

Helen Pfeifer. *Empire of Salons: Conquest and Community in Early Modern Ottoman Lands*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022. xi + 297 pages. ISBN: 9780691195230.

*Gürzat Kami**

Combining two interests in Ottomanist scholarship in early modern bureaucratization and sociability, this book explores the various roles the Ottoman gentlemanly salons played in the imperial decision-making processes, the centralization of the empire, the construction of the elite identity, and the production and circulation of knowledge and culture across the empire.

The author focuses her attention on the salons of Istanbul and Damascus to illuminate the diverse stages through which the Arab provinces were integrated into the Ottoman Empire throughout the 16th century as reflected in the informal interaction of the Rumi and Arab elites. Salon is an umbrella term that denotes any meetings where upper-class Muslim gentlemen engaged in enlightened conversation within the framework of the host-guest relationship, such as “celebratory banquets (Ar. *ḍiyāfa*, Tur. *ziyafet*), lavish drinking parties (Tur. *bezm*, *meclis-i iṣret*), and elegant soirees (Ar. *maḥfil*, Tur. *mehfil*)” (9–11). The reason for employing this French term to refer to Ottoman forms of sociability is to underline the similarities among the elite gatherings across early modern Eurasia (12–13).

The book consists of six main chapters, each covering a theme related to the Ottoman salons and referencing the salon experiences of the Damascene scholar Badr al-Dīn al-Ghazzī (d. 984/1577) and the people in his network, including his father, students, friends, and enemies both in Damascus and Istanbul. The first chapter compares and contrasts salon culture in the Ottoman and Mamluk territories prior to the Ottoman conquest of central Arab lands in 1516–17. It

* Ph.D. Candidate, Marmara University, Department of History.
Correspondence: gurzatkami1@gmail.com.

argues that the learned Muslim elites in the Rumi, Arab, and Ajam domains had similar values and pleasures as an outcome of the shared Islamic education and political culture and that this in turn facilitated the transfer of the salon culture across these domains through itinerant scholars. However, the exchanges between the Mamluk and Ottoman elites were not symmetrical. Mamluk elites were less attentive to their Ottoman counterparts due to their confidence in their cultural and intellectual superiority, whereas the Ottomans were receptive to both Arab and Persian cultures, with relatively greater interest in the latter. The subsequent chapters further dwell on this argument, trying to show how Arab influence on Ottoman salon culture escalated in the early decades of the conquest (Chapters II–V), then how it diminished toward the last decades of the century (Chapter VI).

Chapter II explores how informal elite gatherings in Damascus and Istanbul functioned in incorporating the newly conquered Arab lands into the empire in the two decades following their conquest. The backbone of the narrative involves Father Ghazzi's collaboration with the Ottoman officials in Damascus in 1520s, as well as Ghazzi's own encounter with them in the new imperial center in 1530–31. The main parameters that shaped the relationship between the conquered and the conqueror were the former's need for patronage and positions under the new rule and the latter's need for legitimacy and knowledge in the new provinces. This chapter argues that salons softened the asymmetrical relations between the conquerors and the conquered by allowing social hierarchies to be invented based on variables other than political office, such as scholarly competence, lineage, and eloquence. Arab notables enjoyed soft power thanks to the latter variables, whereas the Rumi elite had the political authority, a situation that positioned two groups in a sort of equilibrium that allowed for effective exchange between them.

The subsequent three chapters are organized thematically and present a vivid description of what went on in the salons. The author adeptly utilizes a wide range of written and visual sources including historical narratives, miniatures, architectural drawings, and photographs of intact buildings in order to discuss the various subjects related to these gentlemanly gatherings, such as the architectural design of the reception rooms, the unwritten rules of conduct with the guests, the production of the elite identity, and the scholarly and cultural exchange between elites. Chapter III addresses the external factors that marked social hierarchies in elite meetings, such as lineage, post, age, and wealth. Salon-goers strived to enjoy a good place in salons through different combinations of these variables. Chapter IV is devoted to another factor: the art of conversation, and

this could directly determine one's authority in a salon. Muslim gentlemen were expected to be well-equipped with literary and scholarly knowledge that earned them delicacy in pleasures and eloquence in speech. Chapter V, which the author had largely published in two previous articles, diverts readers' attention from the elites' competition for social hierarchies to the salons' role in the production of knowledge and its transmission across the empire, paying special reference to Ghazzi's teacher-student relationship with the Ottoman judges of Damascus mid-century. Chapter V argues that elements of Arab culture (e.g., proficiency in Arabic language, the biography writing tradition, knowledge regarding the hadith discipline) was successfully transferred to Istanbul following the conquest and contributed to the intellectual and cultural development of the Rumis.

In order to show the transformation of salon culture in Istanbul towards the last quarter of the 16th century, the last chapter mainly focuses on the scholarly career of Muhibb al-Dīn al-Hamawī (d. 1016/1608), a former student of Ghazzi. Hamawī converted to Hanafism in his youth and managed to enter the Ottoman learned establishment as a town judge in Arab provinces. After his dismissal in early 1570s, he traveled to Istanbul to request a new appointment. This chapter compares Ghazzi's achievement in receiving an appointment to a Damascene madrasa during his abovementioned travel to Istanbul in the early 1530s with Hamawī's failure to receive an appointment to a judgeship in Arab provinces in the 1570s, and concludes that power relations between Arabs and Rumis changed in the course of half a century, with Arabs' soft power having declined. According to author, "unlike Ghazzi, Ḥamawī was unable to penetrate the circles of the imperial elite" because "Rumis had (...) brought to fruition a highly sophisticated and self-confident sociable world of their own, much of it grounded not in Arabic but in Ottoman Turkish,... [Thus] the knowledge that made Arab scholars highly valued in the first decades of the century no longer carried the same weight" (200–1).

