
CLIVE FOSS, *The Beginnings of the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford Studies in Byzantium). Oxford: Oxford University Press 2022. 282 pp. – ISBN 978-0-198865438

• A. C. S. PEACOCK, University of St Andrews (acsp@st-andrews.ac.uk)

The origins of the Ottoman state at the beginning of the fourteenth century remain a controversial topic that for more than a hundred years has been the subject of scholarly debate, notwithstanding the sparse and problematic source base. How could a minor chieftain in a relatively remote area of northwestern Anatolia lay the foundations for the state that would destroy Byzantium and ultimately devour its Turkish neighbours? Confronted with only a handful of contemporary or near-contemporary sources, historians have been forced to rely largely on later Turkish ones, ostensibly drawing on earlier tradition both oral and written. The most famous of these is the chronicler Aşıkpaşazade, writing in the second half of the fifteenth century, whose version of events only rarely coheres with that of Greek historians. Some of the latter, such as Pachymeres, are indeed contemporary with events, but they are limited by their outsiders' perspective and the fact that the Ottoman heartland in northern Bithynia – called by FOSS the 'Homeland' – was a remote, provincial area that seldom came to the attention of Byzantine authors based in Constantinople. Given the problems of accurately reconstructing the chronology of events and indeed putting any substantial historical flesh on the activities of the dynastic founder Osman, it is perhaps unsurprising that, especially since PAUL WITTEK published his famous 'ghazi thesis' in 1938, historians have focused more on the ideology of the early Ottoman proto-state. While WITTEK saw the Ottomans as being driven to expand by their 'ghazi' ideology, more recent historians, such as HEATH LOWRY, have depicted the Ottoman state as a multi-ethnic multi-confessional endeavour driven by desire for plunder.¹ A further important contribution was made by RUDI LINDNER who attempted to use insights from modern anthropology to explore the early Ottoman state, presumed to be, at least in origin, a nomadic enterprise.²

1. PAUL WITTEK, *The Rise of the Ottoman Empire*. London 1938; HEATH LOWRY, *The Nature of the Early Ottoman State*. Albany 2003.

2. RUDI LINDNER, *Nomads and Ottomans in Medieval Anatolia*. Bloomington 1983; IDEM, *Exploration in Ottoman Prehistory*. Ann Arbor 2007.

CLIVE FOSS's book wisely refrains from aiming to solve the enigma of Ottoman origins, but rather 'merely to suggest a way of approaching the problem, and present some material rarely considered in this context' (p. 1). It aims to present the full range of material that can be used to contextualise the rise of the Ottomans, including not just texts but also physical evidence, in particular numismatic and archaeological records, and to understand the Ottomans in the framework of the broader emergence of Turkish principalities (beyliks) in the late thirteenth to early fourteenth century. FOSS quite rightly emphasises the need for understanding the Ottomans in the broader context of Mongol domination of Anatolia, something Ottomanists (with the notable exception of LINDNER) have rather neglected. Indeed, even recent scholarly works on Anatolia in that period may neglect the Mongols entirely.

The book is divided into nine chapters of widely disparate length, each aiming to present aspects of the rise of the Ottomans from contrasting perspectives. As a result, there is a degree of repetition, and the reader may be surprised that, for instance, the account of the Mongol background (based on secondary literature) appears only in Chapter 5, while a brief review of previous scholarship is placed in the final chapter. The first and most substantial chapter, itself accounting for almost half the book, deals with the Ottomans' Bithynian homeland. As FOSS says (p. 2), he aims to test the accounts of Ottoman history by examining whether the places they mention existed, and whether they are appropriate for the period and events described. The research in Chapter 1 was conducted in the early 1980s (when parts of this book were also originally written), before the dramatic transformations of Anatolia through new infrastructure projects in recent years, and are of considerable value for presenting the material remains and historical geography of the period in this region, which is then compared with Aşıkpaşazade's text. FOSS's conclusion is that Aşıkpaşazade presents 'a real landscape, and the toponyms are in their correct places'. Interestingly, FOSS also contends that the mountainous nature of the terrain means it was 'unsuitable for a nomadic society' (p. 87), in contrast to the tendency in scholarship (cf. LINDNER et al.), and indeed of Ottoman tradition, to emphasise this nomadic element. However, it might be safer to assume the early Ottomans were just very poor nomads, and FOSS emphasises the poverty of this area of Bithynia. This analysis of the historical topography of the early Ottoman venture is the most valuable part of the book. Nonetheless, if it shows that Aşıkpaşazade drew on authentic local knowledge, it does not solve the considerable problems of chronology presented by the

