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PERCEPTION OF HISTORY AND THE PROBLEM OF SUPERIORITY IN AHMEDI'S *DASTĀN-I TEVĀRIH-I MÜLŪK-I ĀL-I OSMAN*

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This paper is an analysis of the narrative structure of the chronologically final part of Ahmedi's (d. 1413) primary work *İskendername*, in terms of its perception of time and history. In so doing, it may be possible to examine how early Ottoman historiography dealt with the past and the present. In fact Ahmedi's *Dastān* has been extensively used by scholars so far, but only as the focus of discussions on the Ghaza thesis, however, the examination of Ahmedi's eclectic and sometimes anachronistic history and his treatment of time will provide us a theoretical perspective to the early Ottoman historiography, which has not yet been done in Ottoman studies.

Key words: Ahmedi's *Dastān*, *İskendername*, Alexander the Great, advice literature, exemplar in history, perception of past, anachronism in historiography, political legitimacy.

This study aims to examine the narrative strategy of Ahmedi's *Dastān*, Ottoman section of *İskendername*, Book of Alexander, relating to its concept of history and the politics of memory of early 15th-century Anatolia.[1]

The legendary king Alexander's successes and unprecedented prestige in history left a rich legacy that had been inherited by Islamic literature and historiography in the course of the centuries of intercultural relationship between the Arab and the Greek literati (Gutas 1998). By the 8th century the name İskender, Arabic substitute for Alexander, had been one of the clearest epitomes of the ideally dynamic, triumphant and prudent ruler that was derived from a non-Islamic past, and frequently used by Islamic authors in proposing to paint a portrait of an ideal monarch. İskender was one of the most popular exemplars in Islamic world.

[1] In this study I have used the following editions and studies of the *Dastān*: Banarlı (1939); Erünsal (1983); Silay (2004).

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This figure as a literary-historical exemplar had already taken his place in the land of Rum. There are references to İskender in Ottoman literature as early as the 14th century.[2] The author had designed his work, as we have it, to present to Süleyman Shah, the Germiyan Beg, but his death in the late 14th century forced Ahmedi to divert the direction of his quest and to seek the patronage of Süleyman Çelebi, the most likely claimant of the time to the Ottoman throne after the Timurid invasion.[3] After having added another chapter to his *İskendername* concerning the short history of the house of Osman, Ahmedi (Banarlı 1939, pp. 49–176; Kut 1989, p. 165; Kortantamer 1993) as a man of highbrow culture from the Germiyan court finely situated himself in the Ottoman court.[4]

The diversion from the Germiyan court to the Ottoman court seems to have been a difficult and demanding one.[5] We know that Ahmedi included the part concerning the Ottoman history[6] in his original text later and continuously made additions and modifications in line with the political conditions and changes of the time in Anatolia, and waited for the best occasion to present *İskendername* (Ménage 1964, pp. 169–170).

After the death of the Germiyan Beg, it seems that Bayezid I was the next possible nominee as the leader of a growing power in the region, however the unexpected and violent termination of his reign once again led the author to find another patron to appreciate his artistic works. Surprisingly, but seemingly with resentment, he spent some time with Timur, then he eventually returned to the Ottoman court where Bayezid's son Süleyman Çelebi took him under his patronage. In return, the author presented the revised version of *İskendername* to Süleyman Çelebi after almost 10 years of its completion. However, the late 14th and early 15th centuries saw one of the most unstable periods in the region due to civil war, crusader invasion and political turmoil (Atiya 1938; Alexandrescu-Dersca 1942; Zachariadou 1983, pp. 268–

[2] İskender's exceptional place in mediaeval Persian literature and brilliant works by Ferdowsi and Nizami certainly became the most influential source of inspiration for poets of early 14th century Anatolia. Despite the originality of Ahmedi's work, it has been long agreed that it has mainly the same story as Ferdowsi's *Shahname*. See Gibb (1901, pp. 268–269); Gökyay (1988, pp. 1088–1089); Hanaway (1998, pp. 609–612); İsmail Ünver (2000, pp. 557–559); and Gibb (1901, pp. 8–9). Furthermore, see Sawyer (2003, pp. 225–243). Among other studies in Turkish see Temizel (2002); Kortantamer (1980).

[3] Halil İnalcık has published his recent works with references to new discoveries and archival documents on this period in "Bayezid", "Mehmed I" and "Murad I" articles. For a general political outlook on this period, see Kastritsis (2007a, pp. 222–242; 2007b); İnalcık (1973, pp. 17–22); rather old, but still useful account will be found in Wittek (1938a).

[4] İnalcık's recent contribution to the history of Turkish culture and literature with a strong socio-political background illustrates the artistic life of court poets and their historical connections that explore their mentality in the course of the 15th century. See İnalcık (2006b, pp. 221–282). See also İnalcık (2005).

