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PROBLEMS RELATING
TO THE SOCIAL HISTORY CONTEXT
OF THE ACQUISITION AND POSSESSION
OF BOOKS AS PART OF COLLECTIONS
OF *OBJETS D'ART* IN THE 18TH CENTURY

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There are two approaches to this paper; the first is theoretical, consisting of a set of issues and methods found in studies of late medieval and early modern consumption patterns in Europe; the second is empirical, comprising materials on the social existence of Ottoman princesses and dignitaries in the 18th century.

Ottoman historiography has long been concerned with the state and its organisation. Hence, it is not surprising that in recent years, in order to open up new channels of research, many Ottoman social historians have increasingly become net importers of paradigms from European history. This involves operating with a time-lag model of the diffusion of 'new technology'. It means that studies of historical demography, land tenure, urbanisation, frontier zones, state formation, court ceremonial etc. emerging in Western historical studies have inspired Ottomanists to pose similar questions in their particular field. It is the case, furthermore, that in this way, investigations of daily life, of individuals, their mentality and patterns of behaviour lag behind. It is the same case for consumption or consumer studies, following yet another recent trend in Western economic and social history which is coming, but only just coming, onto the agenda of Ottoman history. From the materials which I have brought together in recent years on the social existence of Ottoman princesses, I first examined their architectural patronage, and then proceeded to look at their daily life in the ceremonial as well as the private space defined by this architecture and eventually moved on to the study of their revenues and expenditures. Simultaneously informed by the kind of secondary or comparative readings that I have suggested above, I came to pose questions concerning their quality of life: How did they spend their time? How did they talk? How did they carry themselves and gesticulate? What and how much did they eat, read or write? What kinds of artefacts surrounded them? What role did these occupy in their lives? These are, I think, relevant questions for both art and social history.

To explore this hitherto neglected 'history of things and manners', it is to a largely unexplored field of probate inventories that, increasingly, historians have been and will be turning. From my work on many such inventories taken at death, of accounts kept in the course of building and furnishing palaces, or for purchases of textiles and jewellery, records of kitchen spending etc., what emerges is that first, waterfront palaces, objects of conspicuous display, personal effects of all kinds and perhaps clothes more than anything else, food (in the form of specific delicacies, new dishes, feasts and a whole manner of eating) and 'culture' (including books, prints and music) were all invested with some kind of significance. This may have derived from their novelty, uniqueness, distant origins or high price (especially when the latter was totally out of proportion to the object's intrinsic worth) or else from the family or dynastic values they embodied. Hence, what may legitimately be defined as a certain kind of consumerism appears to have assumed an important role in this period in proliferating life-styles which in turn served to establish an individual's public identity.

Until fairly recently, much of the literature concerning the material life of western as well as eastern courts was written in the language of traditional art history, designed more to help connoisseurs to understand design traditions than to help us all to understand élite culture. At the moment, however, studies of court consumption are coming into their own, and it is this trend that, I feel, has to be carried on into an extensive study of Ottoman court consumption, including a serious attempt to stake out its 'ostentation thresholds'. Such 'ostentation thresholds' for various social groups or strata, marking the necessarily elusive boundaries where the private determinants of their consumption meet public determinants, are to be best observed, as one might expect, through probate inventories and confiscation registers. From the second half of the 17th into or through the 18th and perhaps into the early 19th centuries, what do they have to tell us? First, of course, with all due attention to methodological niceties, there are some 'static' or 'repetitive' patterns to note. Thus, what remained of the lifetime acquisitions of a person at his death cannot be supposed to have coincided exactly with his actual attitude toward goods and worldly acquisitions. We may immediately infer that books, for example, were never among their top priorities. Perhaps more importantly, are the *changes* in the frequency, amount and value of the items that appear in 18th century princesses' and dignitaries' inventories as well as others that have been studied in the existing literature. The importance attached to these items might be expected to have varied from one social group to another, and yet there are some remarkable instances of *change and development* that seem to cut across certain social groups (although the years from 1703 onwards and those of the Tanzimat era are often presented as economically, socially and culturally stagnant).

