panaite describes as *pax ottomanica*, not outside of it.³⁹

This approach is useful in understanding the nature of the Kurdish begs’ autonomy in the Ottoman imperial context. Broad surveys of Ottoman provincial organisation always treat the Kurdish *hükümet*s as sui generis, exceptions to be mentioned in parentheses. The lack of comprehensive monographic studies of the *hükümet*s in the Ottoman realm, coupled with the prevalent historicist notions of the Kurdish past, has pushed the question of Kurdish emirates’ autonomy to the margins of Ottoman historical writing. Historians mention the specific position the Kurdish emirates had within the Ottoman administrative system without actually investigating that position. The Kurdish *hükümet*s’ position was different from that of the classical Ottoman sanjaks, but it was by no means unique. This book considers the Palu emirate’s autonomy as one example of the manifold modalities of the organisation of autonomy within the Ottoman imperial system.

The book pushes the examination of the Kurdish *hükümet*s’ autonomy beyond the usual focus on their administrative position, considering them in relation to the hereditary position of the ruling family and the actual fiscal, military and administrative prerogatives and exemptions this position gave them. The *hükümet* status tied the rulership of the emirate to a family in a hereditary fashion. From the sixteenth until the eighteenth century, the Ottoman state recognised the Kurdish begs as a corporate body that

Introduction

collectively made decisions about the administration of the region. The imperial decrees mentioned them as *Kurdistan begleri* (or alternatively as *ûmera-ı Kurdistan*). According to the Ottoman documents defining the hereditary rights of the begs (*temessüknâme*), when a beg died without an heir (since succession was based on primogeniture), the Kurdistan begs could choose someone from among themselves to rule the emirate. This changed in the late seventeenth century, when the Ottoman provincial administrators increased their efforts to intervene in the appointment processes of the Palu begs, despite the begs being technically immune to such interventions. The Kurdish emirs' horizontal relations in the early centuries of Ottoman rule, the mechanisms they deployed to collectively rule the region, and the way in which their sense of being a part of a larger unit (e.g. *ûmera-ı Kurdistan*) shaped their relations with the Ottoman administration are questions for Ottoman historians. For the purposes of this book, the point is that the Palu begs entered the Ottoman realm as a noble family whose de jure hereditary rights and privileges manifested in the degree to which they were exempt from Ottoman oversight.

Nobility as a Historical Category of Analysis

On a hot summer day in 2013, I visited Palu in search of descendants of the Palu begs. My initial inquiry led me to a young man. Dressed in a suit, he pointed out of the window and said that he owned the quarry by the hill – his voice could not hide his pride. This was one of several references to his wealth. He was proud of his connection to the *begs*, but they were totally fabricated. The actual descendant of the *begs*, a retired teacher in his mid-fifties, came to meet me in a decrepit Renault 12, probably from the early 1990s. He seemed happy to have the attention of a historian interested in his ancestors, and mentioned that the quarry owner was a *nouveau riche* whose desire for a noble past had led him to the Palu begs. In Palu, a small district that is now an impoverished backwater, the title of *beg* had survived into the twenty-first century; the begs' wealth, however, had not. I found it puzzling that the title persisted when its bearers had long since fallen from grace, that it was potent enough that a well-to-do person would claim it. The begs' real descendants could prove their noble identity via a *temlîknâme*⁴⁰ (alternatively *temlîk* or *mülknâme*) – a title deed from the Ottoman sultans that recognised their hereditary rulership over the Palu emirate – that they kept in a chest in their attic.

The absence of hereditary nobility in the Ottoman Empire is a foundational assumption in Ottoman historical writing. Generations of historians have based their theories, conceptualisations and narratives of the Ottoman

The Kurdish Nobility in the Ottoman Empire

administrative system on the idea that hereditary nobility had no legal place in the Ottoman politico-administrative order. According to this widely accepted view, the Ottoman state diverged from its European counterparts in terms of its persistent opposition to hereditary rights and privileges. This theory is based on references to three institutions seen as the building blocks of the classical Ottoman regime: gradual Ottomanisation of ruling aristocracies in the newly-conquered areas, the *devşirme* (child-levy) system and *müsadere* (confiscation of wealth).

