

## Artisans and Travel in the Ottoman Empire

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**Reviewer:** Gemma Norman

Professor Faroqhi has long been considered a world expert on Ottoman history and her new book, *Travel and Artisans in the Ottoman Empire: Employment and Mobility in the Early Modern World*, serves to confirm this position. The 15-page introduction alone showcases a range of skills and knowledge from a scientific analysis of the Little Ice Age to succinctly answering the 'so what?' question dreaded by so many scholars. Rarely can any historian take a particular subject area within their field and make it their own, but Faroqhi is well known for her ability to study and represent the everyday lives of Ottoman subjects (1) as well as being an authority on trade and commerce in the Ottoman Empire, and this work combines all of her best subject strengths. This is a particular achievement in a field of history where the surviving sources consist mainly of government documents or at the very least represent the perspectives of other authority figures or court chroniclers, who can hardly be considered impartial. Add to this the fact that a large amount of the documentation held in the Ottoman State Archives (Ba?bakanl?k Osmanl? Ar?ivi) referring to the post-Classical (1450–1600) and pre-Tanzimet (post-1850) era is still in the process of being catalogued, having been given a low priority, Faroqhi's decision to work to a great extent with the history of the 18th century is a brave one. Karen Barkey, writing in 2008 claimed 'If Ottoman historical eras were to compete for lack of scholarly interest and attention, there is no doubt that the eighteenth century would win'.(2) The frightening fact is that this period is still extremely understudied, with very few publications being produced by historians even now. This makes Faroqhi's rallying cry to all 18th-century Ottomanists (p. 9) a matter of immediate importance for the future of Ottoman history as a field of study globally.

To set this study in context a principal factor for consideration is migration into Istanbul. Urban growth is a constant feature of imperial expansion and, despite the fact that Ottoman expansion had slowed during the 18th century, urban migration into the capital remained steady leading to population growth. The subsequent shortage of jobs coupled with the expected friction between long-term Istanbul residents and newly arrived migrants further complicated the situation as, despite the lack of encouragement from the government, migrants still kept coming to the capital. There is also the question of the population peak in Istanbul during the 18th century due to a plague, of which Istanbul was identified as the epicentre resulting in migrants and other outsiders being retained in the city to try and contain the disease (p. 144). Migrations in general and certainly those surrounding a bustling, cosmopolitan capital often have a marginalising effect on societies

leading to heightened friction between social groups.

The 18th century was a period of worldwide change, and the Ottoman Empire was no exception. Historian Donald Quataert speaks to the shifts in Ottoman commerce during the 18th century and the division between international and domestic trade, claiming that at this time while international trade was more visible it was less important than domestic trade in both volume and value.<sup>(3)</sup> The 18th century has also traditionally been viewed as a period of corruption and decline by Ottoman historians but is, thankfully, currently undergoing a re-evaluation, right down to the most fundamental historical building blocks such as periodisation.<sup>(4)</sup>

Working within this daunting context Faroqhi remains true to her purpose of uncovering the details of the everyday lives of ordinary people within the Empire, adding the idea of 'Ottomans on the move' (p. ix) specifically to fill in another missing component in current scholarship. There is a tendency to believe that people in pre-modern eras did not have the level of mobility of those in the modern world, whether through lack of desire, need or resources, this is of course untrue: civilisations have been moving skilled workers around to where they were most needed since Mesopotamian times. Faroqhi sets herself the task of proving that this stereotype of immobility is an inaccurate generalisation in the Ottoman case. She is also extremely inclusive as to what constitutes mobility, referring to military mobilisations as well as pilgrimages, diplomacy and trade. The book is structured in three main sections each covering a different perspective of the larger theme. The first section of the book on elite travellers shows that they were just as much subjects of the sultan as anyone else and had their own causes for movement, but subsequently Faroqhi utilizes tales of runaway slaves and accounts of guild activities to be found in various court records (*sicilleri*), in addition to travellers' tales, to take an original and innovative perspective on the topic of the lives of 'ordinary' people in 'Ordinary people and their products on the move'. The final section, 'Staying put', features three case studies on 18<sup>th</sup>-century Istanbul workers, before concluding with a discussion on movement into and around Istanbul. Space and consideration is also given to peoples moving across the Empire's borders in both directions for various reasons, for example foreign elites seeking asylum represent the higher social stratum while tales of runaway slaves provide evidence of such movement by those lower down the scale, further widening the scope of this study.

