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OTTOMAN PROVINCIAL NOTABLES IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Over the past several decades the study of provincial notables has become increasingly popular. However, almost without exception all of these studies tend to limit their scope to a specific individual, family or region without providing a comprehensive examination of notables throughout the entire Ottoman state. In this paper, I will bring together eighteenth century provincial notables, namely *ayans*, from the Balkans, Anatolia and the Arab provinces and attempt to create model *ayans* which supersede geographical boundaries within the Ottoman state. As will be seen the creation of a single model is impossible due to the great differences which existed between lesser and greater *ayans*. Fortunately, separate models can be created for these two groups, as well as the development of a third category, which I refer to as the Ottoman Warlord, for individuals, such as Pasvanoğlu Osman Pasha of Vidin, Süleyman Pasha of Baghdad, Cezzar Ahmed Pasha of Acre, and Tepedelenli Ali Pasha of Janina, to name just a few, whose status and power went well beyond that of even the greater *ayans*.

The term *ayan* is of Arabic origin (plural of *ayn*) and its earliest Ottoman usage during the fifteenth century referred to a notable living in a city. These notables came from a variety of backgrounds such as high-ranking officials like *sancak-beyis* and retired *beylerbeyis* to *kapıkulus*, janissary leaders, *kadıs*, *mu-derrises*, *muftis*, *multezims*, *mukataa emins*, guild leaders and well-to-do merchants. Initially the title of *ayan* was limited to the city or district in which they resided. This limitation on the nature of the *ayanlık* makes clear the fact that being an *ayan* prior to the late sixteenth century was largely honorific and had little, if any, impact on provincial administration.

By the early eighteenth century the term *ayan* became much more significant than its rather modest meaning in the prior centuries. It began to be applied to individuals who were more than just notables in a given town or district, but rather people who exercised political influence and whose status, as such, was officially recognized. The transformation of the *ayan* in the early eighteenth century into a distinct social class, differing from both the government-appointed officials such as the *sancak-beyis*, *valis*, and *kadıs* and the local elites such as wealthy merchants and cultivators, was a direct result of their growing economic position within the provinces due to the extension of the tax-farming and land tenure systems as well as the social responsibilities that came along with it. These

later responsibilities included regional administrative duties and protection of the people living within their realm of influence.

Regardless of the changes that occurred in the nature of the *ayans*, by the early eighteenth century two very different groups existed within the Ottoman state that both carried the title *ayan*. The first of these and, by far, the most widespread were small local notables who through their wealth and local influence were able to stand apart from the rest of the local population. The second group, and the one which is of most interest to this study, is the greater *ayans* who exerted influence over entire provinces and received official recognition from the state in terms of titles and honors. Both of these groups could be found throughout the empire and served an important role in the functioning of Ottoman provincial administration.

Those individuals who would fall into the category of lesser *ayans* were found throughout the empire serving in numerous capacities, often acting as intermediaries between the local population and the central government. Just like the greater *ayans* who will be discussed later, the backgrounds of the lesser *ayans* were very diverse. They could either be native to the region, that is have long standing family ties, or be a transplant from elsewhere in the empire, such as a former member of the Janissary corps. The latter case was especially true in the Balkans and the Arab provinces where many *ayan* and well-established *ayan* families had roots in the janissaries. Thus it was not always the case that individual *ayans* were native speakers of the local language, however, due to the nature of the *ayanlık*, it was necessary for them to acquire both linguistic and cultural competency of the region in which they resided.

These lesser *ayans* were often distinguished from the general population by the singular *nisba*, word denoting one's ethnicity, family or geographic origin, occupation or personal trait, which they carried.¹ Some examples of these would be Macar Ali (Ali the Magyar), Molla Idris Agha (Idris Agha the Mullah), Manav Ibrahim (Ibrahim the Fruit-seller), and the intriguing name of Gavur Imam (the infidel imam), all of whom were lesser *ayans* in the service of Pasvanoğlu Osman Pasha, the *ayan* of Vidin.

Unlike the lesser *ayans*, those who carried the patronymic titles of *-oğlu* and *-zâde* or, even more significantly, had the plural forms of these two endings could be categorized as being part of the greater *ayans* which often times were familial dynasties whose influence over a given region extended for at least a couple generations. Examples of this group include: Karaosmanoğulları of Saruhan,

¹ In her unpublished study of the *ayans*, Ms. Katircioğlu suggested that the *nisba* could be a factor in determining one's rank within the *ayanlık*. Although she admits that more work needs to be done, I believe that it is a very interesting and possible conclusion, and only future studies will be able to shed more light on this hypothesis. See Nurhan Fatma Katircioğlu, "The Ottoman Ayan, 1550-1812: A Struggle for Legitimacy," (M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1984).

