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*Battle of Manzikert. Diorama at the Istanbul Military Museum.
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Paper

“Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream”

The Construction of the Golden Age Myth(s) in Seventeenth-Century Istanbul

Ian McLaughlin

BETWEEN 1648 AND 1656, TWELVE DIFFERENT MEN SERVED AS grand vizier of the Ottoman Empire. Unnerved by the apparent administrative crisis, the boy sultan Mehmed IV asked one of them why, if “during my father’s reign, the treasury was sufficient for Janissary salaries and other expenditures . . . this [was] not the case now?”¹ The vizier dutifully conducted an audit of the state’s finances to answer the boy’s question, but the dismal results angered Mehmed enough to have his chief adviser executed. A modicum of political stability returned to the realm with the ascension of the Köprülü family to grand vizierate in 1656, but the financial troubles of Mehmed’s minority were the result of more than a half-century of protracted wars, internal rebellions, and massive demographic change.²

Dubbed “the crisis of the seventeenth century” by scholars, the period resulted in deep introspection among Ottomans of different social classes

1. Qtd. in Marc David Baer, *Honored by the Glory of Islam: Conversion and Conquest in Ottoman Europe* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), 50.

2. Sam White, “The Little Ice Age Crisis of the Ottoman Empire: A Conjuncture in Middle East Environmental History,” in Alan Mikhail, ed., *Water on Sand: Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2012), 74.

and schools of Islamic interpretation and practice.³ Although modern historians tend to attribute the crisis to factors beyond political (or sometimes even human) control, the structure of Mehmed's question to his grand vizier and his subsequent actions indicate that the Ottomans themselves saw the instability of the realm as the result of (reversible) mismanagement.⁴ However much the participants of these debates disagreed on the nature of this mismanagement or on the proper way to remedy it, they all agreed that at one time things had worked. As a boy, Mehmed IV believed this time was during the reign of his father Ibrahim; in adulthood, Mehmed agreed with others that it was the reign of Suleiman the Lawgiver (1520–1566). If only the Ottomans could return to those past forms of administration, many reasoned, all would be well again. Others still looked to a religious golden age during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad.

In the end, rulers throughout the seventeenth century innovated rather than drawing on tradition. The semi-feudal system of *timar* holders, for example, was altered drastically by the introduction of lifetime tax-farming contracts and the regular rotation of provincial administrators was ended.⁵ In spite of these developments, the Ottomans never embraced innovation as a principle. Instead, the ruling classes, the religious hierarchy, and the people of Istanbul continued to look to a mythical "golden age" for inspiration and renewal. While this golden age was at any rate more the product of imagination than of fact, I argue that there were two principal historical candidates: the reign of Sultan Suleiman in the previous century, and the time of the Prophet Muhammad, nearly a millennium prior.

Throughout the period of crisis, public opinion in the empire oscillated between the two golden ages until a synthesis was forged. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, advice writers of the Ottoman bureaucracy, narrowly focused on matters of governance and elite status, pined for the time of Suleiman. Towards the middle of the century, those influenced by the Kadizadeli preacher movement pressed for a religious reformation that, in ways similar to the European Protestant Reformation, would return society strictly to the

3. See Madeleine Zilfi, *The Politics of Piety: The Ottoman Ulema in the Postclassical Age (1600–1800)* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1988), 166–168.

4. Leslie Pierce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 154.

5. Karen Barkey, "In Different Times: Scheduling and Social Control in the Ottoman Empire, 1550 to 1650," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 38, no. 3 (1996), 481.

practices found in the religion's original holy texts—the Qu'ran and the Hadith, both originating from the Prophet Muhammad. Ultimately, these two threads of golden age thinking, religious and administrative, converged as the strongly pious adult Mehmed IV and his Kadizadeli court preacher, Vani Mehmed Efendi, laid the public relations groundwork for the second siege of Vienna in 1683.