Several chapters of the current volume have been published already in academic journals in Turkish and German but this book makes available for the first time the entirety of Faroqhi's work on this subject in English. This does give the advantage that the chapters can be read in many cases as standalone studies and are very useful for a researcher looking for information on a specific trade, region or social group within the study. It may be said that a series of anecdotes does not provide enough evidence to create a historical trend or to draw any final conclusions, but Faroqhi always sets a case study in its wider historical context and analyses her findings, as in her chapter on Evliya Çelebi's writing on Cairo guildsmen where Çelebi's writing is scrutinised, both for bias from his own experience and for connections to the wider history of Ottoman Egypt (pp. 64–74). Critics may also argue that the anecdotal style can feel like a lack of continuity and flow in the book as a whole, however this is avoided by the skilful structuring of the volume's content and results in a very readable publication with the stories of individuals and the details of their activities bringing the history to life in a way that is very engaging and appealing to the reader. Faroqhi admits openly in the introduction that

'On these issues, we certainly have many questions but very few answers. However, it makes sense to keep the questions in mind none the less, for once the researcher has posed them, one fine day he/she may find a document that does provide at least partial answers' (pp. xiv–xv).

However, with regard to the documentation and answers she does find, she holds back nothing of her discoveries from her readers and attention to detail is always her trademark.

Due the geographical, cultural, linguistic and religious make-up of the Ottoman empire it was inherently multi-cultural in nature making defining what is meant by an 'Ottoman' characteristic problematic for

historians, and often leading to regional and/or periodical specialisations on the part of many practitioners. This work, while prone to anecdotes and case studies does not seem to be bound by such limitations. For example, Faroqhi's study of sweetmeat sellers in mid-18th-century Istanbul de-constructs the example down to its component parts, allowing these to be situated in the wider historical context. Thus, there is a discussion of the institution of the *gedik* (a legal document giving permission to set up and own a business which had become a pre-requisite by the 18th century for engaging in any kind of trade within the empire), and how it came to be found in government records (p. 177), as well as one which examines the example of the sweetmeat sellers in the context of the controversial issue of guild monopolies (5) and their uses, abuses and legality (pp.178–9).

In terms of using the sources available to her, Faroqhi draws on the rich secondary literature where it exists, including the analyses of Evliya Çelebi and works on the Ottoman-Venetian connection. This is done enough to show a total understanding of the context without straying too far from the original topic or compromising the originality of her argument and perspectives. Utilizing the copious amounts of new primary sources from the intensive archive research which has become her *modus operandi* as a practitioner, Faroqhi manages, while still uncovering new and previously unexamined cases, to situate them within their wider historical context. She also supports her arguments with up-to-date scholarship on larger, interdisciplinary issues, such as the changing focus of the history of international relations in the past few decades and how this gives a different perspective to her study of Ottoman ambassadors in Vienna (p. 3), and the question of who had access and when to written sources concerning these diplomatic exchanges (p. 9). There is always the fear for a historian when working with archival sources that if something was written down it was due to it being out of the ordinary, rather than characteristic, which is another caution against using an anecdotal approach. However this can be avoided by a diligent historian undertaking a sufficient quantity of primary source research, which Faroqhi has always done despite the difficulties of working in an under-catalogued period of Ottoman history. On the whole the correct balance is struck between the more popular and published primary sources such as Çelebi's writings, and the new data uncovered in the archives. Çelebi does appear to be something of a staple, but while this may be seen as indicating an over-reliance on one work there is no doubt that his writings are the most appropriate in this category for a study on travel in the Ottoman empire. Faroqhi's bibliography makes humbling reading, ranging from the expected works on Ottoman political, military and trade history to works of anthropological theory and art history, a scope which has allowed her to deliver a rounded and cohesive history of a topic previously neglected by Ottoman historians.

However despite her range of sources, approaches and expertise Faroqhi is both wise and humble enough to acknowledge that she could not cover everything in this one volume. Her conclusion acknowledges that there would have been migrants who remain completely undocumented and thus are hard to account for. Her intention seems to be one of trail-blazing, opening up new under-researched areas of Ottoman history to the wider academic community and encouraging further work on these areas, so while she may not have written the definitive book concerning Ottomans on the move, she has certainly written the first ground-breaking volume of what will hopefully be many more studies on this fascinating and under-examined topic. This book should and will become essential reading for students and scholars of Ottoman history.

## Notes

1. S Faroqhi, *Subjects of the Sultan: Culture and Daily Life in the Ottoman Empire*, (London, 2005). [Back to \(1\)](#)
  2. Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective*, (Cambridge, 2008) p. 197. [Back to \(2\)](#)
  3. Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire 1700-1922*, (Cambridge, 2005) p. 126. [Back to \(3\)](#)
  4. B Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World*, (Cambridge, 2010). [Back to \(4\)](#)
  5. E Yi, *Guild Dynamics in Seventeenth-Century Istanbul: Fluidity and Leverage*, (Boston, MA, 2004). [Back to \(5\)](#)
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