Let us look at these one by one, beginning with the idea that early Ottoman methods of conquest worked by gradually incorporating local aristocracies.⁴¹ According to this claim, the Ottoman state followed a two-stage policy towards incorporating the newly-conquered territories. First, it established a form of suzerainty, and then it tried to eliminate the local dynasties by establishing direct control through instituting the *timar*.⁴² Starting from Bayezid I (r. 1389–1402), the policy of using vassals to administer newly-conquered places was replaced by the appointment of Ottoman governors.⁴³ One important way the Ottoman state approached the question of the indigenous noble families was to appoint them to important positions within the administrative machinery. With Mehmed II's reign (r. 1444–1446; 1451–1481), the doors of the highest offices in the central administration, including the Grand Vizierate, were opened to Balkan aristocrats – Greek, Bulgarian, Serbian and Albanian elites. Even the fallen Byzantine ruling dynasty was subsumed into the Ottoman ruling elite.⁴⁴ The logic for incorporating the former Balkan and Byzantine aristocracies into the Ottoman administration was that it prevented them from becoming rival nodes of power.

The second pillar that supports the claim of the lack of a hereditary nobility in the Ottoman Empire is the system of meritocracy that served as a primary instrument of elite formation in Ottoman statecraft through the *devşirme* (child-levy) system. That system, which forcibly recruited young Christian boys from across the Ottoman territories, created a slave (*kul*) army and court bureaucracy of Ottoman civilian and military officials whose sole loyalty lay with the Sultan.⁴⁵ The purpose of the system was to counteract the emergence of hereditary nobility by creating a select group of military and civilian officials loyal to the ruler. Starting from the mid-fifteenth century, these formerly Christian, peasant-origin children filled the ranks of the highest positions in the Ottoman system, including the Grand Vizir's office, gradually replacing the former Balkan and Byzantine aristocracies who had filled this position up until this period.⁴⁶

Last, Ottoman historians have seen *müsadere*, the state's confiscation of the wealth and property of deposed elites (*ehl-i örf*), as another indication

Introduction

of the empire's intolerance towards elite groups accumulating inheritable wealth and power. From the rule of Mehmed II (r. 1444–6, 1451–81), Ottoman sultans institutionalised *müsadere* to prevent the formation of hereditary nobility.⁴⁷ The practice of *müsadere* was closely related to political execution (*siyaseten katl*), since oftentimes the confiscation of wealth and property followed this.⁴⁸

This belief that the Ottoman state was different from its European counterparts in terms of being fundamentally inimical to hereditary offices and privileges also found an echo in the writings of the European political philosophers. The Renaissance political theorist Machiavelli described the Ottoman state as ruled by 'a prince with a body of servants', different from the French state, which was ruled by 'a prince and barons' who 'hold that dignity by antiquity of blood and not by the grace of the prince'.⁴⁹ Ottoman observers of the later centuries also emphasised what they considered the unique method of elite formation by the Ottoman state. For instance, in his political treatise, İbrahim Müteferrika stated that the Ottoman state was not comparable to other states because 'in the latter, posts belong to the nobility and are hereditary, while the sultan grants offices to whoever is worthy'.⁵⁰ Originating from the writings of the Ottoman and European observers alike, the idea that *de jure* hereditary nobility was non-existent in the Ottoman politico-administrative system trickled into Ottoman historical writings as one of the most widely accepted and rarely questioned doctrines of the field.

These assumptions about the absence of hereditary nobility in the Ottoman Empire are reminiscent of similar arguments surrounding the non-feudal nature of the Ottoman state. From the 1930s through the 1980s, the question of an Ottoman feudalism caused the most heated debates within Ottoman historiography. Generations of historians argued that the Ottoman state was not feudal, that its fiefdoms (*timar*) were different from those in Europe. First, they were handed out by the Sultan and were non-hereditary. Second, compulsory labour was not prevalent in the agrarian sectors since the system was based on in-kind tax and rent collection. Finally, the *timar*-holders did not have juridical authority over the *reaya*.⁵¹ Halil Berktaş criticises this approach because of its rigid legalism, arguing that this understanding of feudalism comes from Ottoman historians' tendency to take state legal and political discourse at face value. Given the state's vested interest in presenting itself as an autonomous monolithic entity, Berktaş suggests going beyond a legal and juridical definition of feudalism and considering it within the larger socio-economic context of pre-capitalist societies:

