

ATATÜRK KÜLTÜR, DİL VE TARİH YÜKSEK KURUMU
TÜRK TARİH KURUMU YAYINLARI
XXVI. Dizi — Sa. 2

CIÉPO
OSMANLI ÖNCESİ VE
OSMANLI ARAŞTIRMALARI
ULUSLARARASI KOMİTESİ

VII. SEMPOZYUMU BİLDİRİLERİ

PEÇ: 7-11 EYLÜL 1986

Yayına Hazırlayanlar:
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TÜRK TARİH KURUMU BASİMEVİ—ANKARA
1994

CONSEIL SUPRÊME D'ATATÜRK
POUR CULTURE LANGUE ET HISTOIRE
PUBLICATIONS DE LA SOCIÉTÉ TURQUE D'HISTOIRE
Serie XXVI — No. 2

CIÉPO
COMITÉ INTERNATIONAL
D'ÉTUDES PRÉ-OTTOMANES
ET OTTOMANES

VII^e SYMPOSIUM ACTES

PÈCS: 7-11 SEPTEMBRE 1986

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IMPRIMERIE DE LA SOCIÉTÉ TURQUE D'HISTOIRE

1994

THE HISTORIAN AS BIOGRAPHER: MUŞTAFĀ ʿĀLĪ OF GALLIPOLI'S BIOGRAPHIES

JAN SCHMIDT

The subject I should like to discuss in this short paper is the biographical aspect of the great history of the sixteenth-century author Muştafā ʿĀlī of Gallipoli, the *Kūnhü 'l-ahbār*, the "Essence of Histories". The work which has not as yet found its critical editor is a vast universal history in four volumes, called "pillars", and deals with the history of the world from its creation until the writer's own days¹.

The biographical aspect is of fundamental importance for the *Kūnh*: firstly, the narrative of historical events and developments is dominated by the personalities of prophets and sultans in particular, secondly, and series of short biographies are added to the narrative in several places in the work and regularly so in its fourth, Ottoman volume. The biographical material offered here is voluminous, especially for ʿĀlī's own sixteenth century; the biographical sections cover from about a third of the chapter on the reign of Sultan Selīm I up to half or more of those on Süleymān and Selīm II². They describe the lives of six hundred and two men and three women, descriptions which vary in length from one short sentence up to a number of folios³.

Biography played an important rôle in Muslim historiography from the very beginning; we might even say: Muslim historiography had its very roots in the closely related sciences of biography and genealogy⁴. In

¹ There exists an incomplete printed version in five volumes edited by Meḫmed Lebib, Istanbul 1277-1285.

² The three periods begin subsequently on fol. 222b, 270b and 423b of *Kūnh* IV in the Berlin manuscript Hs. or. quart. 1090 (B) (B. H. Flemming, *Türkische Handschriften, Verzeichnis der orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland*, XIII, 1, Wiesbaden 1968, no. 26, 19). The last period ends on fol. 485b. The biographical sections begin on, fol. 255b, 357a and 457a.

³ See, e.g., the lives of 'Mevlānā Şemsü 'd-dīn', Süleymān/*ulemā*, *ibidem*, fol. 379b and 'Mevlānā Muhyi 'd-dīn 'Arabzāde', *ibidem*, fol. 383a-385b.

⁴ Cf. B. Kellner-Heinkele, "Osmanische Biographiensammlungen", in: *Anatolica*, VI (1977-1978), 171-172.

his general introduction to the *Künh*, 'Alī justifies the activity of the historiographer by stating that it is a religious duty of mankind to remember the deceased. He compares the historiographer with 'Isā who had the gift of reviving the dead. By keeping their memory alive, in particular of those who were worthy of honour, such as pious men, scholars, poets, sultans and statesmen, man could continue to benefit from their good example, or on the other hand, learn from their faults and mishaps even after their deaths⁵.

As is clear from the sources he mentions, 'Alī followed in the footsteps of the classical historiographers and biographers; he had read the work of at-Ṭabarī and Mirḥōnd, Ibn Ḥallikān and Dawlatshāh, to mention only a few of his most famous predecessors⁶. The sixteenth century moreover was the age in which the Ottoman serial biography, the *tezkere*, began to flourish and 'Alī was fully aware of the works of this type written before the 1590s when he started to write the *Künh*⁷. Moreover, he personally knew some of their authors such as 'Aşık Çelebi, Laṭīfī, 'Ahdī and Kınalızāde Hasan Çelebi⁸. In the *Künh*, he discusses their literary merits, applies their methods of literary representation and exhaustively uses work as sources⁹.