[5] In Latifi's *Tezkire* it is said that Ahmedi was compelled to seek a patronage in the Ottoman court as his *İskendername* was unappreciated and that the poet was turned down in the Germiyan literary circles. See İpekten (1993, p. 163, n. 5).

[6] Modern scholars have discussed Ahmedi's *Dastān*, and opinions differ as to the measure of its authenticity and value as a reliable "history". See Fodor (1984, pp. 41–54).

296; İnalcık 1992, pp. 1117–1119; Kastritsis 2007, pp. 222–242). Süleyman Çelebi was replaced by his brother Çelebi Mehmed in 1412, the conditions changed once again on the Ottoman side, and Ahmedi had to present his work to the new ruler who finally gained control over the region and managed to establish a limited stability though far from the empire of Bayezid I. On the death of Süleyman Çelebi in 1411, by preparing an additional part to a new *mesnevi* titled *Cemşid ve Hurşid*, he presented it to the successor Mehmed I (İnalcık 2006b, pp. 253–259; Banarlı 1939, pp. 59, 141; İpekten 1993, p. 164). In this circle, the author had to improve his old work *İskendername* continuously. It appears that, as the first major historical narrative of the Ottoman state, this text requires further examination in order to have a better understanding of the perception of history in the early 15th century and its role in defining the relationship between past and present in the form of a combination of different genres, namely history, *nasihatname* (book of advice) and epic literature.

İskendername's chronologically final part on the early Ottoman history has long been an important source among Ottomanists since Paul Wittek referred to the work as his main textual evidence from the late 14th century to the *Gaza* thesis (Wittek 1938b, p. 14). Recent discussions revolving around the *Gaza* thesis have brought back the work into focus, however with different comments and ideas. Colin Imber's conclusion that Ahmedi is not a historian, but a moralist (Imber 1994, p. 136). later was developed in a recent study by Heath J. Lowry, who assessed the work in the context of ongoing discussions on ideological or earthly motives of the early Ottoman expansion. Lowry suggests that the work seems to be a *nasihatname* rather than a chronicle meaning that the authorial intent was focused on helping the sultan mold the future rather than providing the knowledge of the past (Lowry 2003, pp. 15–31).[7]

While seeking a patron, Ahmedi undoubtedly necessarily modified his text simply by dint of unpredictable political turmoil of the time. Although the necessary additions or modifications did not seemingly have to do with the subject matter except few chronological corrections, it yielded crucial outcomes in regard to its approach to past and its effect on the collective memory.

First of all, short before a new successor's takeover, the author became embroiled in struggles, dynastic politics, and intrigues. Especially the death of the ruler would mean a thorough confusion all over the country causing abolition of every decree or grant effective in the period of the deceased ruler. The lack of authority generally results in a sort of frightful period triggered by stagnation and uncertainty. Under such circumstances, it is inevitable that a society undergoes a severe disorder (İnalcık 1998, p. 116). Disorder and uncertainty begets despair and helplessness causing fear of the present and deep concerns about the future, hence, a literary device is needed "to contrast the successful past with the questionable future" (Lowry 2003, p. 31). Consequently, it is supposed that after losing confidence in the future, a consolation could and should be found that is buried in the past.[8]

[7] See also Kafadar (1995, pp. 55, 93–95) and Darling (2000, pp. 133–163).

[8] For philosophical discussions on the perception of past in terms of morality and its political effects see Williams (2005, pp. 40–51).

Past versus Present

In contrast to a period of disorder that takes place "now", there is nothing to be afraid of in the comfort offered by the days past. It is a concluded, frozen, and in a sense, free of threat, space in which community in disarray could find a symbolic safety and comfort. This attitude can be analysed within the context of the influence of traditionalism on the early Islamic historiography.[9] As described by J. S. Meisami, rewriting the past in the pre-modern sense of the term is considered not "an indifference to the past", but as an attempt to filter memories through "selective memory" of the historian so that only those which are of crucial importance and deserve remembering enter the playground (Meisami 1993, p. 248). Along with selective memory, in accordance with the *mentalité* of the community, narration of the past events is shaped by "the modes of perceiving the past" in a society, and therefore, "not all of them are historical" (Subrahmanyam 2005, p. 28). The historian conceives of various criteria, i.e. moral or political, takes a specific event, and then links it to other events in a schematism that aligns the past with the actual world and 'users' of those events with one another. In this schematism, authorial intent which might be also interpreted as mission of the historian is clearly grounded in the procedure of highly purposeful and selective recollection from "a mass of unrelated and disordered material".[10]