The Kurdish Nobility in the Ottoman Empire

the fundamental social classes that could be found in virtually any pre-capitalist peasant society were here recast by the state as legally differentiated estates or orders, bolstering the illusion that classes were 'made' by the state instead of state being derived from a certain class structure, whilst also making it more difficult to detect the universal behind the specific, the suppressed sociological spontaneity underneath the legal garb.⁵²

In the past few decades, paradigmatic shifts in Ottoman historiography have added nuance to previously dominant idealist portrayals of the Ottoman political system. The depiction of the classical Ottoman state as centralised and absolute has been reassessed. Historians of the Ottoman provinces have established that the Ottoman state deployed a variety of administrative models and flexible ruling techniques in its provincial periphery, even during periods when it was supposedly most centralised. More recent scholarship has shown that it was not centralism but adaptability, flexibility and accommodation that gave the Ottoman administration its longevity.⁵³ Meanwhile, the meta-narrative of decline that had long been the major analytical framework for understanding the Ottoman seventeenth and eighteenth centuries came under serious criticism.⁵⁴ At the same time, critiques of modernisation theory and orientalist perspectives rendered dominant assumptions about the Ottoman Empire's uniqueness highly problematic.⁵⁵ Comparisons of the Ottoman politico-administrative system with its European and Eurasian contemporaries gained currency. These changing paradigms are echoed in approaches to Ottoman modernity. Critiques of Europe-centred modernisation narratives in light of an emphasis on the interconnectedness of the world and multiple routes to modernity have revealed the indigenous roots of transformation of Ottoman society in the long nineteenth century.⁵⁶

Despite this sea change regarding Ottoman state power and the question of elite formation, the assumption that hereditary nobilities were non-existent in the Ottoman realm remains unquestioned. This thesis is based on the persistence of the assumption that the state meant the central administration at the capital, that it successfully abolished any rival dynastic claims with the policies mentioned above, and that it had absolute control over other elite groups at the centre and in the provinces. In a way, despite the revisionist accounts that have complicated the notion of the state, the idea of the all-powerful Ottoman state has remained intact in Ottoman historians' unquestioned acceptance of the lack of a *de jure* nobility. Additionally, the field's foundational works about the nature of the early Ottoman state and its approach to hereditary nobility were based on the early Ottoman conquests, mostly in the Balkans and Anatolia. As such, in Ottoman historiography, the pre-Ottoman nobility in

Introduction

the newly-conquered territories refers primarily to Byzantine, Balkan and Turcoman aristocracies. These regions' experience of Ottoman conquest did not necessarily reflect the experiences of other areas that came under the Ottoman rule much later. That is, as the empire expanded with more conquests, the reality of elite formation became more complex, but the meta-narrative of the lack of hereditary nobilities based on these early centuries' experiences remained intact.

In his survey of eighteenth-century provincial magnates, Ali Yayıoğlu argues that '[t]hese new provincial elites also differed from the nobilities we know in Europe and elsewhere, which were clustered as corporate bodies with hereditary rights and privileges'.⁵⁷ Ottoman magnates did not have hereditary rights over their offices and contracts, and the 'Ottoman sultan reserved the right to dismiss officeholders, revoke contracts, and even confiscate property and order executions without judicial process'.⁵⁸ Although Yayıoğlu draws a clear line between European nobilities and Ottoman provincial elites, he is careful to mention exceptions, referring to 'the dynasties in distant provinces that were integrated in the empire with special vassalage arrangements, such as Crimea (until 1774), Bosnia, Kurdistan, the Caucasus, and the Hejaz'.⁵⁹ While this recognition is worth noting, it remains a rarity as the consensus is that there was no hereditary nobility in the Ottoman Empire.⁶⁰ But if there are so many 'exceptions' in so many different parts of the empire, on what conceptual and historical assumptions is the consensus about the Ottoman state's attitude towards hereditary nobility built?

In its essence, this argument is based on the belief that there was one type of nobility in Europe, uniform across time and space with no historical variations. For Ottoman historians, the French nobility is usually *the* prototype of European nobility. More broadly, most comparative studies of nobility are defined by a research agenda 'derived from French history'.⁶¹ Based on an entrenched estate system, constituting a corporate body, and with hereditary rights that the monarch could not seize, the French model was considered the ideal and, thus, the basis for comparisons and conclusions about the Ottoman case. What if the mirror image of Ottoman nobility discussions, that is the European nobility, was instead a kaleidoscopic reality?