various Greek and Turkish accounts of Osman's campaigns (discussed in details in the following two chapters). FOSS is obliged to conclude that 'Hope of understanding or even establishing the course of Osman's rise in the Homeland seems unlikely be fulfilled' (p. 139).

Chapter 4 introduces the non-narrative sources for the early Ottomans, primarily numismatic and epigraphic, with a handful of documents. Chapter 5 examines briefly the Mongol role in Anatolia. The next three chapters focus on the broader Anatolian context of Osman's relations with his neighbours and the beyliks of Anatolia, drawing primarily on the Arabic texts of Ibn Battuta and al-'Umari. FOSS carefully avoids describing his closing chapter as 'Conclusions', for he admits that 'it is not yet possible to close the book on the earliest Ottomans: too many pages are missing' (p. 232). Still, the author does succeed in shedding some shafts of light on this obscure period, in particular through the chapter on historical topography and extant archaeological remains. The emphasis on seeing the Ottomans in their broader Anatolian context is also praiseworthy, and sets a welcome example that Ottomanists, one hopes, would show an interest in pursuing.

Nonetheless, much work remains to be done on the rise and fall of the Anatolian beyliks, both to understand them as polities with their own historical significance, and in the broader contexts of the development of Mongol and Ottoman power in Anatolia. To do this, a much wider source base, including Mamluk and Italian sources, is required, plus a thorough consideration of the literary, epigraphic and numismatic heritage of these polities. FOSS points in the right direction, but more concrete results will only come from a more granular understanding of this complex period than we currently have. Likewise, while FOSS is certainly correct to point to the elephant in the room, viz. the Mongols, his research takes little account of the significant recent work on them both in Anatolia and the Ilkhanate more generally. To take one example, he makes much of the *waqfiyya* of the Mongol commander Nur al-Din ibn Jaja (pp. 38–42), which endowed agricultural lands in Eskişehir to his foundations in Kırşehir as evidence of the proximity of Mongol rule to the early Ottomans. It would have been useful to cite JUDITH PFEIFFER's article on the subject.³ What the *waqfiyya* shows is that lands around Eskişehir were acquired by Nur al-Din ibn Jaja and were

3. JUDITH PFEIFFER, Protecting Private Property vs Negotiating Political Authority: Nu al-Din b. Jaja and His Endowments in Thirteenth-Century Anatolia. In: ROBERT HILLENBRAND – A. C. S. PEACOCK – FIRUZA A. ABDULLAEVA (eds), *Ferdowsi, the Mongols and the History of Iran*. London 2013, pp. 147–165.

evidently in a condition to provide a reliable income stream for the focus of his endowments in Central Anatolia, only a few of which were in Eskişehir itself. It does not unambiguously indicate any permanent Mongol administrative or military presence there. Moreover, given Ibn Jaja's involvement in the great anti-Mongol revolt of 1277, to regard him simply as an agent of Mongol power is simplistic.

There are other areas where the bibliography is rather dated. It seems strange, for example, that Orhan's famous inscription of 1327 in Bursa is discussed (p. 147) without reference to the important articles by COLIN HEYWOOD and LUDVIK KALUS.⁴ On a more minor point, the inconsistent use of Turkish orthography is somewhat irritating and some of the transcriptions from the Arabic will be downright confusing for the uninitiated who may not be able to divine at first glance that 'Yaznik' is İznik or 'Sanub' is Sinop. Further editorial work to produce a more user-friendly text would have been helpful here. Nonetheless, there is much to welcome in this volume, which represents an important contribution to the study of the early Ottoman period and points to useful avenues for future research.

Keywords

early Ottoman conquest; late Byzantine Anatolia

4. Both published in *Turcica* 36 (2004).