

**Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: the Construction of the Ottoman State*
(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995)**

At its height, the Ottoman Empire spanned great swathes of the Near and Middle East and Eastern Europe; it lasted from the late medieval period to the early twentieth century, making it one of the most lasting empires in world history; its cultural impact continues to this day. Yet, since academic scholarship first began to study the Ottomans, it could not reach a lasting consensus upon the question of the origins of this state. How could a small and insignificant frontier group emerge out of Anatolia to become such a power? In *Between Two Worlds: the Construction of the Ottoman State*, Cemal Kafadar analyzes the historiography of Ottoman origins to attempt to reach a new understanding of the Anatolian frontier milieu out of which the Ottomans emerged and to argue a new paradigm for the construction of Ottoman power.¹

Osman, the eponymous founder of the Ottoman dynasty, was one of the many Turco-Muslim warrior chiefs – *begs* – who struggled for power and wealth in the fractured and ever-changing frontier zone of Anatolia. In the wake of the weakening of Byzantine and Seljuk power and the Mongol invasions, petty lordships – *begliks* – could claim semi-autonomy for themselves. The Ottoman *beglik* began as one amongst many, yet over the course of only a few generations, had created a centralized political and social structure that enabled them to dominate first their home region of Bithynia, then expand across the Bosphorus to Thrace and finally, in 1453, to take the Byzantine capital of Constantinople.

Historians have continued to dispute the means by which Osman and his successors achieved their success and why they, rather than any other *beglik*, rose to dominance. Bias, nationalism and essentialism have pervaded their analyses. The first modern historian of the early Ottoman state, H.A. Gibbons, for instance, was unwilling or perhaps unable to admit that Asian

“barbarians” could have constructed such a complex and significant state as the Ottoman Empire. He concluded that Greek converts had been the “creative force” behind the Ottomans and that their state was merely a continuation of the Byzantine Empire.² Although there were some critics of his approach, it was not until the work of Mehmet Köprülü and Paul Wittek in the 1930s that historians began seriously to consider alternatives to Gibbons’ thesis. Although Köprülü and Wittek both favored the same methodology, examining the “social morphology, culture and institutions” of the frontier, they reached significantly different conclusions.³ Köprülü argued that the rise of the Ottomans was the success of Turkish tribalism. Heavily influenced by the Annalists, he perceived an Ottoman state that was the creation of a Turkish mentality. This was a very agreeable vision to modern Turkish nationals, who could use it as a source of communal identity and pride. However, other historians tended to view Köprülü’s ideas as irrevocably tainted by nationalism, and his thesis only really gained traction within Turkey. Wittek rejected the “tribal” theory of Köprülü, arguing that, rather than tribes, historians should view frontier society as the milieu of *gazis*, warriors driven by religious zeal to expand the realms of Islam. Osmān Beg and followers, he argued, applied this *gaza* ethos to expand their fortuitously placed *beglik* into an Empire. Soon gaining favor within Western scholarship, Wittek’s theory became the “textbook orthodoxy” of Ottoman origins until the 1980s.⁴

Led by Rudi Paul Lindner, critics of the *gaza* theory claimed that the lack of religious orthodoxy shown by the *gazis* precluded a religious motive for the Ottoman expansion. Rather, they maintained that chroniclers added religious motives later as a means of legitimizing the Ottomans once they had achieved power. To them, the

¹ Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: the Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995)

² *Ibid.*, 33.

³ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

Ottomans had succeeded as an inclusive tribe driven by Turkish pragmatism. However, as Kafadar notes, these critiques are problematic too. They assume a “true” version of Islam from which the inhabitants of the frontier diverged. This, he perceives as a fundamental misreading of the frontier ethos and characteristic of crude Orientalism and essentialism rather than subtle analysis. Partially rehabilitating Paul Wittek’s gaza theory, Kafadar argues for an end to the historiographical dichotomy in favor of a more nuanced, complex interpretation of early Ottoman history.