In fact, however, European nobility was more heterogeneous than this.⁶² Revisionist approaches within various strands of European historiography have presented a more nuanced and historicised portrait instead of the long-prevalent ideal-type definition of nobility.⁶³ The single term 'nobility', Paul Fouracre states, 'should comprehend a spectrum of people which stretched from the leaders of small communities of several

hundred people, through to an élite group of families which dominated a single county, to that supra-regional élite which would later make up the *Reichsaristokratie*'.⁶⁴

Unlike the French model, not all noble groups were legally defined as an estate by the monarch.⁶⁵ Nobility not only had regional variations; it was a group in which 'complex gradations, forming bewildering sub-hierarchies existed everywhere'.⁶⁶ Urban-rural divisions, power and wealth differentials, variations in manners and etiquette make it impossible to discuss nobility as a uniform category. And the nobility's political power varied across place and time. Not all nobles in or out of Europe were represented in a representative body.⁶⁷ In his comparative analysis of the European nobilities, Asch states that 'England was one of the few European countries in which nobility with the exception of its highest ranks, the peerage, never became a legal estate. The gentry was always a much more informal social status group'.⁶⁸ Along similar lines, in his survey of the British nobility, John Cannon points out methodological problems in the definition of the titled nobility and its various constituents. Compared to continental nobilities, the British nobility was distinguished by its small size. This was the result of nobility being bestowed by the monarch – as opposed to being attached to office or service. In addition, the practice of primogeniture resulted in the ongoing shrinking of both the size and wealth of the nobility.⁶⁹ All of this made it imperative for historians to 'include the gentry as "a lesser nobility" in their definition of the English aristocracy'.⁷⁰

Seeing nobility as an ideal type rather than a variable historical phenomenon, and guided by the absence of an estate system in the Ottoman Empire, Ottoman historiography categorically rejected the usefulness of the concept for understanding elite formation in the imperial domains. And as far as European historiography is concerned, notwithstanding the revisionist approaches that have complicated the concept of nobility and showed its protean character, historiography on European nobles rarely ventured east of Hungary.⁷¹ This regional bias was a corollary of a long-standing orientalism that drew a thick line between the Ottoman (read Islamic) political formation and Europe and emphasised the former's difference and peculiarities. In rare instances when Ottoman imperial formation was considered as part of Europe, it was still treated as an exception in terms of having 'notables' but not 'nobilities'.⁷² As Peter Haldén states, '[a] long tradition in Western political and social thought argues that the Ottoman Empire terminated hereditary elite groups and established an impersonal despotic state in which all subjects, from the most exulted vizir to the most humble Anatolian peasant, were slaves of the sultan'.⁷³

Introduction

This view is also buttressed by the writings of Ottoman historians which until quite recently were based on the notion of the absolute power of the Ottoman state. This Eurocentric political thought, as Haldén rightly argues, ‘cast the Ottoman Empire as the radical “other” of European realms’.⁷⁴ The result is an Ottoman history without nobility, and a history of European nobility without Ottoman representation.

But if nobility is an ‘an elite which was open, imperfectly defined, and subject to regional variation’,⁷⁵ one may legitimately ask what nobility actually entails. Despite the variations, there are patterns that allow us to deploy the concept to understand certain elite groups. Originating in a pre-capitalist socio-economic milieu, nobility at its most basic entails ‘entitlement or pre-emptive claims on resources by virtue of one’s own distinguished position’.⁷⁶ The historians Leonhard and Wieland state that the notion of ‘distinctiveness’ that nobility entails goes beyond ‘mere inequality with its dominantly legal and socioeconomic connotations’.⁷⁷ Furthermore, nobility must be acknowledged by both external and internal groups.⁷⁸

Nobilities are formed as a result of the coalescence of service with privilege. In return for performing services and fulfilling duties, nobilities are assigned hereditary rights, privileges and prerogatives. The form and the degree of the noble privileges were not static, but historical and contextual. But as this book demonstrates, military roles and responsibilities were critical in the initial formation of nobility as a privileged group. In addition to honour and lineage, ‘military valor’ constituted one foundation of noble identity.⁷⁹ Above and beyond their military functions and entitlement to landed wealth, the making of the nobility also involved a process of ideological construction that allowed them to justify their status and wealth by virtue of descent from noble ancestors.⁸⁰ This construction was fortified through a special code of conduct used only with other nobility and the ruler; by the concept of honour; and by the use of honorific titles that differentiated them from others.

