

“Gems for Royal Profit”: Prefaces and The Practice of Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Court History

Ethan L. MENCHINGER*

Abstract

Ottoman court chroniclers had definite notions of the past, and of the proper nature, use, and form of history. Oftentimes, they reveal these ideas in the prefaces of their works. An examination of seven prefaces from eighteenth-century court histories shows an ideal practice of history-writing quite different from modern understandings. This practice is intensely moral and practical; it also suggests that historians should produce works beautiful in-and-of-themselves. Like medieval and pre-modern European historiography, eighteenth-century Ottoman court chronicles aimed to be true and useful in an exemplary sense, and also pleasing to the senses. Truth, utility, and form were thus closely linked elements of good history-writing.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire – Eighteenth-Century – court history – historiography

Özet

Osmanlı resmi tarihçileri (vakanüvisler), geçmişe ve tarihçiliğin uygun tabiatı, faydası ve biçimine dair belirli düşüncelere sahiptiler. Eserlerin mukaddimelerinde bu yaklaşımlar zaman zaman açıklanmıştır. Onsekizinci yüzyıl Osmanlı resmi tarihlerinden yedi tane mukaddimenin incelenmesi, modern anlayışa benzemeyen ideal bir tarihsel uygulamanın varlığını göstermektedir. Bu uygulama çok törel ve pratiktir ve tarih eserlerinin özünde güzel olması lazım geldiğini de akla getirmektedir. Onsekizinci yüzyıl Osmanlı resmi tarihçileri eserlerinin, Ortaçağ ve modern öncesi Avrupa'ya özgü tarih yazıcılığı gibi örnek niteliğinde olan, bir anlamda gerçek, faydalı ve de memnuniyet verici olmasını amaçlamışlardır. Bu nedenle, hakikat, yararlılık ve biçim, iyi tarih yazıcılığının yakından bağlantılı unsurlarından olmuşlardır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Osmanlı İmparatorluğu – Onsekizinci yüzyıl – resmi tarihi – tarih yazıcılığı – tarihçilik

In the pre-modern Muslim world, recording the past was a profound concern.¹ This fact is particularly evidenced in the rich but neglected historical literature of the Ottoman Empire, which ruled much of the Middle East and Europe for some five centuries. Lamentably, not only has “scant scholarly attention...been paid to Ottoman historiography in general,”² but particularly untouched are the numerous works of dynastic historiographers, court chroniclers called *vakanüvis* or *vekayinüvis* (literally, “recorder of

* University of Michigan - USA

1 See, for example, Bernard Lewis, “Reflections on Islamic Historiography,” *Middle Eastern Lectures* 2 (1997): 69-80; Bernard Lewis, “Perceptions Musulmanes de l'Historie et de l'Historiographie,” in *Itinéraires d'Orient: Hommages à Claude Cahen*, ed. R. Curiel and R. Gyselen (Bures-sur-Yvette, 1994), 77-81. For a theoretical discussion on the topic, see Thomas Naff, “The Linkage of History and Reform in Islam: An Ottoman Model.” In *In Quest of an Islamic Humanism*, ed. A. H. Green (Cairo: 1983), 123-138.

2 Gabriel Piterberg, “Speech Acts and Written Texts: A Reading of a Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Historiographic Episode,” *Poetics Today* 14/3 (1993): 399.

events”), which form what might be called the “official narrative” of the dynasty. Between the early eighteenth- and twentieth-centuries, Ottoman *vakanüvises* created a voluminous body of historical writing. Little scholarship to date, however, has taken up these histories or their authors as objects of study, much less subjected them to close readings or stylistic and comparative analyses. Most often they are used as mines of information without an attempt to understand motive, intellectual and social context, or internal coherence.³ Our lack of appreciation for these chronicles thus deprives us of many possible insights into Ottoman use and conceptions of the past – why and how official chronicles were written, what purposes they served, and how they created narratives which, to Ottoman readers, presented the past in meaningful terms.