Such a perception of the past facilitated the attachment of the Ottoman part to a "universal history" for Ahmedi.[11] Nevertheless, its introduction to the main body of *Iskendername* whose both focus and content do not apparently theoretically fit the history of a recently emerged power in western Anatoli and the Balkans remains problematic. One cannot escape the idea that the place of the Ottoman part in the universal character of *Iskendername* seems to be irrelevant. It is this problematic that forced Ahmedi to write "An Apology for the Delay of Gazi Affairs" and to tell how this idea occurred. As an explanation for putting the Ottoman part at the end of his work, Ahmedi formulated a simple, yet, to some extent, reasonable theory on the basis of chronological relation and therefore, developed a complicated formula, employing a rhetoric to set forth the superiority of coming last in comparison to being "earlier" in history. Actually, his argument was supported by highly convincing examples: Islam is the last religion, the Qur'an is the last sacred book, the Prophet was sent as the last one, and they occupy the prime place not in sequence, but in importance:

> Any thinking person knows that what comes last is best.
> When God blessed the human being with strength, mind, life,
> and body
> Mind was certainly superior to the other three qualities, and
> of course it was the last.

[9] Especially see Robinson (2003, pp. 83–102).

[10] Carruthers (1990, p. 62): "Within his memorial 'forest', a trained student, like a knowledgeable huntsman, can unerringly find the places (*loci*) where the rabbits and deer lie".

[11] For the universal character of the work, see Sawyer (2003, p. 229).

The Messenger, last of the prophets, was the seal and the
noblest of all.
The Koran was the last of the four Books, superseding all the rest.
The human being, superior to any other creation, was created last.[12]

Traces of a similar reasoning and argumentation exist in *sufi* literature concerning the legitimacy of the "rightly guided" caliphs. The era of the first four caliphs has been discussed at length among Muslim scholars in terms of its socio-political aspects and consequences. However, the *sufî* interpretation of this legitimacy is quite a different issue and among the best and most authoritative examples of the literature is *Ilahi-nama* by Farid al-Din Attār. Later, following Attār's path, a *nasihatname* entitled *Esrar-nama*, written by another *sufî*, Tebrizli Ahmedi, for his Aqqoyunlu patron in 1479, refers to the divine acknowledgment of the historical order of these caliphs after the Prophet (Ayan 1996). Although these examples do not manifestly make comparison among caliphs, the reader can easily intuit the tone giving not a superior, but an exceptional position to the fourth caliph. It is in a 16th-century Turkish *Menākıb* on the deeds of the four caliphs that we find perfect example of such a comparison. Shams al-Din Sivāsi (d. 1598),[13] highly respected and prolific Halwatiyya sheikh, explicitly avows this superiority and applies it to the chronology of the first four caliphs with reference to prophetic sayings about the last caliph's status. He suggests that the place of the fourth caliph as the last among the rightly guided caliphs should be assessed in line with the Prophet's position as being the last prophet of the last religion (Sivasi 2005, p. 250). It is also significant that Shams al-Din Sivāsi translated Attār's *İlahi-nama* into Turkish[14] and, as we have it, this is the first Turkish translation of the work (Toker 2004, p. 437). However, it is not possible to have a judgment whether it was purely a statement of Ahmedi's belief concerning the caliphs or the author just used this argument to back up his ideas.

In fact, the driving force for putting the Ottoman part as a later addition in *İskendername* is undoubtedly a practical necessity and simply makes Ahmedi's text chronologically correct and explicable. Therefore, he attempts to persuade the reader – here, obviously the Ottoman ruling class – about the place of the narrative of the Ottoman state as a later addition by constructing an eloquent and fair argument which is religiously and practically convincing. The last component is always the best one, or the newer (what is happening now) has superiority over the older (what happened in the past). This was a quite impressive argument, built on practical reasons, in convincing the audience, but Ahmedi's defensive manner implies that he was uneasy about his reasoning. In fact, this argument was not free of weak points by the standards of the time, for Ahmedi's perception grounded on a linear progress in history from the older to the newer contrasts with the old and highly esteemed sense of history whose reference point is the age of the Prophet and of the rightly guided caliphs, which had long been accepted as the Golden Age of Islam (Robinson 2003, pp. 86–

[12] Ahmedi, in Sawyer's translation: Sawyer (2003, p. 234).
[13] For general information see Akaya (1997).
[14] *İbretnüma*, Süleymaniye Ms. Library, Hasan Hüsnü Paşa, no. 1038.

