

Abdurrahman Atçıl. *Scholars and Sultans in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*. Cambridge, UK & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017. xiv + 259 pages. ISBN: 9781107177161.

**Yasemin Beyazıt\***

**Translated by Faruk Akyıldız\*\***

Ottoman scholars remain an important research area for Ottoman studies. In this context we can state the literature to have increasingly diversified and progressed from several branches. Some of these fields of study are the scholars' world of thought, schools they were affiliated with, how they produced and conveyed knowledge, their institutions, practice of forming social groups, forms of employment, and positions and roles in state and social life. Abdurrahman Atçıl's book, *Scholars and Sultans in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*, which is the subject of the current review, stands out as it engages with several fields of research.

Atçıl completed his PhD with his dissertation entitled "The Formation of the Ottoman Learned Class and Legal Scholarship (1300-1600)" in 2010 under the supervision of Cornell Fleischer at the University of Chicago. The book we are addressing was prepared based on this dissertation. We should also add that the work has recently been translated into Turkish.<sup>1</sup>

The focus of Atçıl's work is on how the Ottoman scholars became civil servants in the early modern period and formed a social group. The scholars' transformation into an important branch of bureaucratic organization is a unique practice in

\* Prof. Dr., Pamukkale University, History Department. Correspondence: ybeyazit@pau.edu.tr.

\*\* PhD. Student, Istanbul 29 Mayıs University, History Department.

1 Abdurrahman Atçıl, *Erken Modern Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Âlimler ve Sultanlar*, trans. Gürzat Kami (Istanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2019); Abdurrahman Atçıl, "The Formation of the Ottoman Learned Class and Legal Scholarship (1300-1600)" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, IL, 2010).

the context of Islamic history. For this reason, Atçıl emphasizes the necessity of producing new terminology in Ottoman studies; he distinguishes between scholars who became part of the bureaucratic administration and those who did not and suggests naming the former as *scholar-bureaucrats* in his work's introduction. This proposal is one of the most striking aspects of Atçıl's work. Defining a person or social group over a prominent aspect makes the subject concrete in historical research as well as facilitates its presentation and comprehension. Atçıl's suggestion of scholar-bureaucrats also points to an informative feature possessed by the scholars the Ottoman central government employed. Having said this, what is not mentioned in the book is why the author prioritizes scholars' qualifications when defining the group. The question to be answered here is whether being a scholar or being a bureaucrat was the dominant qualification. Additionally, we should add that the group known as Ottoman scholars had not been a completely homogeneous group. As is known, high-level madrasa scholarship (*müderris*), dignitary judges (*mevleviyet*), and the administrative *ilmiye* positions of *kadıasker* (chief judge) and *şeyhülislam* (chief jurist) were the highest levels where scholars were employed. Additionally, there is an extended cluster of town judges (*kasaba kadıları*) and madrasa scholars positioned lower in the hierarchy whose appointments were under the authority of the *kadıaskers*. These lower and higher groups have an order with internal movement. Classifying these two layers under the same name is also an issue that should be opened to discussion.

Another noteworthy aspect of Atçıl's work is that he attempted to periodize the history of Ottoman scholars. Regarding the periodization of Ottoman history, many different opinions are known to exist. This is undoubtedly an effort that has contributed to the field in terms of better understanding a historical event or institution with its change and continuity. Atçıl examines the history of the scholars in three main periods with certain milestones. The first is the early Ottoman period (1300-1453) when no strong link existed between scholars and the Ottoman administration, the second is the formative period of the hierarchy (1453-1530) in which the process of articulating scholars to bureaucratic administration had begun, and the third is the consolidation of the hierarchy (1530-1600) where scholars were empowered by being allowed a say in administrative, religious, and legal matters and turned into a self-reproducing social group through their novitiate status (*mülazemet*; 1530-1600).

In the first part of his book, Atçıl outlines the early Ottoman scholars (1300-1453). Among the main topics of this section are the establishment of madrasas

in the Ottoman geography, scholars being invited from other scientific basins to the Ottomans, and the connection between the Ottoman administration and the services scholars performed. Atçıl especially emphasizes how the Ottomans tried to meet their educational needs both by inviting scholars from other regions and by opening new madrasas. According to him, although the Ottoman dynasty had bigger and stronger endowments (*vakf*), the madrasas were mostly commissioned by the viziers, statesmen, and scholars rather than by the dynasty itself. When considering the period, a strong bond had not yet been established between scholars and the Ottoman administration.