Although a full study of these chronicles is the work of years, as a modest beginning it may be worthwhile to consider Ottoman court historiography from the perspective of its practitioners. *Vakanüvises* wrote with specific notions of the past, the meaning of the past, and of the proper nature, use, and form of history, all of which influenced their historical depictions. Oftentimes, moreover, they expressed their views on these subjects, in prefaces (*mukaddime*) which included, among other things, statements on the purpose and pursuit of history.⁴ Such prefaces, from seven Ottoman court histories dating from the early to late eighteenth-century, form the basis of this paper. Taken together, they offer a view of history that is intensely moral and practical. They also suggest that historians should produce works which are beautiful in-and-of-themselves. Like medieval and pre-modern European historiography, eighteenth-century Ottoman court chronicles aimed to be “true and useful” in an exemplary sense,⁵ but also pleasing to the senses. Truth, utility, and form were considered closely linked elements of good history-writing.

The chronicles examined here are all from the eighteenth-century. They cover a period from the beginning of the century and the first *vakanüvis*,⁶ Mustafa Naima, until the

3 No book-length survey exists on Ottoman court chroniclers. Bekir Kütükoğlu's long article is the best treatment, “Vekayinüvis,” in *Vekayinüvis Makaleler* (İstanbul, 1994), 103-138. Lewis V. Thomas' work on Naima remains the most in-depth analysis of a single chronicle in English, though written some sixty years ago. *A Study of Naima*, ed. Norman Itzkowitz (New York, 1972). Among those contributing to revived interest in Ottoman historiography are, notably, Gabriel Piterberg and Baki Tezcan, whose recent article, “The Politics of Early Modern Ottoman Historiography,” while thought-provoking, is seriously flawed; *The Early Modern Ottomans: Remapping the Empire*, ed. Virginia H. Aksan and Daniel Goffman (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2007) 167-198.

4 In scholarship on Middle Eastern historiography, *mukaddime* is rendered in English as either “introduction” or “preface.” I have opted for the latter term in this paper.

5 On exemplary history-writing in Renaissance Europe, see Herschel Baker, *The Race of Time: Three Lectures on Renaissance Historiography* (Toronto, 1967). On truth in medieval European historiography, meanwhile, see Nancy Partner, *Serious Entertainments: The Writing of History in Twelfth-Century England* (Chicago, 1977), esp. 190-191.

6 The post of *vakanüvis* began in 1702 with Mustafa Naima, though this is not without debate. Karslızâde in the nineteenth-century elided the position with the earlier *şehnameci*; *Osmanlı Tarih ve Müverrihleri: Âyine-i Zürefa* (İstanbul, n.d.), 50-70. On the problem of terminology see especially Kütükoğlu, “Vekayinüvis,” 103-105; Thomas, 36-37; also Christine Woodhead, “An Experiment in Official Historiography: The Post of Şehnâmeçi in the Ottoman Empire, 1555-1605,” *Wiener Zeitschrift Für Die*

publication of Ahmet Vâsîf Efendi's chronicle in 1804. In chronological order, these works include those of Naima, Çelebizâde Âsım, Mehmet Suphi, Süleyman İzzi, Mustafa Reşit Çeşmizâde, Mehmet Edip, and Ahmet Vâsîf, supplemented by several lesser, non-court histories.⁷ Because this paper is confined mainly to prefaces, moreover, and has not, as is preferable, considered each work as a coherent whole,⁸ any conclusions must be preliminary. Without better knowing how *vakanüvises* followed their own precepts, this study can only be confined to ideal practice.

A "Pleasing Introduction": The Post of Vakanüvis Through Prefaces

The best place to look for a pre-modern Muslim historian's views on history is in his *mukaddime*.⁹ *Vakanüvises* and other chroniclers generally began their work with these sections, which included such things as invocations to God, dedications to patrons, autobiographical information, and, sometimes, expositions on history. Often dismissed as rhetorical dross,¹⁰ the significance of these prefaces should not be overlooked. Although some contend that *mukaddimes* contain little more than "the perfunctory elaboration of platitudes" which "rarely show any evidence of independent thought,"¹¹ several recent studies have argued that the preface was more than stereotyped linguistic bombast. *Mukaddimes*, while similar and even imitative, still allowed scope for expression. Tied to the author's overarching views or themes, they can provide information on a work's intellectual, social, and political context.¹² As Nancy Partner observes, the fact that statements on the purpose of history were clichéd does not mean they were not sincerely held.¹³ Such remarks, furthermore, even if platitudes, still represent an ideal which defined

Kunde Des Morgenlandes 75 (1983): 169-170. Interestingly, Çelebizâde Âsım, writing in the 1720s, calls his predecessor Râşit a "şehname-guy." *Çelebi-zâde Âsım Târîhi*, haz. Ali Aktaş (www.yazoku.net, accessed 11 October 2009), 4.