In light of the comparative revisionist perspectives, this book approaches the notion of nobility as a historical phenomenon – a type of elite formation found in the pre-capitalist imperial context and the flexible ruling strategies of early modern empire – as opposed to an ideal type defined solely by shared legal and technical characteristics. The differences between the Ottoman political system and the European cases do not mean the Ottoman Empire had no nobles. While lacking a European-style estate system that gave nobility political representation, the Ottoman politico-administrative system included provincial elites who had been granted hereditary economic and political privileges. By

focusing on the Palu begs, this book provides the first systematic study of nobility and the hereditary privileges that came with it within the Ottoman imperial domains. From the sixteenth until the mid-nineteenth century, the rulership of the Palu emirate (*hâkim*) came from the descendants of the Palu begs by virtue of the *temlîknâme* granted to them in the sixteenth century and renewed by successive Ottoman sultans. With this *temlîknâme*, the position of the *hâkim* was attached to a family name for three centuries. The *temlîknâme* was renewed for the last time in 1841 by Sultan Abdülmecid I (r. 1839–61),⁸¹ and the census registers of 1841 specifically noted that the lands of Palu were under the hereditary ownership of the Palu begs. In addition to the imperial state's recognition of the family's rulership, the begs who ruled the Palu emirate in a hereditary fashion had all the characteristics of an elite group defined as hereditary nobility in an imperial setting: a sense of entitlement referring to noble pedigree; titles (*beg/mîr/emîr*) that distinguished them not only from commoners, but from other elite groups with no similar claims to noble ancestry; and a privileged position that accorded them inalienable authority over land, both as an economic resource (i.e. control over agrarian surplus) and a territorial entity (i.e. administrative authority), as well as tax exemptions – and all of this was hereditary. This sense of having a privileged position was further galvanised by the fact that their status had a *de jure* character granted by the imperial decrees of successive Ottoman sultans over three centuries, decrees that linked them to the Ottoman imperial state that recognised and legitimised their entitlement. For the Palu begs, this noble consciousness and its accompanying sense of entitlement showed a striking continuity from the time they came under Ottoman suzerainty to the end of the empire. What changed was the nature and extent of the privileges that came with their noble position. This means that the degree of *autonomy* they held vis-à-vis the Ottoman state and the latter's authority in the begs' jurisdiction changed over time according to politico-economic and military circumstances.

Beyond the notions of privilege that concern the nobility's relationship with the imperial state, a key aspect of hereditary nobility is control over land and the nobles' position vis-à-vis the agrarian producers. Land stands at the centre of the book's analysis of the Palu begs' privileges. The begs of the Kurdish *hükümet*s held inalienable control over land and labour, and until the mid-eighteenth century issues related to agrarian relations of production in the areas under the begs' ownership remained largely outside the Ottoman imperial state's reach. This, of course, means that the idea that the Ottoman state's control over land was absolute and uniform

throughout the empire, and that it protected a presumably independent peasantry, does not hold up when it comes to the Kurdish emirates.