Although the Ottoman biographical dictionaries which contain a wealth of historical and literary material have become the subject of systematic scholarship, this has hardly been the case for the histories which contain such material¹⁰. This is unjustified, especially for such a work as the *Künh*, which may well be regarded as one of the richest examples of the *tezkere* genre in itself.

⁵ *Künh* I (ed. Mehmed Lebib), 2-4 and 40-41.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 18-19.

⁷ 'Alī mentions the following biographical dictionaries: the *Heşt bihişt* of Sehi Beg of 1538, the *şakāyīku 'n-nū māniye* of Taşköprüzāde of 1558, its continuations, the *el-'İkdu 'l-manzūm* of Minik 'Alī Çelebi, the *şikkū 'ş-şakāyīk* of 'Aşık Çelebi, the *Gülşen-i şu'arā* of 'Ahdī of 1563, the *Tezkere-i şu'arā* of Laṭīfī of 1569, possibly including its continuation up to 1572/73, the *Meşā'irü 'ş-şu'arā* of 'Aşık Çelebi of the same year and the *Tezkiretü 'ş-şu'arā* of Kınalızāde Hasan Çelebi of 1585.

⁸ This is, apparent from their short biographies occurring in Süleyman/poets, Selim II/*ulemā* and poets. For Hasan Çelebi, cf. C. H. Fleischer, *Gelibolu Āli Efendi, 1541-1600. A study in Ottoman Historical Consciousness*, Dissertation, Princeton University 1982, 66.

⁹ With the notable exception of 'Ahdī's *Tezkere* whose work he nevertheless knew and quoted, are discussed in *Künh* IV (B), fol. 380b-381a and 479a-479b.

¹⁰ On the present state of scholarship, Kellner, "Biographiensammlungen", *passim*.

The question now rises: what did 'Âlî contribute to Ottoman biographical literature apart from copying or elaborating his literary sources? To answer this question we have to direct our attention to the part of the *Künh* where the most original material is likely to be found: the part which deals with 'Âlî's own age. If we turn to the last systematic biographical sections added to the chapters on the sultan Süleymân and Selîm II, we find that of the short lives contain material obtained from oral sources or based on the author's personal experience with the men whose lives described, both to aspects, traditional to the genre. Particularly these pages are most fascinating being read. 'Âlî was a poet and scholar by vocation and had an inquisitive mind. Through his upbringing in a literary milieu, his *medrese* training and long if erratic, career as a state official, he came into contact with many of the celebrities of his time. To his bitter disappointment, he never was able to obtain an appointment in the highest ranks of the Ottoman bureaucracy, to his various provincial postings he was obliged to travel a lot and took he the opportunity to visit pious men known for their learning, governors information about the past, and literary celebrities to discuss their or his own work or to participate in their literary salons. In this way, he obtained a mass of historical and biographical data which he finally included in the *Künh*. The parts of the text based on belong deservedly to the most well-known and the most quoted from his entire work¹¹.

The part of the *Künh* dealing with the period of the author's lifetime is not exclusively concerned with the great men of his time, but —and this makes the work especially interesting for the social historian— also with persons of lesser rank known to the author who not normally have found their way into history. Thus, 'Âlî remembered Şeyh Sinân Hâlîfe, his teacher at the *mekteb* of his native Gallipoli. After having summed up the facts of the latter's *'ilmiye* career, he writes: "I (lit. this humble one) was taught by him and enjoyed the sweet benefits of logic, of the science of the Koran and of lexicology. He had a pleasant library surrounded by a priceless garden like Paradise, full of flowers, in summer and winter alike (..)"¹² Although we would like to hear more details, nevertheless our imagination is stirred by this short but scenic addition to the somewhat

¹¹ For 'Âlî's biography and his contacts with contemporaries, see: Fleischer, *Âli*, chapters 1-3.

¹² *Künh* IV, Selim II/şeyhs, (B), fol. 470a.

dry statements on the Şeyh's career; we are able to call up a picture of the boy stooped over his books amid the scent of fresh flowers. The past seems momentarily restored to life.