- 7 See bibliography for a complete list of these works, which will be cited individually below. I have, unfortunately, been unable to consult a number of court histories from the period for the reason that they exist only in manuscript.
- 8 Authors advocating this approach include Marilyn Waldman, *Toward a Theory of Historical Narrative: A Case Study in Perso-Islamicate Historiography*, (Columbus, 1980), esp. 4-25; Julie Meisami, *Persian Historiography to the End of the Twelfth Century* (Edinburgh, 1999); John R. Walsh, "The Historiography of Ottoman-Safavid Relations in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *Historians of the Middle East*, ed. Bernard Lewis and P. M. Holt (London, 1962), 197-199.
- 9 See Franz Rosenthal's classic study *A History of Muslim Historiography* (Leiden, 1952); also Tarif Khalidi, "Islamic Biographical Dictionaries: A Preliminary Assessment," *The Muslim World* 63:1 (1973): 53.
- 10 See Sholeh A. Quinn's study *Historical Writing During the Reign of Shah Abbas: Ideology, Imitation, and Legitimacy in Safavid Chronicles* (Salt Lake City, 2000), esp. 33-61. Prefaces were common to Arabic and Persian as well as Ottoman literature.
- 11 Walsh, 198-199. For more criticism see Bushra Hamad, "History and Biography," *Arabica* 45/2 (1998): 215-232.
- 12 On Ottoman prefaces, see Thomas, 65-83; also Douglas A. Howard, "Genre and Myth in the Ottoman Advice for Kings Literature," in *The Early Modern Ottomans*, 161-162. Safavid prefaces figure prominently in Quinn, esp. 33-61.
- 13 Partner, 188. As Waldman argues, one can assume that formal history is "pervaded by the views of the author and his age on writing history, on the meaning of history in general, and on the particular history that

the limits of discussion on historiography.¹⁴

To begin, it might be useful to consider who Ottoman court historians were and how they operated. *Vakanüvises*, one and all, were part of an elite. Occasionally, they were men of religion from the *ulema*: Raşit Efendi, as noted by his successor Çelebizâde Âsım, left the post of historian when he was appointed chief judge of Aleppo.¹⁵ More often, though, chroniclers belonged to the highest level of the Ottoman scribal bureaucracy, the *hacegân*. Mehmet Suphi, for example, served during and after his term as historian as head of the chancery office, or *beylikçi*.¹⁶ Ahmet Vâsıf, meanwhile, held various high posts in addition to *beylikçi* such as *mektupçu*, *amedî*, *tevkii*, ambassador to Spain, wartime negotiator, and later in his career *reisülküttâp*.¹⁷

Süleyman İzzi records in his preface how he himself was chosen as *vakanüvis* in 1745. As it reveals something of the process and criteria for appointment, the passage is worth quoting in full:

*[The Grand Vezir Hasan Pasha] informed His Excellency the reisülküttâp Elhac Mustafa Efendi of the mentioned circumstance [of appointing a historian]. Ordering strict inquiry into authors from among the scribal class, and especially those inclined to and capable of recording and rendering both tenor and sense in the composition of events or in oration [best-i makalede], according to the rules of historians, His Excellency the abovesaid Efendi then had certain capable men from the imperial council's hacegân recorded in a list according to the imperial command, those suitable in the Sublime State for the illustrious post of vakanüvis – he then ordered this humble one, the incapable, most remiss, talentless servant, Süleyman İzzi, to succeed to the said group [of candidates]. This was submitted to His Excellency the Grand Vezir, August and Absolute deputy; upon his ordering it be someone well-trained with powers of description, this humble servant was, by way of honor and gratification, selected and raised up from amongst the eminent.*¹⁸

According to İzzi, scribes in this case formed the pool of candidates for court historian. Specifically sought were men skilled in written composition and oration, with good descriptive powers.

To these may be added other qualifications, not least of which was a detailed knowledge of state affairs. Ahmet Vâsıf claims his access to state secrets added to his authority as historian. “Other than my confidence in state secrets, my intermediacy, and my employment in negotiation service,” he writes, “I adorned the majority of memoranda submitted in secrecy to the Imperial court of my own accord, with my humble pen. For this

is the subject of the work.” Waldman, 6; cf. Meisami, 6.

14 Baker, 18.

15 Çelebizâde Âsım *Târîhi*, 3-4.