The Idea of the Golden Age and Islam

Although it has a particular resonance in Islam, the contested idea of the golden age goes back at least to the time of the ancient Greeks. The archaic poet Hesiod, for example, wrote of a "golden race" whose members lived "peaceful, untroubled lives, [while] the earth supplied all their wants."⁶ Centuries later, Democritus contested this view, arguing on the contrary that humanity emerged from the dark ages of barbarism only once it acquired language, tools, and fire. Plato, however, defended the golden age idea, advancing a view that became commonplace in the Roman and, later, the Muslim world. According to him, technology and sophistication brought moral decay with them; the simple, uncluttered time before the invention of "culture" had been the real human paradise. After all, Prometheus, who had given fire to man, was also responsible for bringing the plagues of Pandora. This story sufficiently established the gods' feelings about civilization and progress. Finally, and most crucially, the late stoic philosopher Posidonius specifically blamed more complex forms of society for corrupting the simplicity of true religion, leading to the introduction of extraneous rituals and dulling mankind's spiritual connection with God.⁷

In Islam, the idea of a golden age goes back to the Qu'ran itself. In sura 5, verse 3, the Lord declares, "This day I have perfected your religion for you, completed my favor upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion." Based largely on this verse, Muslims came to believe that the Prophet and his companions had lived a perfect version of Islam, and that *bid'ah* (innovation) in religious matters was both unnecessary and undesirable. Nevertheless, Muslims differed on how literally to take the injunction against innovation. To cite one

6. Kenneth J. Reckford, "Some Appearances of the Golden Age," *The Classical Journal* 54, no. 2 (1958): 79.

7. Reckford, "Golden Age," 80–81.

example current in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: should spoons and pants—clearly alien to seventh-century Arabian society—be forbidden?⁸

Imam Birgivi Mehmed Efendi's answer to the question of innovation in the influential sixteenth-century treatise called *The Way of Muhammad* adhered closely to the ways of Muhammad's lifetime. His answer laid much of the ideological groundwork which later Ottoman commentators would draw upon to determine a golden age. The imam did not go to the lengths of condemning the use of spoons (as some of his later followers did); for him, the prohibition against bid'ah only applied in "its strictly religious context" to "forms of worship."⁹ Even when it came to religion, Birgivi allowed that many practices introduced after Muhammad's lifetime, such as attaching minarets to mosques, were suitable adaptations to changing social contexts. Minarets, for example, may be necessary "so that the call to prayer can be heard from further places" in cities.¹⁰ Even so, Birgivi strongly condemned any change past what he viewed as acceptable: "the following of pernicious innovations is more harmful than not following the way of the Prophet at all."¹¹

To Birgivi, these "pernicious innovations" mostly came from certain sects of Sufism (the mystical practice of Islam).¹² He decried those "mystics" who would, on the basis of a pretended "inner knowledge" or "inspiration," justify their clear deviations from orthodox Islamic practice.¹³ Unfortunately, it is not altogether clear which practices the imam has in mind: whether he would forbid *raks* (dancing for enjoyment, which was widely forbidden in traditional Islam), for example, or *devrân* (a ritual dance, or "whirling," which has a religious meaning for Mevlevi Sufis), or whether he thought *devrân* constituted a barely-disguised form of *raks*.

Above all, for Birgivi, the issue of spiritual authority was more important than any particular practice. He contended that those who took their rapturous mystical experience as a source of theological knowledge were likely to go astray at some point, which to him meant rejecting the authority of the Prophet. Hence, he lamented the existence of some "who call themselves Sufi and claim

8. Lewis V. Thomas, *A Study of Naima* (New York: NYU Press, 1972), 108–9.

9. Imam Birgivi, *The Path of Muhammad: A Book on Islamic Morals and Ethics* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, Inc., 2005), 71.

10. Birgivi, *The Path of Muhammad*, 72.

11. Birgivi, 73.

12. Interestingly, Birgivi was affiliated with a Sufi order himself.

13. Birgivi, 74.

that their *shayks* (masters) look upon God twice daily."¹⁴ Were that claim true, he averred, it would elevate Sufi shayks above both Muhammad and Moses—a positively blasphemous idea. Thus, Birgivi concluded, all true religious expression must lead toward imitation of the Prophet.¹⁵

The Rise of the Kadizadelis and the Muhammadan Golden Age

Birgivi's diatribe, however extreme, fit comfortably within the concerns of his time period and provided the basis for Muhammadan golden age thought.¹⁶ In fact, the late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Ottoman Empire, under pressure to define itself in opposition to the Shi'a Safavid Empire in Iran, expressed a prolonged ambivalence toward Sufism. Ibn-i Kemal, who would eventually rise to be the head of the Ottoman Islamic establishment (*sheyhülislam*) under Suleiman, changed his position on the legality of certain Sufi practices no less than three times; moreover, this conflicted attitude was not confined to Kemal. There was a rising tide of anti-Sufism in the capital, which compelled Sufi shayk Sünbül Sinan Efendi to write a pamphlet defending Sufi ritual practices. Sinan Efendi's apology convinced the presiding sheyhülislam—who went so far as to declare his prior position apostate (*kufi*) in his private notes on Sünbül's treatise—and, eventually, Kemal. Overall, this episode demonstrates that the scholarly elite, when left to their own devices, were open to competing and nuanced interpretations of Islamic law and practice.