To achieve this new history, Kafadar re-examines and analyzes the sources available for the period. Although specific Ottoman sources are rare, he maintains that other frontier narratives remain valid for understanding the mentality of the gazis across Anatolia and, as the Ottomans were part of the frontier milieu, to understanding the Ottomans. Originally oral histories, these warrior epics and hagiographies portray the gazis as both pragmatic and sincere in their faith. What the gaza critics consider contradictory to the holy warrior spirit, the heterodoxy and inclusivity of the gazis, Kafadar maintains is actually an intrinsic part of the gaza ethos. These gazis, “attuned to the realities” of the fluid frontiers, attempted to convert through empathy and cooperation with Christians, through a meeting of “hearts and minds.”⁵ Far from the centers of orthodox Islamic thought, the gazis were unconcerned about theory, yet this did not translate to a lack of Muslim feeling. They often accommodated and cooperated with their non-Muslim neighbors and fought amongst themselves, yet that did not preclude a religious motivation to their actions. Rather, Kafadar notes, they were adept at balancing competing norms – faith and materialism, pragmatism and idealism – through an understanding of long and short terms goals and by prioritizing that which was “right” in the long term.

The chronicles of the House of Osmān, as analyzed by Kafadar, further demonstrate the importance of the gaza ethos to the Ottomans. These chronicles first

emerged in the years following the Timurid defeat of the Ottomans and the subsequent turmoil in the Ottoman polity. Lindner characterizes them as an evolution to a “state ideology,” that the older narratives formed a core truth from which later histories degenerated in an attempt to legitimize Ottoman rule.⁶ Kafadar, however, rejects this “onion” approach, arguing that historians should view the chronicles as the product of different historical traditions that should be analyzed on their own terms not on the basis of their appearance within a degenerative linear progression. To illustrate this, he examines the narratives of Osmān and his uncle Dündar in the context of other “hard” evidence to demonstrate that the late or early appearance of a source is a poor criterion for reliability.⁷ In addition, Kafadar rejects Lindner’s assertion of the gaza ethos as a “later construct,” an “ideology of schoolmen.”⁸ To the contrary, he notes the antipathy shown in many gaza chronicles towards the *ulema* orthodoxy. While the chronicles produced by the *ulema* portray the centralized, bureaucratic state as a natural end, the sources of gaza ethos depict it as a moral decline, a regrettable shift from the egalitarian frontier ideal to a hierarchical and alienating new paradigm. These competing narrative traditions thus speak more to a “garlic” model of historiography in which different traditions each contribute to the whole.

With this new appreciation for a range of chronicles and sources, Kafadar proceeds to reinterpret the emergence of the Ottoman state amid the dynamic frontier milieu. It was, he avers, not a chance or immediate result but rather a hundred and fifty year long process during which the Ottomans showed considerable agency to capitalize upon their position and better manipulate the “constantly shifting matrix of alliances and tensions” to achieve hegemony.⁹ To do this, Osmān and his heirs utilized the heterodox, inclusive ethos of gaza, cutting across ethnic and religious lines, to slowly build a stable

⁵ Ibid., 69, 72.

⁶ Ibid., 99.

⁷ Ibid., 108.

⁸ Ibid., 109.

⁹ Ibid., 121.

polity. Admittedly, the Ottomans did have some strategic advantages. Their location in Bithynia and insignificance during the Mongol invasions made them too inconsequential for the Ilkhanids to bother suppressing, which gave them time to organize out of the limelight. Yet, Kafadar maintains, it was an Ottoman vision, a deliberate policy that included novelties such as unigeniture, which led to a strong central government that could survive both internal and external threats. Over time, this vision changed and developed to reject the egalitarianism of the frontier in favor of a hierarchical empire, and with it, the position of the gazis changed from equals to vassals to marginalized holders of hierarchical positions, yet the gaza ethos remained, albeit in a transformed state.

Thus, Kafadar reasserts the validity of the gaza ethos within the historiography of the emergence of the

Ottoman state while accepting the role of inclusive tribalism to achieve a more complex, nuanced narrative of Ottoman state formation. He rehabilitates sources, including the heroic epics and hagiographies of the frontier as well as the whole range of the chronicles of the House of Osmān as all potentially valid to this new narrative, arguing convincingly for a considered, critical approach to all sources in the context of their tradition rather than to preferring particular sources based on age within a single otherwise undifferentiated mass. This is subtle and refined history and, while the book is ill-suited to general readers, *Between Two Worlds: the Construction of the Ottoman State* is an important addition to early Ottoman historiography and vital reading not only for historians of the Ottomans, but also for scholars interested in the methodology of source criticism or the role of Islam in the dynamics of social and political life.