In 1575/76 (983) when ʿĀlī served as secretary to Ferhād Paşa in Bosnia, he used the opportunity to visit Hācī Meḥmed Beg, *dizdār* (castle-warden) of Pojega and noted in a postscript to the story of Sultan Süleymān's "German Campaign" of 1532: "I was invited to (Mehmed Beg's) house and was shown abundant hospitality". ʿĀlī was surprised by what he saw. Although Meḥmed Beg "was an old man, ninety years of age at that time, he still was full of life like a young man and a passionate lover of virgin female slaves". Moreover, he continuously entertained a large company at his house and ʿĀlī wondered how a man in his circumstances, living on an income of 6000 *aḳçe* per annum, could afford to employ three to four servants who cost him at least 1000 *aḳçe* per person, as well as keep an enormous house where he daily gave 20 to 30 banquets abundantly supplied with sweetmeats, while at the same time foddering the 70 to 80 horses of his permanent guests every night. Meḥmed Beg explained to ʿĀlī that before the conquest of Pojega he had been a dayı labourer in a place near Salonica. "I worked for a salary of about three *aḳçe* with which I tried hard to make a living. When the Conqueror of Countries Sultan Süleymān undertook the German Campaign, he made me a groom (? *sāyik-i zimām*) in the Imperial Army (...). (Afterwards), I came in contact with the *Beglerbegi* of Rumeli, Yahyā Paşazāde and became his boon-companion (...). When Pojega was captured, I was appointed castle warden (*dizdār*) there on the latter's request". He further explained that he was very well off because his *timar*-income was enhanced by the profits he made by selling chestnuts grown on a mountain attached to his land in the vilayets of Budin and Tımişvar¹³. Thus, we are taken into the banquet hall of a local, be it perhaps exceptional, military man far away on the-Ottoman border and are able to follow the dialogue in simple and direct speech between the author and his host. We learn of ʿĀlī's curiosity, perhaps not completely free of envy, and the way it led to his obtaining biographical data, the détails of which were deemed worthy of inclusion in his world history.

ʿĀlī was not always so generous with detailed descriptions of the circumstances under which he met contemporaries whose lives he recorded.

¹³ Ibidem, Süleymān/25th event, (B) fol. 269a-269b.

The majority of the fragments of this type consist of short but often lively and witty accounts of banquets, such as the example given above, and literary gatherings, *meclis*, where he met and competed with his fellow poets. Famous is 'Alî's discription of his meeting with the biographer 'Aşık Çelebi in Üsküb where the latter was Cadi, probably around 1570/72¹⁴. 'Alî recorded that 'Aşık received him and feasted him^a for three days on end. Glasses were raised and 'Alî was offered by his host a *kuḫa* which began with the distich, "Doubtlessly the glass is the most perfect thing for scholars united in a banquet at this transitory pleasure spot..." 'Alî eventually found himself quite embarrassed though, when he had to admit to his guest that he had not mentioned him in his Dictionary of Poets¹⁵.

The resuscitation of sixteenth-century Ottoman life in 'Alî's *Künh* does not only result from memoir-like and autobiographical accounts like the ones referred to above, but also from 'Alî's anxious involvement in the, disastrous development of the Ottoman Empire after the middle of the century as he and many of his contemporaries saw it, when the corrupt grand-viziers and courtiers could no longer be held in check by the weak or confused sultans who succeeded Süleymân¹⁶. The worst of them was the sinister Albanian "Koca" Sinân Paşa who pushed the Empire during the five periods of his Grand-vizierate to the brink of irreparable ruin. His personality dominates the narrative of the *Künh* from the period of the Yemen campaign of 1568 when he managed to rob 'Alî's patron and direct employer, Lâlâ Muştafâ Paşa, of his position as campaign Commander and Vizier, until his death in April 1596. 'Alî, who met the man in Cairo during the preparations for the military expedition, gives free rein to his hatred and is especially successful in picturing the man's brutish character in short and venomous scenes. On his way back from Yemen, Sinân Paşa stopped in Jidda, where he was approached by Cadi Ḥusayn, an agent of the *Şerîf* of Mecca, Abî Numay, who brought with him "a thousand pieces of gilt porcelain and numberless other presents including a cloth with all (the necessities) for a banquet which was laid out before

¹⁴ Fleischer, *Alî*, 92-93.

¹⁵ *Künh* IV, Selîm II/poets, (B), fol. 478b-479a. See also: G. M. Meredith-Owens, *Meşâ'ir üş-şu'arâ or Tezkere of 'Aşık Çelebi*, London 1971, xiii and xvii.