However, when Kadizade Mehmed Efendi began his career as Friday mosque preacher in Istanbul in the 1620s, the private nature of the debate over Sufism and other "innovatory" practices became shockingly public. Having become disillusioned with Sufi spirituality, Kadizade arrived in the capital eager to begin a spiritual reformation among the masses.¹⁷ His energetic sermons, which condemned everything from using coffee to making pilgrimages to the tombs of saints, garnered him attention and advancement opportunities; his superiors moved him to larger and larger mosques as time went on. As Madeleine Zilfi has shown, the promotion of preachers within the imperial mosque system

14. Birgivi, 91.

15. Birgivi, 75; Zilfi, 166.

16. Birgivi, xiv.

17. Baer, 65.

“depended on their ability to hold a crowd.”¹⁸ Kadizade and, eventually, his followers and imitators, drew attention not only through sheer individual charisma, but through (somewhat ironically) innovative sermonizing techniques. Instead of reworking famous sermons, as had been customary, Kadizade gave highly original diatribes commenting on “the contemporary scene” and calling out specific individuals for their apostate practices.¹⁹

Both Zilfi and Douglas Howard stress the accessible, if crude, distillation of doctrine in explaining Kadizade’s mass appeal, but his ability to relate his sermons to the anxieties and upheaval of the era seem just as important.²⁰ Istanbul was a city threatened not many years before the preacher’s arrival with invasion by the Çelali rebels.²¹ It seems logical that many would be worried about how to restore their mighty city to divine favor and protection. In any event, the debate over how to put the empire back on stable footing now extended far beyond the court elite to the common resident of the imperial capital. Kadizade gave them a simple solution, familiar to all students of Biblical prophets: Repent! If they could return to the practices prescribed by the Prophet Muhammad, the empire would surely begin to flourish again. By the 1640s and 1650s, after Kadizade’s death, the followers of his movement were repeatedly incited to riots, during which they shut down Sufi lodges and coffeehouses.²² The Kadizadelis continually tried to harness the power of the state for their goals, with intermittent success, especially under the reign of Mehmed IV (1648–1687).

Nearly all the innovations condemned by the Kadizadelis as a source of Ottoman decline, with the exception of tobacco, had been practiced well before the multiple military and social crises of the early seventeenth century. Even the first coffeehouse in Istanbul had been established during the reign of Süleyman.²³ In most ways, then, the reform movement seemed uniquely aimed at restoring society to the age of Muhammad, with little thought to the history of the Ottomans. However, there was at least one important sense in which

18. Zilfi, 164.

19. Zilfi, 163.

20. Howard, 153.

21. White, 77–78.

22. Fariba Zarinebaf, “Policing Morality: Crossing Gender and Communal Boundaries in an Age of Political Crisis and Religious Controversy,” in *Living in the Ottoman Realm: Empire and Identity, 13th to 20th Centuries*, ed., Christine Isom-Verhaaren and Kent F. Schull (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2016).

23. The year was 1555. See Uzi Baram, “Clay Tobacco Pipes and Coffee Cup Sherds in the Archaeology of the Middle East: Artifacts of Social Tensions from the Ottoman Past,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 3, no. 3 (1999), 142.

Kadizade's preaching seemed to overlap in its concerns and aims with the elite authors of the advice literature (discussed in the section below). In trying to harness the power of the state, encouraging the Sultan to fulfill his traditionally Islamic duty of "judging with justice," the popular fundamentalist preacher was also not-so-subtly promoting royal authority.²⁴

The sermon where Kadizade expounded on the Qur'anic phrase "judging with justice" was given in 1633.²⁵ Murad IV, who was in attendance, had only just assumed full power after ten years in which his mother Kösem had effectively ruled the empire as regent.²⁶ It is fully possible that, like many of his contemporaries, Kadizade saw the rise of women within the imperial household as one reason for imperial decline.²⁷ For the advice writers especially, the erosion of strong sultanic authority since the days of Suleiman was an alarming sign.²⁸ In sharing in this diagnosis, the Kadizadeli movement, though ostensibly advancing the Prophet Muhammad's day as the golden age, apparently also had the reign of Suleiman in mind.