16 Süleyman İzzi, *Tarih-i İzzi* (İstanbul, 1784), 3.

17 Ahmet Vâsıf, *Mehasinü'l-Asar ve Hakaikü'l-Ahbar* (İstanbul, 1804), I: 4, II: 3, 231, 237. *Mehasinü'l-Asar ve Hakaikü'l-Ahbar*; haz. Mücteba İlgürel (İstanbul, 1978), 373. *Mektupçu* – chief scribe of the imperial council. *Amedi* – receiver general of the Grand Vezir's correspondence. *Tevkii* – scribe charged with drawing the sultan's signature on documents. The *reisülküttâp* was akin to the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

18 Translated from *Tarih-i İzzi*, 3. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

reason, my humbleness' knowledge of the central and minute circumstances of events included in the present work is most sufficient and perfect.”¹⁹ Access to “state secrets (*esrar-ı devlet*)” appears to have been expected of a good eighteenth-century court history. In an imperial rescript from the year 1791, Sultan Selim III ordered that Mehmet Edip use and record such matter in his work.²⁰ Edip complains that one of his previous histories had suffered from a lack of access to secrets:

*As those charged with recording history have neither might nor main to successfully, of their own accord, enter into the secret affairs of the Sublime State, the brief contents which this humble servant composed [earlier]...are but limited to a history of the appointments and dismissals of men of rank, along with daily events; they forsake the minute explanation of necessary affairs which was their original purpose.*²¹

Edip goes on to praise the sultan for giving him full rein of sensitive material: “The source of the state historian's coherence is but confidence in secret matters. An imperial edict was thus issued in honor...so as to say, “May certain of the Sublime State's secrets no more be concealed from him!”²²

In all likelihood, the phrase “state secrets” referred to source material: government archives. *Vakanüvises* received information from the chancery regularly. After completing a matter, offices like the *beylikçi*, *mektupçu*, and *amedî* provided the historian with what appear to be documents (*ilm ü haber suretleri*). Appointments and dismissals arrived from the Tahvil and Ruus divisions, for instance, while word of official ceremonies came from the Teşrifat office.²³ In one imperial rescript, dated July 1802, the sultan further orders that Ahmet Vâsîf be given regular news on Europe:

*Howbeit he is recording and dictating the pages of his history with truth, fact, and perfect care, because our servant Ahmet Vâsîf Efendi is unable to procure news and events occurring in the European states, and because the register of events he has written and compiled is lacking this advantage, send unto him, month-by-month, the news and tales coming to pass in Europe, according to truth and fact.*²⁴

It is perhaps significant that many *vakanüvises* served in the very chancery offices responsible for providing material to the court historian. However, the fact that offices had to be reminded of this duty suggests it was not always carried out. Mehmet Hâkim Efendi,

19 *Mehasin*, II: 3. He speaks here of his service as *tevkîi*.

20 Hatt-ı Hümayun 11187, in Enver Ziya Karal, *Selim III.ün Hatt-ı Hümayunları* (Ankara, 1942), I: 166-167. There is some confusion about the recipient of this order. Kütükoğlu believes it refers to Mehmet Edip, “Vekayinüvis,” 108; Mücteba İlgürel, conversely, claims it refers to Vâsîf, xlv. The text is unclear, but Kütükoğlu has established a proper chronology; Edip's language also mirrors that found in the rescript, leading me to side with Kütükoğlu.

21 “Teşrifatî Naîm Efendi Târîhi,” haz. Aziz Berker, *Tarih Vesikaları* III (1944): 70. Berker misidentified Edip's history due to an incorrect notation on the text. Kütükoğlu, “Vekayinüvis,” 119, n. 100.

22 *Ibid.*, 71. “Bu suretde bazı serair-i Devlet-i Aliyye dahi ketm olunmasun deyü...”; cf. Karal, 167. “*Esrar-ı devlettir deyu vukuati kendiden ketm ettirmeyüb tahrir ettirin.*”

23 Kütükoğlu, “Vekayinüvis,” 107-108.

24 Hatt-ı Hümayun 5019, translated as quoted in İlgürel, xlvi-xlvii.

like Edip, complained that he was forced to exclude certain material from his history.²⁵ Likewise, Halil Nuri Bey insisted that sound history required a return to the “ancient practice” of revealing state secrets.²⁶