A related aspect of the Kurdish begs' privileged position concerns the administration of justice in the *hükümet*s. In Palu, there was a judge (*qadi*) of the local Islamic court appointed and paid by the imperial centre.⁸² The records of the Islamic court constitute vital sources for Ottoman historians, both for legal history and because they are rich in information about socio-economic hierarchies and disputes.⁸³ But there are no records of Palu's Islamic court. And this does not apply just to Palu; no records of any of the other Kurdish emirates' (e.g. Cîzre, Eğil or Hazzo) courts are available.⁸⁴ Ottoman official correspondence shows that the imperial state rarely sent decrees to the *qadi* of Palu, and when it did, it almost always involved the state asking the *qadi* to go after the *hâkim* to make him pay his annual tribute to the central treasury, which was almost always in arrears. Occasionally, the state asked the *qadi* to monitor the repair of churches. Outside these issues, Ottoman archival records show no signs that the local Islamic courts functioned as a major legal mechanism to resolve disputes in the locality. Nearby Harput, which was an ordinary Ottoman sanjak, had a functioning court and its records from 1630 through 1830s are available.⁸⁵ They indicate that cases concerning Palu inhabitants were handled by the *qadi* of Harput, especially from the eighteenth century on. But these cases were mostly related to day-to-day economic and administrative issues that required the *qadi*'s supervision, particularly his notary services, not actual dispute resolution. The court records of Amid – the provincial centre of Diyarbekir – also handled cases related to Palu. These suggest that Palu inhabitants used justice mechanisms outside Palu's local Islamic court. In the countryside, this would have been tribal justice.⁸⁶ The role of *hâkim* in the administration of justice in that realm – an area outside the imperial state's reach – must have been more pertinent. This is the context in which we must consider the begs' legal autonomy.

Hereditary Privilege and Modernity: The Question of the Nobility's Decline

Nobility's fate in modernity has been widely discussed in comparative studies of nobility. Before the 1970s, historical approaches to nobility often portrayed it as a relic of the traditional order, opposed to the values and ideas represented by the bourgeoisie: a social group doomed to vanish in the dustbin of history.⁸⁷ For some scholars, there was a seventeenth-century crisis of the elites, while others saw a long-term decline of the nobility 'in face of the twin threats of Leviathan state and the rising middle

class'.⁸⁸ More recently, however, this narrative of crisis and decline has been replaced by one of adaptation, accommodation and survival.⁸⁹

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Ottoman state set out to abolish the Kurdish begs' hereditary privileges *in toto*. The historical processes that resulted in the abolition of the Kurdish begs' autonomous rule were no less complex than the concept of nobility. Histories of Kurdistan rightfully see the abolition of the Kurdish emirates as a significant turning point in the region's history – but they do so mostly from a presentist point of view. The disappearance of the Kurdish noble families is understood as the termination of 'potential nuclei' of a forceful group with a modern, nationalist agenda.⁹⁰ And discussions of the disappearance of the Kurdish elites' autonomy do not examine how modernisation transformed the previously privileged elite status of the Kurdish begs within the Ottoman system. Existing historical narratives of the Kurdish emirates have emphasised the Ottoman state's military campaigns against the powerful emirates. According to this oft-told tale, these military campaigns resulted in the uprooting of the Kurdish begs from their homelands and the confiscation of their property. It is true that the Ottoman state deployed force to undermine the Kurdish *emîrs* in the mid-nineteenth century. But at the core of this process – both before and after the military operations – was a negotiation about what to do with the hereditary fiscal, military and administrative privilege of the Kurdish emirs. The standard account, already limited, also focuses only on the experiences of the most powerful emirates, those known for their fierce resistance to Ottoman state-making, at least initially. What happened in greater Kurdistan with the lesser elites whose wealth and authority did not match these big ones requires a more nuanced historical perspective.⁹¹ The history of the Palu begs is not one of heroic resistance but of a noble family who justified their fiscal, military and administrative privileges by referring to the imperial state's recognition. By examining the Palu begs' modern history, this book makes four important interventions in the historiography of the Kurdish emirates' disappearance.

First, contrary to the dominant narrative that starts the emirates' transformation with the intervention of the Tanzimat state, this book pushes the periodisation back to the eighteenth century. From the 1720s on, well before the Ottoman state abolished their hereditary privileges, the Palu begs' control over their land had already undergone significant transformations. Palu was near two important mining areas: Keban and Ergani in the Euphrates basin. This proximity gave the Palu nobility the significant role of providing for these mines' logistical needs. Above and beyond the economic burden that the mines put on the local population,

Introduction

the establishment of the Ma'âdin-i Hümâyün Emâneti – a special mine, fiscal and administrative body established to oversee the administration of the Keban and Ergani mines – meant the begs had to contend with mine administrators who significantly challenged their political and fiscal authority. As the mine superintendents' interventions increased, the begs started to lose their control over the appointment processes to the rulership (*hâkim*) of the emirate. The established practice of primogeniture vanished, and the *hâkim* position became monetised, as the superintendents imposed exorbitant fees on candidates for the position. It was within this context that the Palu begs increasingly leased out or sold their hereditary lands. The commodification of land resulted in the fragmentation of the Palu begs' control over land from the 1730s on.