Advice Literature and the Administrative Golden Age

Before and during the time of the Kadizadeli, the genre of advice literature flourished in the Ottoman realm. In a time of rapid change, educated civil servants, fearful of being pushed out by a new ruling elite, eagerly jockeyed for status by appealing to Ottoman tradition in pamphlets addressed to the sultan. The nature of that Ottoman tradition, however, was nearly impossible to pin down. As the empire expanded in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, administrative positions were increasingly reserved for two groups: *sipahis*, or cavalry who held the right to tax revenues within a designated locale (timars); and *devshirme* recruits—converted slaves from Christian families raised in the palace. However, many *reaya* (anyone outside of these two groups) continued to aspire for position.²⁹ During times of war, the Sultan allowed many *reaya* into

24. Howard, 153.

25. Katib Çelebi, *The Balance of Truth* (London: Allen & Unwin, 2008), 121.

26. Zarinebaf 198.

27. Baer, 60–61; Zarinebaf 201.

28. Pierce 170–173.

29. Linda T. Darling, "The Sultan's Advisors and Their Opinions on the Identity of the Ottoman Elite, 1580–1653," in *Living in the Ottoman Realm: Empire and Identity, 13th to 20th Centuries*, edited by Christine Isom-Verhaaren and Kent F. Schull (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2016), 172–173.

the timar system, as the existing population of sipahis was insufficient. However, as population pressures grew and the empire stopped expanding during the later reign of Suleiman, positions became scarce and the descendants of sipahis lobbied to make the system exclusively hereditary.

With the outbreak of two separate conflicts around the turn of the seventeenth century, with Hapsburg Austria on one front and Safavid Iran on the other, outsiders were recruited in large numbers once more. As these two conflicts dragged on for years with little prospect for definitive resolution, the outsiders who became sipahis took much of the blame in the advice literature. One advice writer accused the officers of negligence and cowardice, and recommended that future sipahis be recruited exclusively “from the [ranks of the] capable and the just.”³⁰ Another had a similar position, arguing that children of sipahis were far more likely to demonstrate military valor than unreliable outsiders.³¹

By the time that Koçi Bey wrote a pamphlet addressed to Murad IV in 1631, the image of reliable and noble insiders, threatened for positions and status by unworthy provincials, had become a trope of advice literature. Ignoring the shifty, on-again off-again history of reaya in the military and administrative hierarchy, Koçi located their admission into the ranks to 1584, in the period soon after Suleiman’s reign had ended (1520–1566) but strangely after Mustafa Ali had first complained about the issue in 1581. This discrepancy is explained when one considers that, like the other advice writers, Koçi Bey was not so much relaying the facts of history as “creating an *image* of pure and valorous sipahis of the past by which to denigrate the inefficient sipahis . . . of his day.”³² Even more explicitly than any of the others, however, Koçi located the golden age of administration “in the reign of Sultan Suleiman.”³³

The Siege of Vienna and the Ideological Synthesis

Sometime in the early 1660s, a charismatic Friday mosque preacher by the name of Vani Mehmed Efendi, in the mold of Kadizade himself and of his

30. Darling, “Ottoman Elite,” Isom-Verhaaren and Schull, eds., *Living*, 177.

31. Darling, “Ottoman Elite,” Isom-Verhaaren and Schull, eds., *Living*, 178.

32. Darling, “Ottoman Elite,” Isom-Verhaaren and Schull, eds., *Living*, 179; emphasis added.

33. Darling, “Ottoman Elite,” Isom-Verhaaren and Schull, eds., *Living*, 179.

religious philosophy, captured the attention of Sultan Mehmed IV. Soon the young sultan, still in his early 20s and susceptible to influence, began bestowing lavish gifts on the preacher. Mehmed’s mother Hatice Turhan, a powerful figure who had served as regent during his minority, also developed a close relationship with Vani. By the 1670s, the preacher was accompanying the sultan on military campaigns, tutoring the imperial princes, and receiving a stipend from the imperial treasury.³⁴ In 1679–1680, he wrote an inflammatory Qur’anic commentary that may have induced Mehmed to attempt his ill-fated siege of Vienna in 1683.³⁵

