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Eric R. Dursteler. *Venetians in Constantinople: Nation, Identity, and Coexistence in the Early Modern Mediterranean.* The Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science Series. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. Maps, illustrations. 312 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-8324-8.

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Early Modern Venetian-Ottoman Relations and the Mediterranean World

Eric R. Dursteler's work, which examines Venetian-Ottoman coexistence in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, is an interesting and significant contribution to the growing scholarship on cross-cultural interaction in the early modern Mediterranean. By emphasizing the coexistence in Venetian-Ottoman relations, Dursteler challenges the traditional historiography that has until recently approached the early modern Mediterranean almost solely as a battleground of mutually exclusive categories, such as "East/West," "Muslim/Christian," "Ottoman/European," or "Venetian/Turk." Building on recent studies that question the historical validity of these dichotomous categories as well as the structuralist and essentialist definitions of identity, Dursteler argues that early modern identity was socially constructed and reconstructed according to particular preferences and needs of individuals. Dursteler's main argument is that the fluid and variable nature of identity was the key factor that facilitated peaceful coexistence between Venetians and Ottomans in the early modern Mediterranean. To prove this point, Dursteler focuses on the Venetian merchant and diplomatic community in Ottoman Constantinople from 1573 to 1645, when the Ottoman and Venetian empires experienced the longest period of uninterrupted peace.

Dursteler develops his argument in six chapters. The first three present a thorough description of the diplomatic and commercial Venetian "nation" in Constantinople, beginning with its official core, the embassy or the bailate, and then moving to the larger mercantile community in the city. In this part, Dursteler aims to demonstrate that categories like "Venetian," "Ottoman," or "Greek" were much more flexible and ambiguous than assumed. For example, we learn that although the Venetian authorities gave the mandate to engage in commercial activities in the Ottoman capital only to their noble and citizen classes, by the late sixteenth century the majority of the Venetian community in Constantinople was made up of naturalized Venetians of various social and geographical backgrounds and disenchanted subjects of the Venetian Empire from the Greek islands. Most interestingly, Dursteler shows that the Venetian community at its margins even incorporated individuals who were totally unconnected to the Venetian state, including Ottoman subjects.

The fourth and fifth chapters deal specifically with the question of early modern identity. By examining different cases concerning Jews who operated at the periphery of the Venetian nation, and other groups more directly associated with the Venetian state and institutions, such as the patrician Venetians or citizens, Dursteler shows that even the most important marker of early modern identity, religion, was not fixed. People could and did change their religious loyalties, sometimes even more than once in a lifetime. In these chapters, Dursteler also delineates the meaning and scope of membership in a political community during the early modern era. He examines the political loyalties of a number of Christian converts to Islam who became prominent members of the Ottoman elite and observes that they still felt affection for their cultural and geographical origins. This leads Dursteler to conclude that national identity was a key element of early modern identity and that it could trump religious and political loyalties.

The last chapter focuses on Ottoman-Venetian coexistence and cultural exchange in Constantinople. Here Dursteler shows that the lived reality in the city was much different from what the older conflict-oriented historiography has imagined: Christians, Muslims, Venetians, Ottomans, and others lived and worked together in the city, interacting through the same commercial and political networks, and the same genuine human feelings,

such as love and friendship.

Dursteler's critique of the traditional historiography and his good intentions to understand the early modern Mediterranean in its complexity–as a world shared by Muslims, Christians, and Jews–are well taken. His empirically solid findings that draw on a wide range of sources, including Venetian archival material, diplomatic reports, and travel accounts, as well as other French, English, and Ottoman sources (in translation), not only are fascinating but also convincingly show that on the local level the Ottoman-Venetian interaction was so complex and intimate that it cannot be understood through the prism of "conflict of civilizations." Nevertheless, Dursteler's analytical framework and his argument that early modern identity was fluid and malleable, and as such promoted Ottoman-Venetian peaceful coexistence, need reconsideration.

First of all, although Dursteler rightfully criticizes the traditional historiography for making broad generalizations that can only explain conflict, he commits the same mistake by shifting the focus to the other extreme, that of "coexistence," and by trying to explain a particular situation between Venice and the Ottoman Empire with general statements about the fluidity and flexibility of early modern identity. As a result, although his argument may appear effective to explain the Ottoman-Venetian coexistence in times of peace, it does not help us understand why and how at other times these two powers also engaged in warfare with each other and other parties, such as the Habsburgs. In other words, what happened to the malleable and fluid Ottoman, Venetian, Habsburg, Christian, Muslim, and other identities in cases of conflict? Dursteler's analytical framework certainly challenges the Orientalist rhetoric; however, by encompassing only Ottoman-Venetian relations without engaging to a greater extent the larger configuration of early modern matrices of power, especially the role of the Ottoman-Habsburg imperial rivalry in Ottoman and Venetian diplomatic and commercial relations, he does not to this reviewer's mind effectively historicize the motives for peace, coexistence, and facility with which some individuals changed their religious and other identities.

Secondly, for Dursteler the critical theoretical problem of the old scholarship appears to be the assumption that the early modern Mediterranean was divided into fixed homogenous and antagonistic categories. Yet he does not see an even larger and graver problem: the traditional scholarship has completely naturalized the categories of "Muslim," "Christian," "Venetian," and "Ottoman" by accepting them as fixed and timeless entities, defined outside the immediate historical and social context that gave them meaning. Because he is not very sensitive to this issue, Dursteler unconsciously reproduces some of the assumptions of the traditional historiography. This is particularly evident in his treatment of the Ottomans. Dursteler views them as a Turkish and Muslim power that is an outsider in the Mediterranean world–albeit a tolerant one–rather than trying to understand the formation of the Ottoman imperial identity and its meaning within the social, cultural, political, and intellectual currents of the early modern Mediterranean. This is surprising, since the book presents numerous examples of how Ottomans drew upon the human resources, expertise, commercial, and information networks of the Mediterranean while rising as a global imperial power, and offers a fascinating description of the Ottoman capital Constantinople as a microcosm of the early modern Mediterranean.