Second, the Palu begs let us analyse the Ottoman state's approach to the hereditary privileges of the landed elites in the context of modern state-making during the Tanzimat era. For the Ottoman state, Palu was important mainly for its fertile agricultural land. But seizing the agrarian surplus in the form of tithe required the abolition of the begs' hereditary rights. Oddly, while the Ottoman administrators were leading a series of large-scale military operations against the powerful Kurdish emirates (e.g. Baban and Bohtan), they were not reckless or heavy-handed towards the Palu begs. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Palu begs could not have resisted a military assault from the Ottoman state. Nevertheless, there were serious discussions at the *Meclis-i Vâlâ-i Ahkâm-i Adliyye* (The Supreme Council of Judicial Ordinances) aimed at justifying the abolition of the begs' hereditary privileges.⁹² Why? The discussions among the various echelons of the imperial and provincial bureaucracy demonstrate that the existence of the imperial decrees which granted the begs these hereditary privileges was not a light issue for the Ottoman administrators. There was an effort to justify the annulling of the imperial decrees by referring to how much had changed since the Kurdish begs were first granted these privileges. The idea was that since the Ottoman state now had a regular army, the begs' military service was redundant, and thus they no longer merited hereditary privileges. But even after the state confiscated the Palu begs' lands, the begs' reference to the imperial decrees to justify their hereditary rights did not always fall on deaf ears. As far as the Palu begs are concerned, the Ottoman state was neither categorically inimical nor oblivious to the notion of hereditary rights.

Third, the processes leading to the transformation and eventual dissolution of the Kurdish begs' noble privileges were shaped within the context of their relations with *local actors*. When the state confiscated the begs' lands in the 1840s and opened them up for sale, landownership and local

power structures changed drastically. At the core of these changes was the emergence of local Armenians as major purchasers of Palu begs' confiscated land. This brought about a fierce, protracted conflict between the two groups, with the Armenians working to undermine the begs' hereditary claims by insisting on their legal rights as the land's new owners. The Palu begs' status was challenged not just at the imperial level, but within the locality by local actors, mainly wealthy Armenians who became the primary voice of modern property rights based on individual land ownership with title deeds – all anathema to the noble privilege ardently defended by the begs.

Fourth, conventional historical accounts of the Kurdish emirates indicate that a political vacuum emerged in Kurdistan that would be filled by newly-powerful religious leaders (sheiks) who went on to lead the nationalist revolts at the end of the century. While the rise of religious leadership in Kurdistan is important for understanding the region's modern history, this narrative obscures the multifaceted nature of the political scene that emerged in the aftermath of the emirates' abolishment. Modern state-making entailed creating new posts in the provincial bureaucracy and co-opting the begs into this system by granting them positions. It is true that the Tanzimat was a huge blow to the begs' leadership position, but they did not disappear overnight. Instead, they used their contacts with various echelons of the central and provincial Ottoman administration to vie for administrative positions, even when the system wanted to eject them.

Historical Geography of Palu

The Palu begs' identity as a noble family was tied to their control over the fortified town of Palu and its fertile land. Thus, to understand the career of this family, we must understand the land over which they claimed hereditary ownership. From Istanbul, one could reach Palu via three different routes. Someone coming from the south would arrive at the port city of Mersin, then take a caravan to the east and arrive at Palu after a ten-day journey. From the north, one would arrive at Samsun – a port city on the Black Sea – and take a caravan to the south to Palu. This route took longer, about sixteen days. The last route went north-east to south, from Trabzon through Gümüşhâne, Erzincan and Kiğı to Palu. This route took about ten days.⁹³

Palu's old town was built on the west and east sides of a steep hill on the banks of the fertile areas of the Aradzani/Murad River, which flowed round it on three sides. The summit of this cone-shaped hill was 3,292 feet and was crowned by an Urartu-era castle.⁹⁴ The famous seventeenth-century traveller Evliya Çelebi poetically likened the castle to the head of



Figure I.1 The ruins of the old city of Palu. Photo by Yaşar Gündoğan, 2019

a snake reaching up to the sky – Murad River surrounding the hill being the snake’s curled-up body.⁹⁵ It was so unreachable, he noted, that even Tamerlane bypassed it. When Evliya Çelebi visited the castle, İbrahim Beg, the then *hâkim*, was there with his armed forces. In addition to a mosque, the castle featured an arsenal, cellars and cisterns.⁹⁶