¹⁶ The most concise statement on Ottoman decline and the role of the main historical personalities in it is to be found in 'Alî's introduction to *Künh* IV, the Leiden manuscript Cod. 288 Warn.(L) (M. J. de Goeje, *Catalogus Codicum Orientalium Bibliothecae Academiae Lugduno Batavae* (CCO), III, Leiden 1865, no. dcccl, 28), fol. 4b-8b.

him. But the Vizier, irritated, asked: "Why didn't he come himself?" He had his horses trample the porcelain and break it to pieces..."¹⁷

As Grand-vizier he was, according to ʿĀlī, especially guilty of involving the Empire in the long and costly war with the Habsburgs at the end of the century. The author contemptuously pictures him, already in his seventies by then, when, having been appointed commander by Sultan Murād, he rode out to the outer encampment in front of the Edirne Gate. "He seemed confused like a moving corps, completely terrorized and dumbfounded as if he were dead and on his way to the grave-yard outside the gate in order to be buried"¹⁸. During his fifth grand-vizierate he died, and the author and the reader with him, feels relieved that the long story of corruption, nepotism, personal cowardice and murder has at last come to an end. Of the five periods he was in office, "the later were worse than each one before", ʿĀlī commented. Gradually, he had become more bad-tempered and foulmouthed. To those who came to see him on business, he invariably said: "Go to hell!" and, wrongly despising them, he considered it a waste of time to ask the opinion of philosophers who offered him their knowledge and expertise. Poets commented on his death satirizing his cowardice and tilthiness, saying "You Sinān Paşa have now gone to Hell yourself, finding that your abuse has come to be true!"

At the time of his death it was said that a black crow, his black soul, had been seen flying from his carcase¹⁹.

The Ottoman historian — ʿĀlī, as we have seen was no exception— considered it his task to act as an arbiter of manners, to censure the wicked and praise the virtuous. He was most apt to do so when his personal feelings were or had been at stake, when, as was often the case with an official like ʿĀlī, the subjects of his history, upon whom his postings almost exclusively depended, had promoted, ignored or thwarted him in his career or were still in a position to do so. Although this indeed could result in literature of a dramatic or sardonic quality when the author had been thwarted, as the example of Sinān Paşa shows, and although his personal indignation stimulated him to look for ever more brilliant invectives, the characterisation of the historical personalities in question tended

¹⁷ *Künh* IV, Selim II/3rd event, (B), fol. 446b.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, Murād III/38th event, (B), fol. 577b.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, Mehmed III/death of Sinān Paşa, (B), fol. 611a-612a.

to become unsubtle if not untruthful. This was the case when they became the object of exaggerated praise or even abject flattery as happened for instance when ʿĀlī, in the final pages of the *Kūnh*, eulogized the Grand-vizier Cigalazāde Sinān Paşa comparing him with the legendary hero Zāl and the beautiful prophet Yūsuf. The Pasha had been appointed after the Egri campaign of 1596, when ʿĀlī was still busy writing his work and the author clearly hoped to obtain a prestigious appointment from him. Most historians nevertheless agree that the man had played a very dubious role in the campaign and certainly had not been the courageous hero ʿĀlī depicts for us²⁰.

If the personalities described in his work were not the author's friends or enemies and were not or had not been involved in his official career or literary life, their portraits are mostly of a disappointingly flat character and their natures often briefly qualified as "pleasant" or "respectable". The exceptions here are persons about whom curious anecdotes could be told, preferably in elucidation of freakish but generally innocent character traits.

Of "Şeytān" Murād Paşa, the Governor of Laḥsā and Basra whom ʿĀlī once had seen in Damascus, he wrote that he was mad and had become the laughing-stock of the populace: he kept in his coffers puppets representing viziers and donned with clothes and many-plaited turbans (*mücevveze*) in his coffers. If a letter came from the Agent of the Porte (*Kāpu kethüdası*) informing him of the fact that a certain Vizier showed antagonism him, he immediately produced the puppet which resembled [the Vizier] and took endless trouble in order to chastise it with reprimands and punishments (...) and even went so far as to hang and execute it²¹. The Persian Şeyḫ Ebū Saʿīd who had fled from the *kızılbaş* and joined the army of Sultan Süleyman, suffered, ʿĀlī wrote, from dirt phobia. When he received a sable fur from his protector Grand-vizier ʿAlī Paşa, he felt thoroughly embarrassed and began by hanging it outside in his courtyard so that it should be "washed by rain and snow" After another two months, he let his servant scrub it with a clean handkerchief, but the costly fur "had turned a clean handkerchief, but the costly fur "had tur-

²⁰ See: *Kūnh* IV, Mehmed III/Egri campaign, in the Istanbul Topkapı manuscript Aḫmed III 3038 (F. E. Karatay, *Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Kütüphanesi Türkçe yazmalar kataloğu*, Istanbul 1961, no. 741, I, 244), fol. 544b-545b.