87).[15] Furthermore, this acceptance had been cemented by the well-known *hadith* that firmly indicates the increasing deterioration of the time (fasād al-zamān) without giving any possibility to an idea of linear progress in the world.[16] The author was apparently well aware of this weakness because in the main body of *Iskendername* he had already told the histories of early Islamic states and dynasties, with an exclusive appreciation and respect. Therefore, in judging the deeds of the eminent figures, Ahmedi had to situate and re-situate himself in a position that constantly shifts in order to find out the best and the most suitable approach to each and every case in his narrative. The old and widely accepted credo acknowledging the superiority of the preceding over the subsequent perfectly fits when dealing with the faults or misdeeds of the rulers in comparison to their past counterparts, their glories and accomplishments, while the idea of linear progress in history serves the author as a means of praise and exaltation for the ruler of the present time. Additionally, a third and ahistoric "merit-based" evaluation of the past occasionally occurs in *Dastān* with references to moral principles of Islam, yet it appears that this is an auxiliary role and employed only when the time-related (past or present) evaluation does not provide a satisfactory reason for the phenomenon in question as in the case of Bayezid's defeat by Timur. Although the 1402 defeat is explained through moral shortcomings of the Ottoman sultan with an exemplary judgment from a Qur'anic story, yet the author's approach is not without a temporal interpretation implicitly criticising Bayezid for his disregard or indifference to the past experience.

In the introductory part of *Dastān*, Ahmedi explains the main reason for including an Ottoman history to his work as the aim of culminating with a brilliant and influential story. His approach to Ottoman history may be regarded the reflection of an "age of transition" that took place in the region.[17] However, his starting point is an influential motive force not without some mystical reference:

> I have revealed this history
> For all of a sudden it came to my mind
> Words are inspired by doubt/concern
> Whose remedy is having it (the work) finalised[18]

Furthermore Ahmedi, before putting forward his justification, needs to draw a sharp line between what he told previously in *Iskendername* and what he was going to tell in the new section. Passing from a history-telling as a prophecy through the dialogues between Iskender, his tutor Aristotle and his spiritual guide al-Khidr to a history that is *really* past, and reported by the author himself to his patrons means not only a diversion from narrative structure, but also requires a serious semiotic break

[15] As Robinson has termed it, an "overlapping golden age" notion among Muslim scholars could be taken into consideration when dealing with the aspects of Ottoman history writing.

[16] "The best people are my generation, then those who follow them, then those who follow them." See Robinson (2003, p. 86); Gerber (1999, pp. 124–128).

[17] In times of trouble and depression patterns of patronage change in line with audience's literary taste and wish to escape from reality. For a similar case see Meisami (1987, pp. 272–273).

[18] Ahmedi, in Banarlı (1939, p. 111) (my translation).

with his previous perception of history. The first part carries predominantly the attributes of advice literature with moral goals rather than political concerns. Furthermore, under the influence of Ferdowsi's *Shahnama*, Ahmedi's representation of the life and career of Iskender has a strong mystical and allegorical character as well.[19] Here Ahmedi's voice must have been heard distinctively as the narrator of his history, who was supposed to explain to the audience why he had to draw such a clear line:

> Those kings whom I mentioned
> I have spoken of their deeds and characters
> Some were infidels, some showed cruelty (Ahmedi, in Silay 2004, p. 1)
> […]
> Now that I have mentioned that cruel people [the Mongols],
> let me describe the people of justice.
> I will recall those governors (beys)
> who were Muslims and thoroughly just, to a man.
> Everything they did contrasted with the unbelievers' ways:
> what they ate and wore was canonically lawful (halal).
> I speak of them in the ultimate chapter of my book,
> so that it will be completed and perfected by them.
> Let me present you with this Gazavatname.
> Listen to it without objection.
> Don't ask, "Why do you mention the gazis last?
> Why do they come at the end?"[20]

It is clear that the author's reasoning on this distinction depends on religion. He must have thought that he had to justify the chapter's "unusual" place in the end of the text by overshadowing the eminent figures in *Iskendername*.[21] They were now unjust, brutal tyrants, but the Ottoman *gazi*s to which Ahmedi is referring were just, righteous Muslims, therefore deserve to be in the chronologically final section of the work. In so doing, it appears that the author expects to prevent any criticism concerning the place of the Ottoman history in *Iskendername*.

By the 16th century, however, Ottoman historians had already adopted and employed Ahmedi's pattern in history-writing as standard. With the order of Bayezid II (İnalcık 1964, pp. 155–156, 165) who was aware of the prerequisite that makes a sovereign's glory and grandeur, historians were supposed to write histories, some of them universal from the "dawn of the humanity" and Adam to the present day (i.e. Ottoman dynasty) to serve the sultan's aspiration for legitimacy. This legitimacy was mainly nurtured through Islamic, Persian and Turkish traditions.[22] This practice in history writing in the Empire served as the most vital channel of the idea of constructing a grand history conception in which the final (here, Ottoman) element was unques-

[19] For a comparison between Ahmedi's *Iskendername* and Ferdowsi's *Shahname* see Sawyer (2003).

[20] Translation of Sawyer (2003, p. 234).

[21] There is no doubt that Ahmedi's underestimation does not cover the history of Islam.