Palu’s ancient history as an Urartu provincial centre made it a point of interest for European Orientalists from the late nineteenth century on. A natural stronghold of the town housed a ninth-century rock inscription engraved in cuneiform by the king of Urartu Menua (or Menuas) (810–785 BCE).⁹⁷ It recorded Menuas’ military marches and conquests through the country of the Hittites.⁹⁸ Below the tablet are said to be ‘three sets of rock-hewn chambers, apparently the burial places of the princes of Palu’.⁹⁹ One observer in the 1850s noted that ‘a Syriac MS. of the New Testament exists, ascribed to the third century’, in Palu.¹⁰⁰ As a fortified city, Palu also featured in medieval accounts and crusade history. It was the scene of the battles between Emir Balak of the Artuqid dynasty based in Harput and Jocelyn of Courtenay, count of Edessa (Urfa) in the twelfth century.¹⁰¹

Palu also has a unique place in Armenian ethno-national imagination as an ancient Armenian city. Ancient accounts describe it as part of the ‘Fourth Armenia’ of Armenia Major (or the Kingdom of Armenia).¹⁰² In a map showing ancient Armenia on the eve of the Arab invasions, Palunik is indicated as a region that roughly corresponds to the modern town of Palu with an area of 475 square kilometres.¹⁰³ Palu is also significant in Armenian historical memory because it was the homeland of

The Kurdish Nobility in the Ottoman Empire

Mesrob Mashtots (or St Mesrob) – the saint who invented the Armenian alphabet and translated the Bible from Syriac and Greek into Armenian (c. AD 431).¹⁰⁴ In the words of Armenian ecclesiast Karekin Sirvantsdyants, who toured the region in 1878, the Palu castle was the ‘womb of Armenian enlightenment’.¹⁰⁵ In the twentieth century, Palu’s place as a key site of historic Armenia was tarnished by grim memories of the pogroms of 1895 and the Armenian Genocide of 1915. Armenian villages had been reduced to ruined churches, cemeteries and houses.

In Kurdish historical memory, Palu’s significance stems mainly from its being the home town of Sheikh Said (Şêx Seîd in Kurdish) – the famous leader of the Nakşibendî- Hâliidiyye order.¹⁰⁶ Born in 1865, the sheikh was one of the leaders of the 1925 Kurdish nationalist revolt against the Turkish government. The state’s response to the revolt was brutal – it even used its meagre air force against the rebels.¹⁰⁷ Despite its significance during the rebellion, contemporary Palu has lost its ‘Kurdish’ character and is now a centre of Turkish-Islamic conservatism. As mentioned, the descendants of the Palu begs are distant from, if not inimical to, Kurdishness and identify with the mainstream Turkish ethnic identity.

Palu’s current location is not the same as during the Ottoman period. The old town, called Zeve, moved to its current position on the west side of the castle after fires destroyed the city centre completely in 1928 and 1941. From the sixteenth century through the eighteenth, Palu was attached for administrative purposes to the Diyarbekir province. In the eighteenth century, when the Ma’âdin-i Hümâyün Emâneti was established, it came under the roof of this special mine administration because of its role in providing charcoal for the mines. In the mid-nineteenth century, it became a district of the newly-established Harput province. From the late nineteenth century onward, Palu was again a district of the Diyarbekir province. Throughout this process, Palu kept getting smaller, especially after the Ottoman state began centralising in the mid-nineteenth century. The emirate of Palu under the hereditary rule of the Palu begs covered a much larger area than its twentieth-century namesake does. Until the Tanzimat era, all of Palu was under the Palu *hâkim*’s jurisdiction as an emirate. As the Ottoman state made more inroads into Palu’s politico-administrative scene, it began rearranging the emirate’s administrative divisions in accordance with its fiscal, military and bureaucratic priorities. It removed villages from Palu and attached them to the nearby districts, a policy continued during the twentieth century by the republican regime. The fertile villages on the northern bank of the Murad River were under Palu’s administrative scope until 1934, when they were attached to Kovancılar, a newly-established district intended for the settlement