Because the book examines how the Arab provinces were integrated into the Ottoman Empire through the interaction of elites in informal gatherings, many actors are mentioned. In the appendix, the author provides brief biographical entries for the 22 most-mentioned actors in the book as well as a two-page glossary of Arabic and Ottoman Turkish vocabulary related to salons. This is a great help for those readers who are unfamiliar with the period and sources and thus more likely to get lost among the dozens of names mentioned in the numerous historical anecdotes. Lastly, the 40-page bibliography of sources, which corresponds to one-sixth of the main body of the text in length, gives an idea about the author's

ambition to survey the related literature, while the detailed nine-page index shows the publisher's care.

This book is a helpful guide to the different forms, dimensions, and consequences of Ottoman elite sociability. The author seems to have spent much time thinking about the interactions of elites in salons and skillfully deconstructs many historical anecdotes historians usually pass by. The translations of the related passages and verses from Ottoman Turkish and Arabic to English reflect the author's literary taste and help readers engage in a dialogue with the sources.

The book has a few points that need further reflection and elaboration. It carefully describes the transformations in Istanbul's salon culture in the aftermath of 1516 and the second half of the 16th century by tracing the influence of itinerant scholars from the Arab and Persian domains. However, it draws a static picture of the salon culture in Damascus, which probably underwent several changes throughout the 16th century. For example and similar to Istanbul, Damascus hosted many Iranian scholars in the 16th century, including Muhammad al-Ījī, a scholar who was mentioned as being Ghazzī's rival for a teaching post in Damascus (78) who, according to the contemporary sources the author uses, immigrated from his hometown of Shiraz to Damascus as a mature scholar and eventually appeared as the hub in the network of a group of immigrant Iranian Sufi scholars in his dervish lodge located in the suburbs of Damascus. The author does not discuss the possible influence of such figures regarding the formation or transformation of the contemporary salon culture in Damascus, nor does she ever mention any of the many exchanges between them and Rumis who visited the city.

Second, the rigid and broad categorization of elites as "Rumis versus Arabs" (two non-ethnic generic terms referring respectively to the Turkish speaking people living in the Turkish-Muslim habitus of the Anatolia-Balkans complex and the Arabic speaking people living in the region extending from North Africa to the Arabian Peninsula [16–17]) throughout the book sometimes blurs a more nuanced vision of subcategories among the elite. As in the case of the abovementioned Iranian immigrant scholars, not all Damascenes were native speakers of Arabic nor fully assimilated to the local population. Likewise, Rumis, whom Ghazzī had met during his travel to Istanbul, consisted of people differing in education, profession, social status, and political authority, such as high-ranking Ottoman scholar-bureaucrats (91), the Istanbul-based non-bureaucratic but well-connected Ottoman elite (70), and non-bureaucratic provincial figures who were less known in the capital city (66, 67). Gathering them all under the overarching category of

Rumis undermines the veracity of some general inferences, where the term “Rumi” actually only refers to a portion of the Rumi elite (e.g., 94, 131, 167, and 228).

Lastly, the final chapter’s main claim that the worsening economic situation of the empire in the 1570s and precipitous elevation in the status of Ottoman Turkish in the same decades resulted in the redundancy of Arab scholars in the empire’s affairs (201, 221, 231) needs more convincing evidence than a comparison of the experiences of Ghazzī and Hamawī in Istanbul. The chapter narrates a success story for the former and a failure story for the latter in order to sharpen the contrast between the situations of Arab scholars in Istanbul salons in the 1530s and 1570s. However, this narrative does not fully convince the reader for a handful of reasons. Firstly and related to the criticisms above, Ghazzī and Hamawī seem to represent different subgroups among the Arab scholars and have little in common regarding their professional identities. Ghazzī was a semi-independent Shafī’i scholar aspiring for an appointment to posts in Damascene institutions, whose endowment deeds stipulated in particular the appointment of Shāfi’i scholars, whereas Hamawī was a bureaucratic Hanafi scholar seeking a town judgeship in Arab provinces in the service of the empire. In that regard, Hamawī’s professional experience and expectations are much more comparable to that of the contemporary Ottoman town judges serving in other parts of the empire who also went through similar disappointments in Istanbul, as numerous examples in Ottoman biographical dictionaries suggest. Secondly and unlike the author’s claim, Ghazzī’s access to the high-ranking Ottoman scholars does not appear to have been “swift and frictionless” (225), as may be noticed in his multi-staged and time-consuming access to the chief judge of Anatolia (89–91). On the contrary, the incumbent chief judge and many other Ottoman dignitary scholars were in Hamawī’s ego-network and directly accessible to him as patrons, friends, rivals, and opponents. Thus, Hamawī’s failure in receiving the desired appointment seems to be more related to his excessive involvement in groupings and rivalry among the high-ranking Ottoman scholars as one of their protégés, a point the author in fact touched upon slightly as well (215), than to his incompetence at showing up in Turkish speaking gatherings in the imperial capital. Lastly, the author sometimes takes Hamawī’s complaints about the Rumi scholars at face value. The reader cannot help but wonder what would have happened if Hamawī had managed to receive a promotion in Istanbul earlier, before losing hope and starting to target the chief judge whom he had previously praised, praise which the author takes as evidence of the shared gentility between Arabs and Rumis prior to the 1570s (205).

Despite general categories overshadowing the nuances among elites and some forced arguments in Chapter VI, the book is highly recommendable for historians and general readers to learn much about the informal and individual dimensions of Ottoman imperial governance in the 16th century. The rich material and topics the author generously presents will no doubt pave the way for new studies.