[22] See especially İnalcık (1993a). For a recent contribution, see Hagen (2004).

tionably affiliated to, and inevitable component of, the older. There is no doubt that, by building a link between their past and this grand Islamic history, which reached its zenith at the age of the Prophet, and by claiming a genealogy to link the Ottoman dynasty to the Kayı branch of the Oguz confederacy going back to Noah, eminent historians attempted to justify the Ottoman dynastic roots for the survival of the Ottoman past in the future (İnalcık 1993b, pp. 44–46).[23] Hence in the following century, they did not face the complication that Ahmedi had had in the beginning of the 15th century. A century later, the "defect" that made Ahmedi apologise to his audience became almost a *sine qua non* that connoted an unbreakable and natural relationship between the object (Ottoman history located in the end) and the symbolic meaning (its reception by, and integration to, this universal history).[24] For instance, Hoca Saadeddin Efendi's history *Tacu't-Tevārih* whose place in the 16th-century Ottoman historiography is of primary importance, was initially designed to conclude and to correct "the final chapter" devoted to Ottoman history of the Persian *Mir'atu'l-Edvār ve Mirkatu'l-ahbār*, a universal history written by Mevlāna Muslih al-Din Mehmed al-Lāri (Babinger 1982, p. 105).

It seems that Ahmedi did not find satisfactory enough his defensive reasoning on the superiority of the Ottoman throne's place in history, for he resolutely and constantly strives to put a counterbalance to the weight of the merits ascribed to the past in *Dastān*. This was not because his argument was literally unclear or irrational, or theologically questionable, but because his Ottoman patrons were seeking something else. Therefore, he had to be capable of reconciling an old, customary belief of how glorious and blessed was the past with a practical necessity of how perfect and praiseworthy is the present. This approach contains a contradiction in essence, but the author, at this crucial juncture, seems to have overcome this contradiction by referring to the meaning of moral actions and traditionally accepted rules. This concept of history in the hand of the author reaches its climax at the most crucial time that is "now", and furthermore, he does not refrain from comparing, or even replacing the marvellous examples of the past with the new actions of the present figures at the expense of a logical inconsistency. From this angle, history in Ahmedi's *Dastān* may be interpreted to some degree as the sign of a cyclical pattern of growth, maturity and decay on a small scale, but still within the greater context and direction of the ever-increasing corruption of time.

As a consequence, the author's twofold treatment of time was divergent and dependent on his purpose: The past could be interpreted as a cluster of perfect examples for today's man, because present time could only be grasped by the wisdom

[23] By the same author a recent study provides a good comparative analysis of the various genealogies in the early Ottoman historiography: İnalcık (2007, pp. 479–537). See also Imber (1987, pp. 7–27); Flemming (1988), and for the introduction of the Oguz traditions through the tales of Dede Korkut see Kafadar (1995, p. 94, n. 100).

[24] The rising awareness of connecting the recent/local history to a larger/ancient [H]istory may be discussed within the context of "the classical" in Ottoman history and historiography of the 16th and 17th centuries. For a brief historical analysis and up-to-date bibliography see Özel (2006, pp. 273–294).

extracted from the past, and the present could be more important than the past, for the man has the ability to shape it by following the moral rules. In this divided approach, Ahmedi did not hesitate to express that Orhan's just rule superseded that of the forth caliph Ömer (Umar b. al-Hattāb) who had always been regarded the embodiment and the pinnacle of justice in the Islamic world:

> Orhan was equitable and a dispenser of justice.
> Because of him, the justice of Ömer was forgotten.
> Where the justice of the Ottoman exists,
> why would the justice of Ömer be mentioned there?
> (Ahmedi, in Silay 2004, p. 5)

Quite naturally, this was to be taken metaphorical rather than literal. In order not to cause a misunderstanding Ahmedi had to establish a counterbalance between varying uses of perceptions of the past. As a devout Muslim he did his best to exalt the unique nature of the early history of Islam in the relevant chapter of his book. However this could not hamper him from granting the Ottoman dynasty exceptional qualities even at the expense of overshadowing the monumental lives and deeds of the early caliphs. In the final part of his Ottoman history, again he compares Süleyman Çelebi, whose reign covers only a few years over what was left from his father's empire and whose life has been spent in struggle against the other claimants of the Ottoman throne, with a historically and religiously predominant figure such as caliph Ömer:

> Mir Süleyman became Şah in his place.
> He is as visible as the sun.
> What need is there for evidence (of this fact)?
> Since that dispenser of justice is there,
> (then) who is Nuşinrevan or Ömer?
> (Ahmedi, in Silay 2004, p. 22)