Interestingly enough, the passion for collecting that fuelled élite consumerism was also reflected in the increasing number of books that we find in probate inventories and confiscation registers, as well as in the creation of

separate *vakıf* libraries initially in one room of a dignitary's *yalı* or *konak* set apart for this purpose, followed by their transformation into architecturally free-standing *vakıf* libraries. The latter were a novelty, but (alongside waterfront palaces) came to be one of the hallmarks of civil architecture in 18th century Istanbul, as witnessed by the libraries set up by the grand viziers Şehit Ali Paşa (1715), Nevşehirli Damad İbrahim Paşa (1720), Hekimoğlu Ali Paşa (1734-5), Ragıp Mehmed Paşa (1763) or by the Şeyhülislam Veliyüddin Efendi (1761/1768-9).¹ Finally, the numbers of books bequeathed to the more traditional type of *vakıf* libraries (adjoining a mosque complex) also appear to have increased at this time. It seems, in other words, that as valuable objects, books were in fact reflective of 'ostentation thresholds' in Ottoman society. Art historians may be said to have approached books mostly from their production aesthetics, concentrating on formal aspects such as their binding, calligraphy, miniatures or other ornamentation. What, though, was the share of money spent on books in the budgets of members of the élite? What kind(s) of books were in particularly high demand? What were their actual reading habits? Did they collect books to enjoy reading them, or was the possession of books just another form of pompous display? Suggested by the foregoing observations about *vakıf* libraries or the numbers of books in probate inventories, these make up another series of social history questions that deal with books not individually but in terms of the consumption of a whole category or genre.

There appear to have been limits to the extent to which the wealthier classes of Ottoman society could cut their consumption in response to losses in revenue (economists would speak of "a low income-elasticity of demand"), for the élite placed a clear priority on acquiring 'socially strategic' commodities (especially in the realm of textiles and clothing, home furnishings and tableware). The *muhallefat* of Abdülhamid I's daughter Esma Sultan the Younger, for example - which like so many other cases was auctioned off twenty days after her death in 1848 in order to pay her debts - records numerous sets of furniture, utensils and decorative objects, all of which would seem to have been just enough to furnish her palace(s).² *But there were no books whatsoever*, despite the fact that books were no less valuable than any of the jewelled gold, silver, jade or crystal artefacts included in this inventory. Tableware and interior furnishings, in particular, came in such large numbers of sets as to be neither functional nor explicable solely in terms of the ostentatious display of the wealth of this princess, for it is hard to believe that even ceremonials of symbolic significance would have required so many sets. Furthermore, documents registering purchases made in her lifetime indicate that costly garments, including furs and wigs, were always bought in large numbers of sets not only to provide for the needs of her household, but also as a means of manifesting a certain kind of 'inward-looking' consumerism that conformed with her rank and status at the time. There is also a striking *similarity of*

1. İ. E. ERÜNSAL, *Türk Kütüphaneleri Tarihi*, Vol. 2, Ankara, 1991.

2. Topkapı Palace Archives D.413, D.2656/3, E.1184.

composition to be noted between the worldly belongings, as recorded in their probate inventories, of people occupying different rungs on the social ladder. Thus, in terms of registered wealth the fortune of Tepedelenli Ali Paşa (of Ioannina), for example — who rose from banditry to provincial power in Albania in the second half of the 18th century — appears to have surpassed that of any 18th century Ottoman princess or statesman, but it was composed of the same items.³ When we turn to men of more modest means, we find that virtually the same scale of items was to be found in their probate inventories although of course there were fewer of each kind and in all likelihood they were of poorer quality.

There is, however, at least one significant difference. From the probate inventories it appears that the only books that a princess would have kept would be a few very ordinary *mushaf-ı Şerif* and *en'am* volumes.⁴ In the Topkapı Palace Library collections, moreover, I have so far been able to locate only a single book from the collection of Esmâ Sultan the Younger, and that, too, is an unassuming prayer book.⁵ However, to judge from their probate inventories, Tepedelenli, his son, and his grandsons had all acquired quite a number of books, both printed and otherwise, and it is clear that they were literate, for this kind of library comprising literature and history, medicine and military science is unlikely to have been kept just for show. *None of the family members, however, owned any illustrated manuscripts.*

Now as a third instance, let us turn to the numbers of books found in the *muhallefat* of Damad İbrahim Paşa, Kaymak Mustafa Paşa and Kethüda Mehmed Efendi — three dignitaries who played a major role in the reform movements of the early 18th century and then lost their lives in the Patrona Halil uprising.⁶ Ten years before Ahmed III was to sacrifice him to the rebels, the Grand Vizier had already turned over 1525 different titles to his *vakıf* library, which probably meant somewhere around or upwards of 1700 volumes. But in 1730, the private collection that he still kept in his three different palaces amounted to another 163 items. It comprised, apart from those falling into the usual categories of period libraries: calligraphy by Karahisarî and other famous *hattats*, an illuminated (*musavver*) Persian Koran, an album of sultans' portraits, a volume of various illustrations, an atlas of the Mediterranean, 22 other maps and 18 military maps or manuscripts (*tesâvir-i kıta'ât*), plus 11 volumes of other *murakkaat* (including one with a jade-panel book-binding, a corner of which was carefully recorded as missing). As for the grand admiral, he turned out to have had more than 2000 titles in his possession, perhaps amounting to as many as 2500 volumes that he had kept in his *konak* and two *yalıs*. This enormous fortune in books that have been intended to form the core of another *vakıf library* unfortunately disappeared

