

KİTÂBİYAT / BOOK REVIEWS

Michael Talbot,

British-Ottoman Relations, 1661-1807: Commerce and Diplomatic Practice in Eighteenth-Century Istanbul

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With the rise of socio-economic, cultural, and environmental history, diplomatic history has long been relegated to a secondary status and viewed as an archaic field that merely reproduces primary documents and records “what one clerk said to another clerk.” Conflating foreign policy with diplomacy with a clear Rankean penchant of *Primat der Außenpolitik*, such a dry methodology has few to offer to modern readers, now used to interdisciplinary approaches.

The book under review is part of an ongoing effort of breaking this deadlock and rehabilitating with the label of “new diplomatic history” what was once a prestigious field. Although studying the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and Britain in its formative years, between 1661 and 1807, Talbot does not entirely focus on high politics and power struggles between states negotiated by official ambassadors in capitals. Accentuating the centrality and interconnectivity of finance, law, and culture in early modern diplomatic practice in the Ottoman

Empire, he prefers a more inclusive understanding of diplomacy and analyzes how it was practiced rather than concentrating on the long-term consequences of endless negotiations. Approaching the issue from the perspective of commercial pressures, financial constraints, cultural conventions, and social interactions, the book consists of six chapters, each treating a different aspect of British-Ottoman relations.

Chapter One provides a historical background and analyzes the treaties that regulated British-Ottoman relations, mainly the *'ahdname* of 1675 which remained the standard text until 1924. Chapter Two focuses on the practitioner of diplomacy, the “ambassador”. While on the one hand it analyzes the office itself, i.e. the ambassador’s duties in the Ottoman capital, on the other it provides prosopographical information on British diplomats in Istanbul, i.e. their geographical origin, education, social standing, and previous career. Chapter Three focuses on commerce which the author rightly sees at the center of the ambassador’s mission – it was after all the Levant Company and not the crown who paid the bills. A thorough analysis of ups-and-downs of the direct trade between Britain and the *Memâlik-i Mahrûsa* reveals the intertwined relationship between commerce and diplomacy.

Chapter Four analyzes the gift mode at play in every aspect of British-Ottoman relations, focusing on different types of gift exchange (*hil'at*, *hibe*, *pîşkeş*) undertaken between Ottoman grandees and British diplomats. Chapter Five scrutinizes performative diplomacy and accentuates the importance of polysemic ceremonies rituals whose symbolic meaning was interpreted by each party according to their own priorities. Chapter Six deals with the nature of disputes that British ambassadors had to resolve in the Ottoman capital, with a focus not only on foreign policy, but also commerce, finance, and privateering.

Full of detailed documentary analysis and meticulously analyzing contemporary traditions, institutions, and concepts, the book clearly demonstrates Talbot’s adroitness in critically reading his sources. Moreover, although drawing, just like many other students of European and Ottoman diplomatic history, heavily from the archives, Talbot successfully avoids “a Rankean fetterisation of certain kinds of historical evidence” (7). He not only uses an impressive variety of primary sources from Ottoman and British archives but also approaches these documents from novel perspectives. Finally, he successfully integrates this vast corpus of primary documentation with the secondary literature, scrupulously providing

the relevant historical background. He is also very careful not to neglect the less-accessible research on similar subjects, published in Turkish, a thoroughness which has become harder to come by in Anglophone scholarship on the Ottoman Empire.

Talbot's work makes important contributions in that it cautions against the overemphasis on the Islamic nature of the Ottoman empire and on the oft-repeated theoretical dichotomy of *Dârü'l-harb* and *Dârü'l-Islâm*. Moreover, his emphasis on commerce in diplomatic relations and the consular duties of the ambassador allows him to concentrate on other aspects of British-Ottoman diplomacy. Both his observation that British diplomats operated within legal, cultural, and institutional conventions of the Ottoman state and his scrutiny of the Ottoman concept of maritime territoriality offer alternative vistas for his colleagues. Finally, he succeeds in showing how and why the British diplomatic mission in Istanbul slowly graduated from a merchant-financed institution, prone to conflict resolution, to a government-funded one with a more aggressive diplomatic attitude.

By way of criticism, while Talbot does a praiseworthy job in enlargening the scope of early modern diplomacy by breaking the monopoly of high politics, he seems not so eager to move his lenses away from the figure of the ambassador. One cannot help but ask why he refrained from taking one more step in the direction of the "new diplomatic history" and not include informal diplomatic actors, i.e. translators, power brokers, bankers, and intermediaries of all stripes whose political relevance has started to be acknowledged both in European and Ottoman historiography.

Emrah Safa Gürkan

Istanbul 29 Mayıs University