More important, Dursteler's engagement with the broader historical and historiographical issues informing the era remains limited. One such critical issue directly pertinent to his question that remains without reference is state and empire formation. The early modern Mediterranean witnessed the concomitant rise of two imperial powers–the Ottomans and the Habsburgs, each claiming world rule. Moreover, Ottomanists, such as Cornell H. Fleischer and Gülru Necipoğlu, have amply demonstrated the emergence in the second half of the sixteenth century of a distinct Ottoman imperial identity and tradition, which marked the Ottoman sultan as the world emperor, and defined Ottoman art and institutions, as well as the self-perception of the Ottoman elite, for centuries to come.[1] However, Dursteler remains oblivious to this scholarship, which argues for the importance of imperial rivalry for universal rule in the region, and he assumes that the political order of the early modern Mediterranean consisted of states that recognized each other's sovereignty in equal terms, similarly to nation states in our modern world. Therefore, he does not do justice to the fact that Ottomans, whose identity was ultimately a universal and imperial one, never considered the Venetian state on par with their Ottoman empire.[2] Consequently, he mistakes the patronizing attitude toward Venice by converts of Venetian backgrounds who reached key positions in the Ottoman ruling elite, such as Süleyman's grand vizier Ibrahim Pasha, as a sign of disloyalty to the Ottoman sultan and a proof of their lingering "national" identity. It is much more likely that these individuals, just as the sultan himself, viewed their acts of graciousness toward Venice as a sign of superiority and imperial largess vis-à-vis an inferior political

player.

In addition, Dursteler does not adequately address how the rise of the Ottomans as an inclusive and new economic, military, political, and moral imperial power in the eastern Mediterranean affected Venetian political self-perception. If the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 and the defeat at Agnadello in 1509 were two major events that shattered the Venetian self-image as a superpower in the Mediterranean, the real challenge for Venice in the rest of the sixteenth century was to survive as an independent state without yielding to either of the two imperial powers, and to legitimize her coexistence with both. It seems that under these circumstances eventually a new Venetian political image was constructed that found its best expression in the motto of "First we are Venetians, then Christians," justifying the existence of the Venetian state as a separate entity independent from broader Christendom. Although Dursteler makes reference to this principle, he does not trace its historical emergence or development within the parameters of the sixteenth century.

Similarly, in chapters 2 and 3, while discussing the discrepancy between the narrow legal definition and the actuality of who was a Venetian in Constantinople, Dursteler only emphasizes the flexibility and ambiguity in the definition of the Venetian community and the ease with which individuals could seek Venetian association. However, he does not take into account that this flexibility and ambiguity in part were caused by the difficulties the patrician Venetian elite, cautious about preserving the political domination of the aristocracy, experienced in applying the old laws to define who was eligible for Venetian protection under the new circumstances set now by the Ottomans. In brief, it seems that Venetian-Ottoman coexistence was not promoted by the fluidity or insignificance of identities, but rather that the coexistence between the two powers and the broader international setting led to the rise of particular Venetian and Ottoman political cultures, which in return legitimized and sustained coexistence. Thus in the early modern era, the formation of the Venetian state and ideology was intimately intertwined with the rise of the Ottoman state and political culture; and vice versa.

As a last point, this book could have benefited from better editing. The transliteration of Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, and Persian names and expressions suffers from inconsistency. Although a subsection called "Names and Dates" is included in the introduction, surprisingly it only explains the use of different dating systems, but says nothing about names. Overall, it is hard to discern which transliteration system the book employs for which language and whether there is a system at all, as macrons, dots, and circumflex accents are scattered inconsistently throughout the work.

Nevertheless, despite such criticisms, this book is a very important study, which gives invaluable insights into the cosmopolitan culture and the human condition in early modern Ottoman Constantinople, a growing metropolis in the Mediterranean during a time of enormous change. And most important, Dursteler's findings invite one to think that perhaps the Ottoman Empire in the early modern era owed its existence and magnificence more to this cosmopolitan Mediterranean world than to the sheer conquering power of its Turkish-speaking Muslim ruling house.

Notes

[1]. Cornell H. Fleischer, "The Lawgiver as Messiah: The Making of the Imperial Image in the Reign of Süleyman," in *Soliman le Magnifique et son temps*, ed. G. Veinstein (Paris: La Documentation Français, 1992), 159-177; Gülru Necipoğlu, "A Kanun for the State, a Canon for the Arts: Conceptualizing the Classical Synthesis of Ottoman Art and Architecture," in ibid., 195-216; and Gülru Necipoğlu, *The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 13-124.

[2]. On the inequality between the Ottomans and Venetians, see, for example, Alessio Bombaci, "Ancora sul trattato turco-veneto del 2 ottobre 1540," *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 20 (1940): 373-383; Paul Wittek, "A Letter of Murad III to the Doge of Venice of 1580," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 14 (1952): 381-383; and Halil İnalcık, "An Outline of Ottoman-Venetian Relations," in *Venezia: Centro di mediazione tra oriente e occidente (secoli XV-XVI): Aspetti e problemi*, ed. Hans-Georg Beck, Manoussos Manoussacas, and Agostino Pertusi (Florence: Leo S. Olschk, 1977), 1: 89-90.

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