Vani began the commentary by quoting several verses enjoining the people of God to conquest. For Vani (and, indeed, for Mehmed), a return to *ghaza*, or holy conquest in the name of Islam, was just as necessary to a renewal of the state as was abandonment of heretical Sufi practices. However, at this point of the commentary, he wisely passed over whatever lapses in *ghaza* he thought the last century’s Ottoman sultans might have been guilty of in order to turn his fire on to the Arabs: “Oh Arabs, you do not fight on the campaign for Byzantium. . . . Because for a long time the Turks have been the ones who are the *mujahids* waging *ghaza* against the Byzantines and Europeans by land and sea in the East and West.”³⁶ He proceeded to quote a reputed prophecy of Muhammad’s about the fall of Constantinople at the hands of “the sons of Ishmael.” The standard interpretation always considered any “sons of Ishmael” to be Arabs, as they claimed to descend from Abraham through the child of his maidservant Hagar. But Vani, through an ingenious bit of mythical genealogy, asserted that the Prophet must have been referring to the Turkish people—who after all actually did conquer Constantinople—by that phrase. To Vani, the Turks had not only become guardians of the holy places of Islam (Mecca and Medina), but had inherited the role of the religion’s purveyors from the Arabs, starting with the 1071 Battle of Manzikert.³⁷ Moreover, God had allowed the Arab lands to come under Turkish dominion as punishment for neglecting their divine role.

34. Baer, 109–113.

35. Baer, 209; Zilfi, 156–158.

36. Qtd. in Baer, 207.

37. Qtd. in Baer, 208–209. At the Battle of Manzikert, the Seljuk Turks beat the Byzantine army, opening the way for the Turks to settle in Anatolia. (Apparently, Vani has no qualms conflating Seljuk and Ottoman Turks, presumably because they shared the same imagined descent from Ishmael.)

Vani Mehmed Efendi's narrative of Turkish ascension and appropriation of traditionally Arabic roles allowed him to merge the two Golden Ages of seventeenth-century Ottoman thought. First, he reminded his audience that fulfilling the imperative of conquest is an important part of returning to the Prophet's path; then, he recast the Ottoman/Turkish conquest narrative in these new terms, arguing that the conquests of Mehmed II and Suleiman were a continuation of sacred Islamic history. In other words, on one level, he straightforwardly advocated for a return to the conquering sultans of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. But many had been arguing for this, and Mehmed, who frequently led his troops into battle, had come to embody it.³⁸ Vani's great contribution was to imply that to return to the Suleiman's time and to return to Mahammad's time could be one and the same thing, through a combination of renewed spiritual dedication and military-administrative competence.

Conclusion

Throughout the seventeenth century, as the Ottomans battled repeated crises, they struggled to come to terms with this chronic instability and to diagnose solutions for it. A religious golden age and an administrative golden age both provided touchstones for reformers eager to set the agenda. The former offered justification for spiritual cleansing, while the latter served as a rationale for administrative overhaul and renewed military adventurism. Generally, these two golden ages appealed to different segments of the population: the masses found the simpler narrative of spiritual decline and renewal more compelling, whereas the administrative elite grasped for more material explanations of where the state had gone wrong.

However, the two golden ages were often conflated, and eventually collapsed in Vani Mehmed Efendi's compelling synthesis. This suggests both the persistence of societal demands for golden age myths, and their inherent malleability. As the conveniently inaccurate dating of court writers and religious preachers demonstrates, the construction of these myths depends upon a pre-existing canon of indisputably praiseworthy historical figures and texts, which are drawn upon as areas of consensus during times of instability. Generally, there will be as

38. On the desire for militarily active sultans, see Pierce, 168–172; on Mehmed, see Baer, 140–142.

many narratives competing as there are figures in this canon. Reformers, then, variously seize on the narratives most suited to cloaking their own agenda in a veil of ancestral approval. Vani’s genius was to grasp the essential compatibility of the dominant Ottoman golden dreams, weaving them together in a way that still has the capacity to resonate among Turkish Islamists today.³⁹

Ian McLaughlin is a senior studying history, specializing in modern European history—though you wouldn’t know that from his dual minors, Classics (Ancient Greek emphasis) and Latin American Studies (Portuguese emphasis), nor indeed from the subject of the present paper. He first became interested in the Ottoman Empire through their civilization’s (rather Eurocentric) representation as devilishly overpowered gunpowder-blasting heathens in Microsoft’s Age of Empires II: The Conquerors’ Lepanto Campaign. He wishes to thank Professor Isom-Verhaaren for her piercing insight, honest questioning, and conspiratorial friendship. After graduation, Ian plans to pursue a PhD.

39. See “Turkey’s president invokes a millennium-old battle,” *The Economist*, September 9, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21728649-ancient-call-nationalism-turkeys-president-invokes-millennium-old-battle>. In the speech described, current Turkish President Recep Erdogan paints a picture of Seljuk Turks marching “With a Turkish flag in one hand and Islam’s green banner in the other.” What a “Turkish” national flag would look like in 1071 is an open question.