Ahmedi's reiterant reference to the caliph or to the legendary king of the Sasanid dynasty Nuşinrevan (Anushirvan) has a strong symbolic meaning, despite the apparent oddness of this duality. The two legendary characters solely and individually represent the just ruler ideal and are good exemplars for the author and his audience. This kind of approach is focused on a comparison or contrast between historic figures and present ones on the basis of a general principle rather than historical reality. The author did not take temporal or spatial differences into consideration by mentioning Anushirvan and the third caliph of Islam together in the same line, and was more concerned with ideals and how to present them in the form of well-known embodiments. There is no question that he scrutinised the use of ancient figures in history, advice literature and poetry, then extracted from them the necessary references for justification, and created a work in which not only differing, but also opposing perceptions of the past is cleverly applied when necessary. As an "historian" Ahmedi was supposed to tell stories of the past societies, his archaism was independent of religious, geographical or chronological irrelevance and his task was to educate

the ruling elite through morally ideal and illuminative cases at the expense of anachronism.[25] After a chapter on how the Ottoman sultans fought the infidels for the sake of Islam, the reader might encounter a comparison of an Ottoman sultan to an infidel king in terms of justice or governance. Moreover the author takes the liberty of using the recent military achievement of the ruler (i.e. Bayezid's victory at Kosovo) to establish a correlation between the Ottoman ruler and Alexander the Great.[26] As a member of highbrow culture, he was supposed to use well-known aspects of rhetoric, with an eloquent style and necessary vocabulary of exemplars. Finally, as the subject of the sultan his first duty was to produce pleasing works to contribute to, or improve, the literary and aesthetic taste of courtly art. As poet or historian Ahmedi was to use his talent and knowledge in order to deploy a world with which the audience is familiar, comfortable and closely associated by bonds of a metaphysical idealism rather than religion or concrete religious principles. This sort of writing did not require the readers to make a rigorous, inflexible, and blinkered distinction between the Islamic and the non-Islamic (even the irreligious) in regard to history, on the contrary, it gave rise to a multi-layered composition to be supplied by a variety of resources. This perception of history was furnished by universal representations of exemplars and metaphors, and in return, produced a sphere in which is possible to construct almost a complete figurative language in the flow of the narrative. Although its origins are cloudy, yet its propensities toward such an eclectic and hybrid construction lie in the poetical reproduction and moral refinement of both sacred and irreligious histories. This is the way the early Ottoman historians upheld a pattern for history writing embracing diverse sources coming from "al-Awwalūn", as coined by Qur'anic terminology and exhaustively used in Islamic literature, ranging from ancient Greek philosophers to Persian kings who were "infidel" or "idolater".[27] These figures, concepts or

[25] This situation can be compared to the anachronism in Renaissance historiography. Peter Burke coins the sense of anachronism, which lacked in mediaeval mind, as one of the three elements that make the Renaissance conception of the past; see Burke (1969). However, the awareness of anachronism in historiography raised much slower than other cultural/artistic fields such as painting, sculpture and philology, "largely due to revered interpretive canons that stressed that history's importance lay in the timeless moral and political lessons the study of the past could provide, and because historians traditionally assumed that human behavior and circumstances remained essentially similar throughout time". See Ritter (1986, pp. 11–12).

[26] Caroline Sawyer draws attention to the date Ahmedi completed the first version of *İskendername* which corresponds to the Ottoman victory at Kosovo in 1390 against the Crusaders (Sawyer 1996, pp. 135–147).

[27] Peter Burke describes a similar indifference toward the past in mediaeval mind. Mediaeval men lacked a sense of history different from the present and they "did not deny that in some ways the past was unlike the present; they knew, for example, that the ancients had not been Christians". However, Burke suggests, "they did not take the difference very seriously" (Burke 1969, p. 1), cited in Ritter (1986, p. 10). It is not surprising that there is a similitude in Ritter's example for mediaeval "disregard of temporal propriety" and the anachronism in Ahmedi's work: "In sculpture and illustrated manuscripts, for example, ancient personalities such as Moses or *Alexander the Great* were typically depicted in mediaeval dress" (Ritter 1986, p. 10) (emphasis is mine). To have an exact comparison one might consider the inconsistent style in paintings of Iskendername manuscripts presented to various political centers in the region of the 15th century. While scenes of hunting in the manuscript produced for the Mamluk palace represent formulaic images strictly follow Timurid and

special events, after having been refined and converted in time to publicly accepted codes, are combined into a meaningful system which provides a uniquely favourable framework for the consideration of historical problems at a very general, abstract and sometimes metaphysical level. Ultimately, a history as told by Ahmedi, transcended the ordinary problems of causality and was intended to present a bifurcated perception of time that makes sense as long as depicted by conceptualised exemplars. The best effect could be obtained through the cases in which an exemplar matches a concept related to the art of governing: the caliph Ömer-justice; Anushirvan-justice, Timur-injustice and oppression; Ottomans as the last Muslim dynasty-sacred, exceptional position of the last, and so forth.

