

Özok-Gündoğan, Nilay. 2022. *The Kurdish Nobility in the Ottoman Empire: Loyalty, Autonomy and Privilege*. Edinburgh: University Press. xi + 352 pages. Online ISBN: 9781399508636.

Reviewed by **Benjamin Weineck**
Heidelberg University
benjamin.weineck@ori.uni-heidelberg.de

Nilay Özok-Gündoğan's book *The Kurdish Nobility in the Ottoman Empire: Loyalty, Autonomy and Privilege* is an interesting in-depth-study of the Kurdish emirate in Palu, Eastern Anatolia. The Author follows the historical trajectories of the Kurdish hereditary nobility in the area, from its origins in the 16th century through the 19th century Tanzimat-Reforms, with particular focus on the 18th and 19th centuries. As such, the book is a much needed and welcome contribution to many different sub-fields in Ottoman and Islamic Studies, as it closely examines the Kurdish nobility, their interactions with various local and imperial agents of the Ottoman state, and their relationships with various groups from among the broader Ottoman population, including Kurdish tribes, Kurdish and Armenian peasants or Armenian moneylenders, as well as the Kurdish Beg's integration into the local economies. The work succeeds in delineating in detail, yet with a wary eye for broad developments and the larger historical context, the relation with the Ottoman state and the issue of hereditary nobility, leading to its abolition. This development triggered a variety of problems that ultimately led to intercommunal violence between Kurds and Armenians at the end of the century. The book avoids the traps of nationalist and anachronistic arguments, providing an important intervention for the historicization of such conflicts.

Özok-Gündoğans book is divided into three parts and eight chapters. The first part explores the beginnings of hereditary nobility among Kurdish leaderships and households in Eastern Anatolia. Closely analyzing a *temlikname* dated 1535, she argues that the ongoing Ottoman-Safavid hostilities formed the momentum in which a delicate equilibrium was put into play that was henceforth to develop into a long-lived hereditary nobility in the Ottoman Empire. While the overall frame for the further relation of imperial Ottoman and Kurdish autonomous rule was designed through this *temlikname*, granting Çemşid Bey the right to inherit his title and function of *hakim* over Palu to his offspring, Özok-Gündoğan strongly emphasizes that this relation was subject to change over the course of its existence. The author puts special emphasis on the interrelated aspects of land, military and economy, through which she follows the changing relationship of the Palu Begs and their entourage with the local and the imperial Ottoman state.

The second part of the book, 'A Quasi-Rift,' is devoted to the first half of the 19th century, particularly after the Tanzimat-Reforms were introduced to the area by the 1840s. The reforms brought to bear drastic changes to the relationship of the Palu Begs and the Ottoman state, in that the state tried to abolish the Kurdish Beg's hereditary rights. The so-called Wesin-incident, in which the then Palu *hakim* Abdullah

Beg burned down the village of Weşin in 1848, is analyzed in detail. The incident is also elegantly presented as a crucial turning point, as it later served the Tanzimat reformers to argue for the abolishment of the Beg's hereditary rights on the land and its revenues.

The third part, 'Restructuring and Violence,' explores the period after the official abolition of hereditary nobility. It analyzes how the Begs, on the one hand, were still able to manoeuvre within the newly formed administrative structures, assuming the position of Kaymakam, for example. On the other, it meticulously and in a detailed manner traces the processes that led to unprecedented intercommunal violence and the eventual destruction of Armenian livelihood in the vicinity. These again were conflicts resulting from disputes over land, that the Armenians had purchased, which was not recognized by the (former) Palu nobility. This is one example of how the book succeeds in establishing its narrative and its argument on a meticulous analysis of the local political economy, thereby remaining firmly grounded on source-based evidence that is furthermore presented in a clear and elegant prose.

The book's major strength lies in its thorough use of a wide range of primary sources and the careful interpretation of evidence, which critically challenges previous scholarship, generalized assumptions, and essentialist perspectives. This critical and revisionist perspective enables Özok-Gündoğan to go beyond many unquestioned ideas, static and anachronistic perspectives. And yet, she not only deconstructs these assumptions (e.g. the idea of the non-existence of hereditary nobility in the Ottoman Empire) but comes up with a new perspective on the complex and ever changing relationship of the Ottoman state, its various imperial and local agents, and the Kurdish hereditary nobility in Palu: 'Rather than being antagonistic, the relationship between the Kurdish elites and the Ottoman state was actually symbiotic and contextual' (p. 282). The author succeeds in providing convincing evidence for this characterization in every chapter of the work, and for every period covered in the book. For example, the finding that the Ottoman state managed to get hold of the *avariz* payments of the population and thereby circumventing the local Kurdish Begs' right to agrarian surplus extraction (p. 82) shows that the region was not merely (and ahistorically) 'autonomous,' but part and parcel of negotiated and entangled political-economic space.

Another major strength is that Özok-Gündoğan's perspective and her narrative is fully aware of historical contingency and plurality. Her analysis of the Palu context shows that the Kurdish emirates (*hükümet*) were by no means internally homogeneous nor equal in their respective relations with the Ottoman imperial center. There were also *hükümet*s in which the *timar* system was applied, and the Bedirkhans of Bohtan were treated very differently from the Palu emirs, and the introduction of the Tanzimat-Reforms was more contingent upon local economic and political factors than on the fact that it was a Kurdish *hükümet*.

With these qualities, the book makes for a really interesting and instructive reading. I do not want to create the impression that the following is a critique merely for the sake of criticism. Yet, what this reviewer missed was a concise (even if short) chapter on the 17th century as a 'missing link': Özok-Gündoğan refers to the decreased military importance of the Palu emirate in this period in providing the ground for

analysis of the development of the local mining industries. But it would have been interesting to know why she decided to focus on the 18th and 19th century. Is it a question of available sources? The first chapter explores the beginnings of hereditary nobility around the *temlikname* of 1535, while the second chapter starts in 1728 – what happened in between? This lacuna can be understood as an urgent call for further research, for which Özok-Gündoğan's impressively researched and well-written work provides an excellent foundation. The book's limits in scope thus delineate the avenues for further research on the Palu Emirate: one being the somehow less treated 17th century, which especially in the vicinity of Harput would be interesting to know more about, as Harput was apparently affected by much the same 'collapse of rural order' as, for example, Amasya.¹ Another interesting follow-up study enabled by Özok-Gündoğan's work would be to follow the developments from the immediate end of Empire into the Turkish Republic as *A Nation of Empire*,² and compare the Palu elites' trajectories for example with the Bedirkhans from other recent work in Kurdish studies.³

These ideas emphasize that Özok-Gündoğan created an important showcase for the further development of research on seemingly marginalized or peripheral actors and regions within the Ottoman Empire.

- 1 Özel, Oktay. 2016. *The Collapse of Rural Order in Ottoman Anatolia*. Boston/Leiden: Brill, p. 4.
- 2 Meeker, Michael. 2002. *A Nation of Empire. The Ottoman Legacy of Turkish Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 3 Henning, Barbara. 2018. *Narratives of the History of the Ottoman-Kurdish Bedirhani Family in Imperial and Post-Imperial Contexts. Continuities and Changes*. Bamberger Orient Studien 13. Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press.