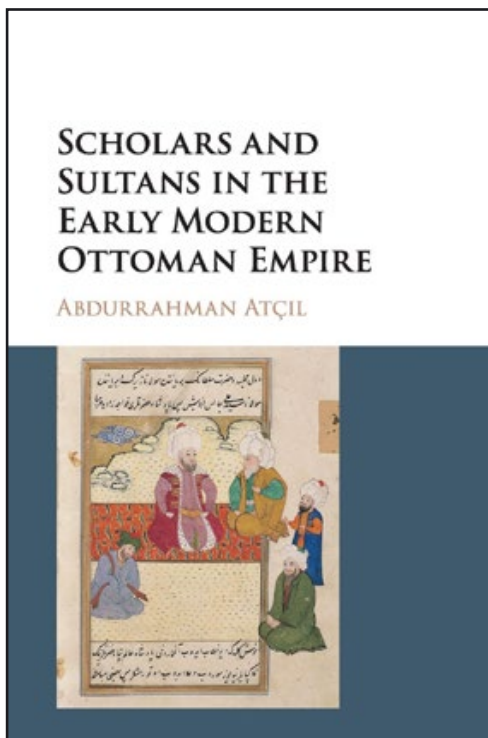




# Scholars and Sultans in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire

*By Abdurrahman Atçıl*

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The opinions expressed in this review represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the TRT World Research Centre.

The book is divided into three parts and ten chapters. The first part (Ch. 1 and 2) analyses scholars in post Mongol Anatolia from 1300 to 1453. In this period, the Ottomans invited scholars from abroad to visit and settle in the absence of indigenous scholars. The book nicely shows the Ottoman competition with other Muslim states to acquire scholars into their realm. Scholars in this early stage performed religious, administrative and financial duties simultaneously. The second part (Ch. 3, 4 and 5) looks at the transformation of the Ottoman principality into an early modern empire and examines how the Ottoman state gradually established control over scholars. Sultans, other members of the dynastic family and ruling elites constructed more madrasas and recruited scholars to teach and study. Alternative means of loyalty were eliminated when endowments and appointments to madrasas were brought under state control. This was also a period of bureaucratisation in which clearly defined career paths with regular advancements and pay increases were institutionalised. The codification of hierarchical rules during the reign of Mehmed II was an important step in this direction.

Part three (chapters 6 to 10) studies the consolidation of the hierarchy of scholar-bureaucrats from 1530 to 1600. In this period, territorial expansion stopped with the Habsburg and Safavid challenges, and the Ottoman state turned inwards to administer its territories more effectively. As a result of this administrative centralisation, bureaucratisation of scholars furthered: Specialisation of bureaucratic functions occurred when financial and scribal offices were assigned to officials with special training. In contrast to earlier periods where scholar-bureaucrats held multiple jobs such as professorships, scribal and financial offices, in this period they were specialized in educational and judicial activities, leading to the formation of *ilmiyye* as a distinct bureaucratic hierarchy.

With centralised administration and elimination of alternative options, scholar-bureaucrats increasingly saw themselves as part of Ottoman establishment and dedicated themselves to its advancement (p. 215).

The author defines the factors that influenced the advancement of scholars such as scholarly excellence, competence, geography, economic needs and

resources, and structured patronage (Ch. 9). Various combinations of these factors brought variations in scholars' careers and led to the emergence of patterns of differentiation amongst scholar-bureaucrats (p. 187). A major contribution of the book is the identification of alternative career paths for scholar-bureaucrats, showing different tracts for dignitaries (*mevali*) and town judges (*kasabat kadıs*) (Ch. 10). By 1600, these career tracts were set, and *ilmiyye* emerged as a distinct group within the ruling elites.

The book uses variety of archival sources to explain the transformation of scholar-bureaucrats. In addition to Ottoman archival materials such as day registers (*ruznamçes*) to record new entrances to government service, biographical dictionaries of scholars and Sufis written by Taşköprüzade and Nevzade Atayi were employed. One expects to see a more critical engagement with these archival sources. A discussion of issues and challenges of archival sources especially regarding the use of biographical dictionaries could have made the arguments of the book stronger. Appointment patterns recorded in archival sources support the main argument of the book, however, they only partially present how these relations between the state and scholars occurred. The author could have included a few case studies of selected scholar-bureaucrats in detail to show their contributions to the empire, their struggles with the ruling elite, competitors within *ilmiyye* and patronage networks in their career tracts.

This book is an important contribution to the revisionist historiography of the early modern Ottoman Empire. Rejecting the argument that assumes a deterioration of scholarly activity in the sixteenth century, the book considers this period of change and transformation from a positive angle: the channels of entering the scholar-bureaucrat community, and thus acquiring an elite status, was open to nearly anyone in this period (p. 218). This follows Baki Tezcan's argument in his *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World* where he conceptualizes the emergence of new actors into the political arena in a positive light as the expansion of public sphere and a limiting factor on the absolute authority of the Sultan.<sup>1</sup> This book fulfils an important gap in the literature by studying scholars in both the lower and upper levels of the state hierarchy. It also presents analysis of the formation of scholar-

<sup>1</sup> Baki Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

bureaucrats from the fourteenth to the late sixteenth century, a topic that has received scant treatment, particularly in English language studies on the Ottoman Empire. Scholars and students who work on the Ottoman Empire, history of Islam and *'ulama* will find this work a valuable contribution that has the potential to open new avenues of inquiry in the history of the early modern Ottoman Empire.