Çapanoğlu of Çorum-Yozgat, and Canıklızâde of Trabzon. These were the *ayans* who have received the greatest amount of attention from Ottoman researchers.

Despite the distinction between lesser and greater *ayans*, in reality one could rise rapidly from among the former or even a group outside the *ayan* rank to become a greater *ayan*. The easiest means by which this could be accomplished was through marriage. It was a frequent occurrence to have intermarriages between the sons and daughters of varying *ayan* ranks. A study of the *ayans* of Aleppo in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries showed that forty percent of all *ayan* marriages were to other *ayan* families. The number would be significantly higher if marriages within one's own family, such as cousin marriages, were considered.² Such marriages were intended to elevate one's standing within the community and provide important political and economic alliances. Important trading center witnessed a number of marriages between high-ranking *ayan* families and individuals from newly emerging Muslim merchant families, consolidating wealth and power in the most strategic regions of the Ottoman state.

In addition to marriage, advancement in the ranks of the *ayanlık* was possible also through service and loyalty. Apart from the familial dynasties of Anatolia and parts of the Middle East, most of the greater *ayans*' successors were their chief lieutenants. Since many of the leading *ayans* were involved in continuous disputes with neighboring rivals, it was necessary to secure a strong successor to ensure an *ayan*'s legacy. By the late eighteenth century, it was rare to see an *ayan* in the Balkans leaving all of his holdings to his son(s). Some examples to illustrate this point include two of the most illustrious *ayans* of the period, Tirsiniçli İsmail Ağa whose wealth and title fell to Alemdar Mustafa Paşa, and Paşvanoğlu Osman Paşa who willed his entire estate to Molla İdris Ağa.

The division that existed between the lesser and greater *ayans*, although there was never an official distinction between the two, was due to the increased wealth and power of some *ayans* throughout the empire. The first, and arguably most important aspect for the emergence of more powerful *ayans*, was the change in the land tenure and revenue raising system of the state. Throughout the empire by the early part of the eighteenth century, participation in tax farming, that is either holding a *malikane* or even administering one for an absentee holder, as well as control of large tracts of land was the key to wealth and, hence, power. Although there were exceptions such as the Kazdağlı in Egypt whose initial source of wealth was the coffee trade,³ most great *ayans* ultimately relied on tax farming and control of agricultural lands for revenue raising. It was much more common to find *ayans* in the Arab provinces with additional sources of revenue

² Margaret L. Meriwether, *The Kin Who Count: Family and Society in Ottoman Aleppo, 1770-1840* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 141.

³ Jane Hathaway, "The Military Household in Ottoman Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27 (1995): 39-52.

such as international trade, than those in the Balkans and Anatolia, but this does not take away from the commonality that existed in the revenue raising of most *ayans* in the empire.

The second characteristic that can be found in all greater *ayans* is that they all possessed militias. These militias which varied in size from as few as a hundred to more than ten thousand were necessary to safeguard the interests of the *ayans*, in addition to maintain regional stability and, ultimately, serve the state in time of war. The greater the power and wealth of an *ayan*, the more he was at risk of being attacked by other *ayans* hoping to usurp his power or garnering the attention of the central government which wished to reassert its authority in the *ayan's* realm. When one looks at provincial politics in the second half of the eighteenth century, it is filled with accounts of *ayans* fighting to either defend or extend their personal power at all costs.

Even more importantly than defending their personal power, *ayans* were required to defend the local population who were ultimately the backbone of their support. Despite the very unfavorable depiction of the *ayans* in various Ottoman documents and chronicles, notably Ahmed Cevdet Pasha's history, *ayans* were responsible to the people who lived under their rule. This statement does not mean that all *ayans* always looked out for the best interest of the local community, but rather if they were to stay in power it was necessary for them more often than not to ensure just administration and security to the local population.

An *ayan* was expected and encouraged by the local inhabitants to stand up against the abuse of the *reaya* and denounce unpopular appointments, such as local officials or the *kadı*. Within the courts, *ayans* had the ability to influence verdicts through their testimony or mediation. Additionally, *ayans* gained support through opposition to increased authority from Istanbul or new taxes. This was very clearly seen in the rather widespread support of the *reaya* for *ayan* opposition, especially in the Balkan territories, to Sultan Selim III's reforms, namely the *Nizam-i Cedid*, which placed new tax burdens on the population. Numerous examples exist throughout the empire during the second half of the eighteenth century of *ayans* losing power due to their loss of popular support.

