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ISMAIL E. ERÜNSAL:

Osmanlılarda Kütüphaneler ve Kütüphanecilik.

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ISMAIL E. ERÜNSAL:

Osmanlılarda Sahafılık ve Sahafılar.

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Libraries and the book trade both have a long history in the Middle East. While texts have always been closely studied, however, the books and the libraries that contained these texts have not often been considered as objects of research in their own right. This gap is especially obvious with regard to Ottoman cultural heritage, which includes the largest extant collections of books in Arabic and Turkish. An important step to fill the gap has now been taken by İsmail Erünsal, probably the leading expert on Ottoman book collections. The two volumes under review, on libraries and the book trade respectively, are products of more than 30 years of research. As each volume is an independent study, I will first turn to “Ottoman libraries and librarianship”, which is a revised edition of his 2008 book.

The book is divided into three parts: the first narrates the historical development of library institutions from the fourteenth to the early twentieth centuries, while the chapters of the second part give a detailed overview of library staff, services, finances, buildings, cataloguing and administration of the collections. Finally, 19 appendices contain transcribed and reproduced original documents referred to in the text. The main sources of the study are endowment deeds; in these documents, as Erünsal cautions, the way in which a library ought to be administered was set out, while traces of day-to-day practice can be found mainly in documentation pertaining to the management of endowment finances. Erünsal draws on decades of research in various sections of the Ottoman state archive, the Topkapı palace archive, the court registers of İstanbul and 20 smaller towns (16 of them today on Turkish territory), as well as the Turkish archive of endowments. Several hundred endowment deeds that Erünsal studied are listed in chronological order with complete references. The wealth of source material is very impressive; however, it has to be kept in mind

that it limits the scope of the study to Istanbul, the core region of Rumelia and Anatolia, and the territory of the Republic of Turkey, for the most part excluding other parts of the former Ottoman Empire, as well as non-Muslim libraries.

Starting with small collections in the early days of the Ottoman polity, by the late sixteenth century, large libraries were attached to many mosques and medreses. The first public library independent of such institutions, however, was the one founded by Köprülüzâde Fâzıl Muştafâ Paşa in 1678. During the eighteenth century, several monarchs and dignitaries founded large independent libraries in the capital as well as in provincial centres. Because of several magnificent foundations of this type, Erünsal characterizes the reign of Maḥmūd I. (1730–54) as a Golden Age of libraries. Systematic cataloguing and protective efforts began that were reinvigorated in the late nineteenth century, and library staff became increasingly differentiated in terms of professionalization and responsibilities. Not all staff members, however, were necessarily full-time employees of a particular library. While early endowment deeds only provided for a “guardian of books”, the personnel of a large eighteenth-century library would include administrators, librarians, copyists, book binders, porters, cleaners and janitors.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such independent libraries continued to be founded and improved, but their economic situation deteriorated so that many smaller libraries eventually vanished from the record. From the nineteenth-century reform era onwards, the libraries continued to support traditional Islamic scholarship but had little connection with westernized knowledge. Even though the number of readers had been on the rise since the late nineteenth century, the establishment of public libraries in the modern sense of the word only picked up speed in the Republican era. Nevertheless, the nineteenth century was a period of intense change; among other things, Erünsal observes that elements of religious education and ritual were then explicitly included into library endowment regulations.

The sheer scale of this endeavour is impressive, as the study gives the first book-length overview of the subject on the basis of multiple sources from several centuries with little previous research to build on. The same is true for the second volume, probably the first monograph on “Ottoman book trade and book sellers”. It is mainly concerned with what one would today call the second-hand book trade, due to the predominance of manuscripts until the mid-nineteenth century, which had a profound impact on Ottoman Muslim book culture. This volume focuses even more on the central region of the empire than the first, which is necessitated by the availability of sources. However, Erünsal argues that at least until the Tanzimat, the book market was most developed in the capital as compared to regional sub-centres and even to ancient cultural centres like Damascus, Cairo or Mecca, because the most important customers used to be the affluent bureaucrats and scholars concentrated in Istanbul. He admits, though, that the evidence may be incomplete, as foreign visitors were able to acquire large quantities of manuscripts in some provincial centres.

Erünsal follows the same approach as in the library study, treating first the historical development of book trading and then individual topics like the book market, shops, customers, popular titles, appreciated qualities of books, precautions against fire, the book sellers’ social position and economic situation, their corporate organization, and the origins of their stock. Having checked through thousands of court registers over the years, the author is able to state confidently that before the late eighteenth century, booksellers are rarely mentioned in the sources. From then on, certain court registers of Istanbul provide insights into the social makeup of this group and its development. The study’s mainstay in terms of sources, however, is a corpus of more than 200 probate inventories of booksellers from the seventeenth to early twentieth centuries, 186 of which are from Istanbul (a complete list is

provided as an appendix). Many booksellers belonged to the lower echelons of the learned class or were descendants of the prophet; some worked in the bureaucracy as their main occupation, but most of them were neither religious scholars nor completely uneducated.

The final section consists of 170 pages of tables and reproductions of documents, including transcripts of probate inventories, to provide the reader with the most relevant source material. Some findings, such as booksellers' average wealth or fluctuations of book prices, are illustrated by graphs. Erünsal traces especially illuminated manuscripts, Quran copies and Müteferriqa prints in order to determine tendencies in book prices from the late seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries. Apart from Quran copies written by famous calligraphers, topics like Quranic exegesis, traditions of the prophet and jurisprudence were in great demand. The wealthy scholarly elite could afford this type of book, and this sometimes led to such an increase in prices that buying expensive books became an investment. Bureaucrats, in turn, preferred books on history and belles lettres, which tended to more affordable.

Erünsal's studies on Ottoman libraries and the book trade are impressive achievements and are bound to be indispensable tools for future studies on Ottoman literary culture.

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