²¹ *Kūnh* IV, Süleymān/*beglerbegis*, (B), fol. 369a.

ned into leather as prepared by the tanner." When the servant touched it, the hair immediately let loose, scattering over courtyard. O he hair already would have sufficed to dishearten him profoundly and how now loads of them lay around! "He burst into tears [and] abused 'lī Paşa for having sent him such a rotten fur, cursing his fate at the same time..." The next day, finally, he decided to have fifty day labourers endowed with sharp eyesight remove every single hair from the courtyard. It took them thirty days to carry out the job. Afterwards, when the Sultan invited him to kiss his hands, he avoided touching him (...) and greeted him by stretching his hand at a distance. "The Sultan, amused, ordered the Grand-vizier to double the Şeyh's income in order to cover his expenses for soap and enable him to wash off his dirt phobia"²².

'Ālī was a most accomplished and versatile littérateur, who was able to apply his rhymed prose to such varying genres as touching memoir, detailed factual description, sustained historical epic, scathing abuse, high-flown eulogy, and humorous anecdote. But apart from providing sound and entertaining literature which indeed was considered to be the first task of the historian and biographer²³ was 'Ālī able to achieve a balanced and realistic characterisation of his personalities?

Perhaps the most cautious approach to biography in the *Künh* is to be found in the description of the Ottoman sultans. In their case the author tend to a more subtle approach because outright criticism or satire even of already deceased rulers could be dangerous. As recorded in the *Künh*, the poet Bāķī, whom 'Ālī knew well, was dismissed from his professorship and exiled from Istanbul by Sultan Murād after he had been maligned by a jealous colleague and accused of criticising the previous Sultan Selīm for inebriety in one of his *gazel*s²⁴. Sultan Murād, for example, was described as being of a "graceful and a sociable nature, devoting extraordinarily much time to familiar intercourse". At the same time, "he was inclined toward mystical poetry to a degree that exceeded the limit of

²² *Ibidem*, Süleyman/şeyhs, (B), fol. 390a-390b. Ebū Sa'īd's dirt phobia is also described in a more matter-of-fact way in the 'İkd', printed in the margin of Ibn Ḥallikān's *Wa-fa-yātu 'l-a'yān* II, Bulağ 1299, 401-406.

²³ This is apparent from Ali's introductions to both *Künh* I and IV as well as from his evaluation of the Ottoman biographers, cf. above, note 9.

²⁴ *Künh* IV, Murād III/3rd event, (B) fol. 490a. See also: E. J. W. Gibb, *A History of Ottoman Poetry* III, London 1904, 134.

what would be considered right"²⁵. Elsewhere ʿĀlī comments that "he had no faults apart from an inclination toward the collection of wordly goods, but this resulted from his genuine wish to expand the treasury of the Muslims"²⁶. This characteristic markedly contrasted with his inclination toward mysticism. To explain, if not to justify, another of the sultan's defects, his inertia, and his rather unbalanced personality in general, ʿĀlī had recourse to the classical theory of temperaments, which, incidentally at the same time had been revived in Renaissance Europe²⁷, connected it with a form of onomancy which ascribed a hidden, mystical-numerical value to letters. Explaining Murād's inertia —the sultan never undert a military campaign personally, worse: he never had travelled anywhere at all his journey from Manisa to Istanbul for his accession— ʿĀlī wrote: According to some, he suffered from headaches (...) but according to me, his inaction was fated... I studied the name Murād and found therā and the dāl, both pertaining to (the element) of fire. There were none of the aerial letters, one of which at least would be conditional to restlessness and motion (...) Each fire (letter), moreover, is opposed by water so that his behaviour and manners were rather inconsistent..."²⁸

The last fragment is revealing for the attitude of ʿĀlī and his age toward the psychology of man, aside from adding another item to our list of genres applied by the author in the *Kūnh*, that of the scientific essay. It should remind us that ʿĀlī belonged to an age in which, both in East and West, the separation between man and nature and its mysteries had not yet taken place and it brings us as close to what is nowadays called "psychobiography" as we could wish for. We should realize, though, that introspection, so strongly favoured in the West and a dominant feature of its literature since the eighteenth century, was not a valued activity with the Ottomans, who, as appeared from ʿĀlī's introduction to the *Kūnh*, were primarily interested in man's (conforming) moral behaviour in society for which he would be ultimately accountable to God on the Day of Judgement.

²⁵ *Kūnh* IV, Murād III/introduction, (B), fol. 485a.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, fol. 486b.

²⁷ J. Romein, *De biografie. Een inleiding*, Amsterdam 1946, 33-34.

²⁸ *Kūnh* IV, Murād III/summary of conquests, (B), fol. 488b-489a.