Another means by which *ayans* were able to win popular support was through their funding of public works projects. It was very rare for an *ayan* anywhere in the empire not to establish *vakıfs* to fund the building of mosques, schools, libraries, roads, bridges, fountains, inns, etc. This was especially true for the most powerful *ayans* who frequently challenged the authority of the central government. Without exception, the leading *ayans* of the late eighteenth century used *vakıfs* not just as a source of building the region's infrastructure, but as a means of solidifying public support for their rule.

As seen above, *ayans*, regardless of their geographic location, tend to share the major characteristics which are associated with local notables in the Ottoman Empire. However, a small group within the *ayanlık* who were among the most

powerful of the greater *ayans* shared additional features which call for the creation of another category. The name I use for this group is the Ottoman Warlord. This term has been used previously by several scholars as a way to describe individuals like Pasvanoğlu, Cezzar Ahmed Pasha, and Tepedelenli Ali Pasha to name a few, but it has never been used as a categorizing term.⁴ For the remainder of this paper I will examine the common features of individuals within this elite group and discuss the need for this new category.

The choice of the term warlord not only builds upon its usage in Ottoman studies by Bruce McGowan amongst others, but echoes its extensive history within Chinese studies (a later time period: 1912-28, but a very useful parallel). By definition, a warlord is an individual who seizes control of a section of a state or empire and operates freely of the legitimate authority. To further my defense of this term, I refer to the characteristics most often associated with the Chinese warlord: "the possession of autonomous military force, control of a base region, the use of force as the final arbiter, the reliance on personal rather than impersonal patterns of rule, and a ruthless and extractive attitude towards society and the economy."⁵ This statement tends to sum up the individuals to be examined below. (The inclusion of the word ruthless in regards to the warlords' attitude towards society does create a difference between Ottoman and Chinese warlords.) Since this behavior was not typical of the vast majority of *ayans*, it is fitting that some type of categorical distinction be made between warlord-like *ayans* and other greater *ayans* such as the Karaosmanoğlu family of Saruhan.

Among the individuals to be examined Cezzar Ahmad Pasha of Acre was the first chronologically, however, as I have contended elsewhere, Pasvanoğlu Osman Pasha was the first Ottoman warlord due to his numerous exploits and defiance of the state beginning in the early 1790s, thus I will begin with him.⁶ Pasvanoğlu, who ultimately was the *muhafiz* of Vidin and held the rank of vizier, had most of the traits common among *ayans*; financially he benefited from his landholdings and access to tax farms, he controlled a sizeable militia, established numerous endowments in the city of Vidin, and was generally supported by the local population. If this was the complete story, Pasvanoğlu would be nothing more than a wealthy *ayan*. However, Pasvanoğlu's story, as well as that of all Ottoman warlords, has many more chapters that include a great deal of violence, deception and intrigue.

⁴ Bruce McGowan, "Age of the Ayans, 1699-1812," in *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1914*, eds. Halil Inalcik and Donald Quataert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 666.

⁵ Diana Lary, "Warlord Studies," *Modern China* 6:4 (1980): 441.

⁶ For an extensive study of Pasvanoğlu Osman Pasha, see Robert Zens, "The *Ayanlık* and Pasvanoğlu Osman Paşa of Vidin in the Age of Ottoman Social Change, 1791-1815," (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2004); *idem*, "Pasvanoğlu Osman Paşa and the Paşalık of Belgrade, 1791-1807" *International Journal of Turkish Studies* 8:1-2 (2001): 89-104.

Most notably for Pasvanoğlu was his constant involvement in banditry throughout the eastern Balkans. He supported either directly or indirectly raids reaching from the Danubian Principalities to Edirne and from Belgrade to Varna. His extensive reach was due to the development of a complicated network of lesser *ayans* and janissaries spread throughout the region. His actions resulted in continuous threats from Istanbul, and ultimately led Sultan Selim III to launch a massive assault on Vidin in 1797. The failure of this effort by the central government to eliminate Pasvanoğlu and his subsequent elevation to the rank of vizier was a major development in Ottoman provincial politics. His successful defense of Vidin, together with Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion of Egypt and the Wahhabi threat in the Arabian peninsula, made clear to other *ayans* that the sultan was not in a position to limit their power.

Until his death in early 1807, Pasvanoğlu operated almost independently of Istanbul. His "independence" cannot be mistaken for a true desire to remove himself from the Ottoman state. Despite his disregard of the Porte's financial and political demands, Pasvanoğlu remained an Ottoman subject, although not an ideal one. He rejected French and Russian offers to support foreign efforts against the Porte, however, he did maintain an active correspondence with these states in order to strengthen his position with regards to Istanbul.