In the second part, Atçıl talks about the establishment of the central-bureaucratic empire and its effect on scholars. According to Atçıl, 1453-1530 are the formative years of the hierarchy. He examines this period in two separate parts: the period in which the hierarchical order was enacted (1453-1481) and the period when the scholar-bureaucrats realized their power (1481-1530). Atçıl states that the scholar-bureaucrat class emerged as a result of the institutional and legal arrangements made beginning with the conquest of Constantinople up to the death of Mehmed II (d. 886/1481). This was because Selim I (d. 926/1520) made campaigns against the Safavids and Mamluks, and Süleyman I (d. 974/1566) gained legitimacy based on justice and sharia; these two main facts increased the need for scholar-bureaucrats in the state and, as a result, this group gained power. Scholar-bureaucrats understood the importance of the role they played for the state as a group, and their hierarchical orders continued to grow stronger in this process.

In the third part, Atçıl touches upon the historical adventure of the Ottoman scholars between 1530-1600, which he calls the “Consolidation of the Hierarchy” and in which their hierarchy was fortified. According to him, the 1530s saw the Ottoman State gain a more central identity, awareness of the law become stronger, and the state turn into a bureaucratic machine as a result. In the expanding bureaucratic organization, a separate civil bureaucracy called the *kalemiye* (the scribal-financial career) started to emerge, employing scholars specialized in *kalems* (the pens). Those who were employed with educational and judicial duties paved the way for the profession known as *ilmiye*. Atçıl starts a new era based on 1530, stating that the hierarchy had been reinforced with the new rules introduced during this period. Probably the most important issue that can be expressed about this process is that the novitiate status provided access to the *ilmiye*. With the novitiate status, the key to entering the *ilmiye* was given to dignitary scholar-bureaucrats; by doing so, the monopoly the dignitary scholar-bureaucrats had over the hierarchy was

guaranteed. At the same time, an increase in the number of madrasas occurred, and the state tried to penetrate the foundations to harmonize them with the hierarchy. In addition, new courts were created. With these developments, scholars became a very important part of the state organization.

Atçıl's effort at delineating periods in regard to the Ottoman scholars is of great importance for being able to understand the transformation they underwent and for determining their place in society and the state as a social group. We can point out that emphasis is placed on the establishment and development of the central bureaucratic empire through the periods he remarks. From this point of view, the conquest of Constantinople is the first milestone for Atçıl. The second turning point he determined is the period from 1530 onwards when the Ottoman state became bureaucratized by gaining a centralist character; specialization emerged in the bureaucracy and the *kalemiye-ilmiye* decomposition had begun. The last period starts in 1600 when the ulema reinforced its power as both an institutional as well as a social group. Although I emphasize the importance of the periods Atçıl has denoted, I think they should be strengthened on a few points. While delineating the periods, the internal dynamics and changes in the *ilmiye* could have been prioritized, law codes could have been used to determine dates, and the times when the scholar's reconciliation with the political authority was strong or weak could have been taken as a basis. Discussing and rethinking why the Consolidation of the Hierarchy period ended in 1600 is necessary. While the Ottoman State was experiencing important changes and transformations in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, how the scholars were affected is an important question waiting to be answered by researchers. In his work, Atçıl recommends this period as being stable with respect to the scholars.

We can add that Atçıl has used diverse resources while writing his work. For the periods when the archive sources are insufficient, the author mostly uses Ṭashkubrīzāda's (d. 968/1561) *Al-Shaqā'iq al-nu'māniyya fi 'ulamā' al-dawla al-'uthmāniyya* and its supplements. He also benefitted from archival resources for the post-1506 period. Since records on early scholars are very few, registers that have come down to us mostly were created for determining the situation, and some of these were not systematically organized, Atçıl's work appears to need to be supported with more evidence. For example, in regard to determining the registers held in 1523, the rate of entry to the profession as a dignitary scholar-bureaucrat (*mevali*) is noted as 37%; this determination needs to be supported with more data (107). In addition, the fact that a similar consideration was not made

for the subsequent periods unfortunately removes the opportunity to compare from historians' hands. The issue of the dignitary scholar-bureaucrats' dominant position over the novitiate status needs to be examined more concretely using newly identifiable resources in the future.

Another issue that was expected to be discussed in Atçıl's book is the consequences that occurred in public and social life as the scholars became part of the central organization. Although the author briefly touches upon the relevant literature on this subject, especially in the conclusion, he does not mention the results of the scholar-bureaucrat practice, which is the main subject of the book. If the last part of the book had been devoted to this, the subject could have been understood more holistically.

Undoubtedly Atçıl's book is a work that will give researchers a chance for new studies in the field of Ottoman scholars. In addition, its character, which emphasizes the political and social developments of the considered periods, should not be ignored when examining the history of a social group. In his conclusion, Atçıl also touches upon the discussions in Ottoman historiography, stating that he adopted the "revisionist" paradigm as opposed to the "decline" paradigm and that this trend has been growing stronger in the last three or four decades. He states that this book should be considered in this context (216–22). To summarize, the work not only opens the door to important discussions for studies on Ottoman scholar but also contributes to a revisionist historiography through the concept of the scholar-bureaucrat and periodization the author has suggested.