3. Başbakanlık Archives D.BŞM.MHF. 13329, 13359.

4. Topkapı Palace Archives D. 2646, E. 135/237, *muhallefat* of Beyhan Sultan, daughter of Abdülhamid I.

5. Topkapı Palace Library H. 105; F.E. KARATAY, *Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Kütüphanesi, Türkçe Yazmalar Kataloğu*, İstanbul, 1961, p. 152.

6. Topkapı Palace Archives D. 2211/1-2.

without a trace following confiscation, since it has proved impossible to locate any of the books in the collections of the Topkapı Palace or elsewhere. Hence, it is only through his *muhallefat* that we know that Kaymak Mustafa Paşa also owned, along with the more usual categories, an illustrated *Şemâ'il-name*, a volume of various illustrations and examples of calligraphy, 6 volumes of various other illustrations, 6 volumes of portolans, 2 volumes of prints, illustrations (?) of the Ka'ba, an illustrated *mecmû'a* and examples of calligraphy by eminent calligraphers. Finally, the Kethüda with only 14 titles at home seems to have acquired books more for the sake of self-satisfaction than with a view to endowing his library in the future, so perhaps it is all the more significant that half of his small collection was made up of: a *Tabakâtü'l-âşikîn*, two volumes of the *Şehnâme*, an *Iskendernâme*, a *Timurnâme*, all illustrated, and four more volumes described as *musavver murakkaat*.

It is difficult, therefore, to avoid the following initial, tentative conclusions. First, books were always associated with high culture and/or, élite consumption. To judge from numerous inventories and registers, at a certain level, accumulating them was part of a wider trend that went hand in hand with a kind of consumerism extending to luxury artefacts, silks, taffetas and rare garden plants as well as maps and pictures. It seems that (royal) women in particular did not read much, and that when they ventured into the male-dominated world of creating or supplying *vakıf* libraries, as in the case of Gülnuş Emetullah, mother of Mustafa II and Ahmed III,⁷ or Mihrişah, mother of Selim III, or Hatice, daughter of Mustafa III,⁸ this was done by drawing on the palace collections and as part and parcel of the larger business of patronising mosque complexes. They might just as well have been commissioning fountains. It was the men who had a special relationship with books as such — but one which perhaps revolved not so much around the internalisation of any specific elements of “new knowledge” in them, as around what they, the maps and pictures all suggested concerning the new availability of, and hence the owner's degree of openness to, existing knowledge. In this context, it is also possible that owning books was used as a proxy for education. To judge by *minutiae* such as the presence of globes but the absence of reading glasses, or the very small quantities of candles allocated on a daily, weekly or monthly basis from the *matbah-ı âmire* to various élite houses, it is doubtful whether the élite was really knowledgeable. Finally, along with the sheer size of the collections built up as prospective *vakıf* libraries, it looks as if it was the possession of illustrated manuscripts of the popular but most expensive variety that more than anything else defined the ostentation threshold demarcating the ‘world of books’ of the capital's élite from the ‘world of books’ of even the richest members of the provincial gentry like Tepedelenli Ali Paşa. These manuscripts are known to have been produced in very limited quantities by the best artists who were inevitably recruited into the palace workshops, while nothing is known of their production outside the palace. In

7. İ.E. ERÜNSAL, *op. cit.* [n. 1], p. 69.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 126, 175, 203.

the rare cases when they were auctioned off to the public, it is possible to trace only one or two of the subsequent owners; the Grand Vizier Hekimoğlu Ali Paşa's illustrated *Hamse-i Nizami*, for example, is known to have been purchased by a certain Gürcüzade, but then it sinks out of sight.⁹ If and when they were confiscated, on the other hand, they reverted to the palace, and might then be relocated to other libraries as donations -circulating, in other words, in a fashion that is curiously reminiscent of the way palatial *mirâ* residences kept rotating among top functionaries in conjunction with their office. So in buying and keeping them, the highest dignitaries of the Empire might have been signalling not just their wealth or their openness to the world, but also -as Norbert Elias would have said-their umbilical cord to the palace.

9. Başbakanlık Archives D. BŞM.MHF.12460.