For all the negative things that can be said about an individual like Pasvanoğlu, he remained a good representative for those living under his authority. All sources suggest that he provided his "subjects" with justice, the measure of any good ruler.⁷ Additionally he used his wealth to improve the infrastructure of Vidin and aid both the region's Muslim and Christian communities. Despite some complaints issued by residents of Vidin during the damaging offensives launched against him, he was seen as a good protector of the region's interests against what was viewed as the greedy exactions of the central government. Ultimately, this was the key to success for all Ottoman warlords.

Neighboring Pasvanoğlu to the west was Tepedelenli Ali Pasha of Janina whose colorful exploits were only matched by the sensational accounts of his life published throughout Western Europe.⁸ Unlike Pasvanoğlu, Ali Pasha was a rather loyal subject of the sultan for most of his life. It was only in 1820 when Sultan Mahmud II stripped Ali and his sons of their titles and declared him an enemy of the state that he began to rebel openly. However, his early behavior and power puts him among the first of the Ottoman warlords. Ali Pasha rarely looked out for any interest but his own. Whether it was the seizure of Adriatic port cities after the removal of French forces or his half-hearted support of the central

⁷ Grégoire Yakichitch, "Documents et Mémoires: Notes sur Passvan-oglou, 1758-1807," *La Revue slave* 5:1 (1906): 263-266.

⁸ For the most scholarly study on Ali Pasha, see K.E. Fleming, *The Muslim Bonaparte: Diplomacy and Orientalism in Ali Pasha's Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

government's initiatives against brigandage in the Balkans, Ali Pasha operated on his own terms, only working closely with the sultan when it served his best interests. When one looks at the sheer strength of Ali's position, ruling over 1.5 million people and being able to field an army of 40,000 men by 1812, it appeared as if he was ruling a state within a state.

Like Pasvanoğlu, Ali Pasha as well as Cezzar Ahmed Pasha of Acre both maintained continuous correspondence with foreign powers. Although it was not uncommon for powerful *ayans* to have contact with foreign merchants, when an individual's interactions went beyond mere trade relations it was very noteworthy. All Ottoman warlords, despite their unwillingness to separate themselves formally from the sultan, saw it as impractical to leave foreign diplomacy solely in the hands of the central government. Great financial, military and political rewards were obtained by circumventing Istanbul in discussions with St. Petersburg, Paris, London, and Vienna.

One of the greatest *ayans* in the Arab provinces in the late eighteenth century was Cezzar Ahmed Pasha.⁹ He governed the province of Sidon and, at times, Damascus from his stronghold in Acre. Ahmed Pasha was much closer in make-up to Ali Pasha than he was to Pasvanoğlu in that like Ali he received titles and positions from the sultan independent of any vow not to continue a rebellion. However, acting in the mold of a warlord, he was very selective in his willingness to respond to the demands of the central government. During Napoleon's invasion of Egypt he was quick to defend his own interests and territories, greatly assisting the effort against the French, but he refused to send troops to fight the enemy in Egypt. Likewise he engaged in numerous struggles to extend his authority in the Druze region to the north and incorporate Nablus to the south.

Süleyman the Great who ruled Baghdad from 1780 to 1802, played within the rules unlike the other three individuals discussed. Despite this good behavior and willingness to provide consistently the Porte with necessary tax revenues and acceptance of the *Nizam-i Cedid*, he can be included within the Ottoman warlord rubric for several reasons. Firstly, one must consider his long period of rule. Suleyman Pasha came to power after a time of turmoil within Baghdad. He established around himself a very powerful coalition of military support to prevent any opposition to his authority. Secondly were his close relations with the British which were due to their financial and political backing of him in both Baghdad and Istanbul. I included Suleyman in this study to stress the fact that an individual could and should be categorized as an Ottoman warlord who, despite support for the central government, had the ability and will to do as they pleased.

⁹ For a detailed account on the exploits of Cezzar Ahmed Pasha, see Thomas Philipp, *Acre: The Rise and Fall of a Palestinian City, 1730-1831* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 48-78.

The term Ottoman warlord includes numerous Ottoman provincial notables from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, none of whom would survive the centralization efforts of Sultan Mahmud II (just as none survived Mao Zedong in China). Individuals connected with this term vary from the rebellious Pasvanoğlu to the loyal Süleyman the Great of Baghdad, however, as briefly depicted above, they all have qualities which are rarely found in other *ayans*. It is only by examining the *ayanlık* as a whole, not limiting it geographically, that certain commonalities can be seen at every level throughout the empire. Although regional distinctions do exist they cannot be viewed as barriers to establishing Ottoman models, be they institutional, social, or political. This study is very cursory, but such humble beginnings are needed before larger efforts can be undertaken.