However, behind the effects of literary conventions, aesthetic concerns, theoretical aspects or Islamic, pre-Islamic, Persian traditions that mattered to Ahmedi, problems of real life must have been by all means a determining factor. It appears that the authorial intent in the text was focused on conveying a political message concerning "a claim of descent from İskender to Bayezid I" for legitimacy (Darling 2000, p. 163).[28] Against the insulting language of Timur who claims not "to rule in his own right but only to exercise sovereignty in the name of a descendant of Chingiz Khan" (Woods 1984, p. 332), who acts in compliance with "yarlig-i asumani ve türe-yi Chingizhani" (Aubin 1963, p. 87) and who attempts to degrade Bayezid by reminding him of his "humble origin" (Lowry 2003, p. 78; Şami 1987, pp. 261–262, 264; Daş 2004, pp. 141–167), there had to be a challenging response on the part of the Ottoman side. Ahmedi was well aware of the Timurid peril that had already reached the Ottoman court in the 1390s, and re-designed his *İskendername* to provide the Ottoman sultan with the appropriate equipment of lineal dignity and historic grounds specifically to counterbalance Timur's rhetorical grandeur derived from Turkish and Islamic roots of legitimacy.[29] However, according to the author, an event in the early period of Bayezid's reign explicitly signals the disaster to come. Bayezid, upon the death of Barquq, the ruler of Egypt, decided to conquer his land and started a campaign to Egypt. But his eagerness ended up with his defeat in the battle of Ankara. Ahmedi argues that Bayezid did not take the necessary lesson out of the death of the Egyptian sultan, hence he prepared his own ending:

> He [Bayezid] did not say "He (the ruler of Egypt) died and I, too,
> will die just as he died" […]
> They said to Nuşirvan "Good news, O Şah! Such-and-such enemy
> is destroyed and gone."
> Nuşirvan said "That would be good news, were I not to die. […]

Turcoman tradition, enthronement of the prince, or the headdress of the courtly ladies, is illustrated in a Mamluk style. See Atıl (1984, pp. 161–162).

[28] Also see Hillenbrand (1996, pp. 222–223).

[29] It is noteworthy that in the late 15th century Neşri mentions the possibility of a lineage between Turcomans and Alexander by referring to the belief that Dhu'l-qarneyn was in fact Oguz himself. See Flemming (1988, p. 134).

Why is it good news? I am going to die too. […]
The death of an enemy is a harbinger to you (Ahmedi, in Silay 2004, p. 21)

Similarly in *Zafername*, Nizamuddin Şāmi stresses the pretentious, unacceptable and immoral attitude of Bayezid and ascribes his defeat by Timur thoroughly to the moral contrast between the two rulers (Şami 1987, pp. 260–263, 309–311). This contrast was highlighted by later Ottoman historians as well. Bayezid's disregard of the moral warning derived from the life of Anushirvan is in striking contrast to what Timur did when the news, or rumour, on Bayezid's illness was once heard. It was echoed in the copies of supposedly original correspondence between the two rulers, compiled by the eminent Ottoman historian Hoca Saadeddin Efendi in a 16th-century chancery manual.[30] According to the fourth letter, Timur tells the Ottoman sultan that he knew about his illness, but refused to take the advantage of it, because he found it morally unacceptable.[31] If Bayezid's illness and Timur's "considerate" response to it is true, we may claim that Ahmedi's interpretation on the defeat is not only the articulation of a mere advice, a morality tale to the sultan, but the author put the Anushirvan story on purpose alluding to the reality. Such a critical tone against Bayezid continued to exist in the Ottoman historiography (for instance in Gelibolulu Mustafa ʿAli) in a much more uncompromising and disparaging style and was employed to serve the notion of cyclical history as the sign of deteriorating time (Fleischer 1983, p. 209).

Present Time in Ahmedi's *Dastān*

The glory of the past suggested an ideal time in an ideal society in Ottoman histories of the 15th century. Quite ironically, the role attributed to the past was not always contrasted with the present time in regard to the expected perversity of the everyday life. Considering the golden age of Islam, the authors were inevitably obliged to follow the idea that all that happened in this specific past was ideally right and deserved exaltation. However there were many pasts, and the author could chose a suitable one among others.[32] This idea somehow ended up with the predisposition in favour of an ideally depicted history. The established belief about the past revolved around a history perception which is morally right, justified and justifying. An event or personality antedating another one was expected to gain more respectful place, hence it might be

[30] There are three known copies available in manuscript libraries in Turkey: Süleymaniye, Reisülküttâb: no. 38368, Es'ad Efendi: no. 3335, titled *Münşeât-ı Hoca Efendi*; Nuruosmaniye: no. 4292, titled *Mekâtibi Sultaniye*. For more information on Hoca Saadedin Efendi's compilation, see Daş (2003, pp. 185–190).

[31] "Ve dāima sizün mariz oldugunuz haberi efvāhda şāyi iken, aslā kulagumuza koymayup, tegāfül şeklünde mukayyed olunmadı…" From Timur to Bayezid, 4th letter taken from Hoca Saadedin Efendi, *Münşeât ve Mükâtabât-ı Sultaniye*, Koyunoğlu Ms. Library, no. 13435, 103a–117b, cited in Daş (2004, p. 165).

[32] See Chase F. Robinson's arguments on the existence of *the* past and *a* past in Islamic historiography: Robinson (2003, pp. 92 ff.).

argued that the past had always been deserved much more attention and reverence. On the other hand, as mentioned before, the authors of pre-Ottoman or Ottoman history expressed introductory eulogies of the sultans, or historic personalities to whom the works were dedicated. Aside from the leading figure, these histories contain several praises to every figure whom the authors speaks of the lives, as in Ahmedi's *İskendername*, from the first Ottoman sultan Osman Beg to Süleyman Çelebi, or from the first caliph to the last one. Ahmedi traced the careers of his main characters and such pattern corresponds to the conception of cyclical historiy of the time: from the birth of a civilisation or dynasty to its ending. He treated time both as a destroyer of the actual life and as a positive element that paves the way to new beginnings.

However, this did not mean that the construction of the idea was entirely unbound or unregulated. Mediated between the real world and the divine world, history was divided into parts resting on a hierarchical order of meanings. So long as the subject matter told by the historian was primarily to be validated on the basis of religious principles. An universally moral value belonging to humanity (i.e. justice), and its symbol personified in the body of a historic personality (i.e. Alexander the Great, or Osman Gazi) composed a unity that makes sense and maintained its appeal to the audience in order to prove its divine spirit. However absurd and incongruent it may seem, Plato, Anushirvan, Khusrau, Alexander the Great, Socrates, al-Khidr, or caliph Umar b. al-Khattab all had common characteristics in nurturing, shaping and leading the thoughts. What they held in common was, to say very roughly, the universal truth. Drawing distinctions between these figures, their characteristics, deeds, careers, personal qualities and the ages in which they lived, generally details that makes them what they are would have confused the reader and distracted them from the focus of the authorial intent. The reason was that they represent a universal value. The role assigned to them was to appear on the scene as morally inspiring exemplars to guide people in the right direction and to encourage them against tendencies to the wrong and the evil. Man is innately inclined to evil-doing, and in order to be a perfect man (*insan-ı kāmil*), according to *sufî* understanding, he must struggle against his weaknesses and worldly desires.[33] Therefore every example in this selection is evidently the epitomes of mature characteristics of humanity, righteousness, propriety and wisdom, each of which has a specific supremacy over humanly weaknesses. In this regard, Ahmedi's choice of İskender, Aristotle and al-Khidr as protagonist constitutes somehow a mystical sub-tone for "the history" of the house of Osman. Historic figures are unindividualised, impersonal, and almost iconic. They rest neither on chronological nor individual nor spatio-temporal and palpable aspects, but on moral values. In this treatment could be found the traces of the problems of factuality and historical veracity in Islamic biography tradition. It would not be fair to reduce it to a simple formula as claimed by H. Gibb (1962, pp. 54–58), however, scholars are supposed to notice the "underlying meanings and political agenda" behind the lines

[33] The role of Sufism has a crucial importance in Islamification of the ancient wisdom of the pre-Islamic Persian past, and particularly the Sufi interpretation of Ferdowsi's Shahnama deeply influenced Ahmedi. On this, see Darling (2000, pp. 161 – 162).

(Malti-Douglas 1980, cited in Hurvitz 1997, p. 44, n. 8). Reading Ahmedi's work, or any other moralist author's work of "history", requires the awareness of a playground of cultural codes where literary traditions and moral ideals have been frequently combined or intersected with legitimising principles (Hurvitz 1997, pp. 43–44). In order to abstract a real character from any particular details and transform it into the paragon of a virtue, it was necessary to lessen the effect of personality and generalise the necessary abstraction into classes. With this methodology, "the ensemble of semiotic codes which logically precede their composition" (Malti-Douglas 1980, p. 140) help the reader create and memorise images to be translated and employed as moral ideals whenever needed.

It is clear that both oral and written cultural works have contributed to strengthening the expectation on the wide use of these semiotic codes in which natural or supernatural attributes were given to historical, religious or legendary personalities. The importance of Ahmedi's historical-literary work lies in the introduction of İskender and other ancient figures to the Ottoman court after the traumatic defeat in 1402 as symbolic meanings. Concomitantly, the author's philosophical preoccupation with history as an indication of ideal man and a manifestation of good manners remained significant among later Ottoman writers.

Consequently, the use of (established) common referents in history writing does not only profoundly preserves and promotes the collective memory of the society and praises the monumental ideals and moral idealism in literature, but also paves the way to a perception of eclectic and anachronistic history in which there was a persistent struggle for superiority between its past and present.

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