What of other sources used in court histories, though? Outside of archival documents, *vakanüvises* tell us they had recourse to both oral and written sources, which physical proximity to the court must have aided them in obtaining. Mehmet Suphi in mid-century used both written and eyewitness testimony, it seems. His work, he writes, “includes state secrets of the Sublime, Ever-Eternal State, and records the exemplary events which I obtained from certain reliable sources or which I attained through personal witness of what occurred at the Imperial court.”²⁷ Ahmet Vâsıf, meanwhile, prefacing his revision of several earlier court chronicles, wrote that “not only is [my work] worthy of perusal by the erudite and insightful, but to the said history's contents I added noteworthy information from what had occurred of late, as well as narratives acquired from knowledgeable men.”²⁸ Oral sources figure prominently in Vâsıf's case, particularly his early patron Gül Ahmet Paşazâde Ali Paşa.²⁹ A close reading of his history also reveals uncited written sources – among them, those of Ibn Khaldun,³⁰ Ahmet Resmi,³¹ Katip Çelebi, and Mehmet Râşit.³² That sources were left uncited was a commonplace for all chroniclers, however. A non-court historian, Ömer Cabi, expressedly utilized “coffeehouse denizens” and “reliable sources,” but included other personal observations, written documents, and oral testimony.³³

To better understand *vakanüvises*' views of the past and history-writing, it is useful to look at how they depict their own labors: as keepers of an old, noble tradition bound to the dynasty's wellbeing. According to Çelebizâde Âsım in the 1720s, “the foundations of the edifice of the world depend on learned men.” In every age, therefore, with the aid of the

25 Bekir Kütükoğlu, “Müverrih Vâsıf'ın Kaynaklarından Hâkim Tarihi,” in *Vekayinüvis Makaleler*, 146, n. 35. “Tahrir olunan makalelerde ilel ve mucib tahririnden mücanebete eğerçi hiç tasaddı olunduğu yokdur; tenbih olunmağla öylece ala ma hüve'l-vaki zabt ve olur olmaz ilel ve mucib tahriri çespan olmadığundan zabt-ı sahih ile iktifa olundu.” This passage is not entirely clear. Two different readings are: “Although the written matters neglect an account of cause and motive, there was no attempt to do [otherwise]. It was ordered so, hence because it was unfitting to set them down as they happened and record any cause or motive, it has sufficed to record soundly [zabt-ı sahih].” Or “...because they were recorded as they happened, and because any account of cause and motive was unfitting, it has sufficed to record soundly.”

26 Kütükoğlu, “Vekayinüvis,” 107-108.

27 Mehmet Suphi, *Subhî Tarihi* haz. Mesut Aydın (İstanbul, 2007), 14.

28 *Mehasin*, I: 4.

29 Ali Paşa was a high-ranking vezir, whom Vâsıf served in the capacity of librarian around the years 1766 to 1769. See İlgürel, xix; *Mehasin*, II: 53-55.

30 Sections of Vâsıf's preface are taken almost verbatim from Khaldun's *Mukaddimah*. Cf. *Ibid*, I: 4-7.

31 Virgina H. Aksan, *An Ottoman Statesman in War and Peace: Ahmed Resmi Efendi, 1700-1783* (Leiden, 1995), 150 n. 186, 158, n. 221; Ahmet Resmi, *Hulasatü'l-İtibar (A Summary of Admonitions)*, trans. Ethan L. Menchinger (unpublished), 12-15; cf. *Mehasin*, II: 85-89, 223-225, 243-244.

32 İlgürel, xlvii. Vâsıf mentions other works in his preface, as well, including the *Risâlet al-İntisâr li-Gudvet al-Ahyâr* and Mühiyettin Arabi's *Muhazarât al-Abyâr wa musamarât al-ahyar*.

33 Ömer Cabi, *Câbi Târîhi*, haz. Mehmet Ali Beyhan (İstanbul, 2003), xxxiii-xxxvii, 1.

dynasty, skilled men are appointed to record history that will act as “worthy guiding principles (*düsturü'l-amel*) to the governors of the world.”³⁴ History, especially court history, helped to support the state through edification and utility. Ahmet Vâsif mirrors these ideas, saying that rulers seek history's benefits:

*They thus assign and appoint men of genius, one each from among the deserving, to record and register, by degrees, those events which are revealed in their states through the revolutions of time. From successor to predecessor, time's harvest is a memento, and from predecessor to posterity, the wayfarer's gift of admonition. Within the Ever-Eternal Sublime State, moreover, this illustrious craft has been esteemed to a degree of perfection. In every era incidents of the divan and royal episodes have been inscribed on the pages of days, embellished the registers of months and years, and, in case of need, have been a reference to the Pillars of the Realm and guiding principle to the Guardians of the State.*³⁵

Criticism was another way in which Ottoman court chroniclers expressed opinions on the proper nature and form of history. Because of the competitive atmosphere of the court, or perhaps because they felt strongly about their craft, *vakanüvises* rarely shrank from giving due praise or censure. It is through these remarks that one can gain a better notion of what good court chronicles consisted – of how the purpose and pursuit of history were conceived, and what qualities were esteemed or derided.

In the *mukaddime* of his history, Mustafa Naima includes an excursus on “vital conditions and important rules” for historians. He offers seven guidelines: historians must be truthful; they must disregard spurious tales; they should incorporate useful details and not confine themselves to spare annals; they should not be partisan; they should use simple language; they should limit themselves to appropriate embellishments; and they should discuss astrology only when its results are demonstrable.³⁶ Naima thus outlines an ideal historical practice that involves considerations of truth, usefulness, and aesthetics. Mehmet Edip's stated aim, meanwhile, was to record urgent matters of dynasty and religion (*din ü devlet*) in a coherent arrangement, without bias or affectation:

*In the composition of the volumes of this history, the pen of abstention has been withdrawn from excessive, consecutive prosodic compounds, which men of insight disdain, and from tasteless, long and prolix verbosity; it is free, so far as possible, of prejudice or favor in places of narration and the description of certain personages; and aloofness from praise or censure for their own sake and from useless prolixity has been preferred.*³⁷

Here, Edip's concern for style is particularly emphasized. Aesthetics held an important place alongside the events themselves, as witnessed in Edip's self-exhortation: “May he do

34 *Çelebizâde Âsım Târîhi*, 3.

35 *Mehasin*, I: 3; see also Vâsif's remarks on the same subject in İlğürel, 4.

36 Mustafa Naima, *Târîh-i Na'imâ: (Ravzatü'l-Hüseyn fî hulâsati ahbâri'l-hâfikayn)*, haz. Mehmet İpşirli (Ankara, 2007), I: 4-5; Thomas, 112-114, 116-117.

37 “Teşrifatî Na'im Efendi Târîhi,” 71.

his utmost in the matter of composition, free from stylistic verbosity!”³⁸

Ahmet Vâsîf also offers strong views on history's proper aim and form, sparing few predecessors. Mehmet Hâkim, for example, who wrote during the 1750s and 1760s, was to Vâsîf unskilled in the art of composition. Not only this, but his work forsook causation, used allusive language, and was void of sound narration and utility, hence “its dubious contents incurred the disgust and weariness of scholars.”³⁹ Vâsîf uses similar words concerning Sadullah Enveri's history: since Enveri's work “was an assemblage of mistakes and defects arising on every occasion through ignorance,” and contained copied documents and curiosities, he was obliged to rewrite it, like Hâkim's history.⁴⁰ Vâsîf concludes by pronouncing generally on the differences between his history and others: “As for historians who have grown and flourished in the Sublime State up to this moment,” he says,

*...some of them clouded their purpose with tenebrous and coarse language. Others in this glorious science, incapable of proper discernment, spent and spilled ink with incorrect assertions, bizarre expressions, and other habits. Without paying heed to the benefit of the state, the fine points of philosophy, and the realities of existential conditions that are tenets of historical science, they were crumbs for the mouths of men of worth and aptitude.*⁴¹

By contrast, Ahmet Vâsîf presents his chronicle as both truthful, useful to the dynasty, and aesthetically pleasing. In his estimation, he depicted “a collection of useful events, including the benefits of morality and elements of practical philosophy,” all with befitting adornment and from which readers could glean truths and become “prudent navigators of affairs.”⁴²

In the view of history seen above, truth, utility, and form are closely linked. This mixture of the scholarly and literary was not uncommon in pre-modern histories, which “were essentially works of art in which the author wished to combine the *utile*, scholarship and the moralistic instruction of the public, with the *dulce* of a pleasant style.”⁴³ Eighteenth-century *vakanüvises* often used these three categories – truth, usefulness, and form – in their prefatory discussions of history. Yet without knowing what such concepts entailed, it is easy to impose modern understandings on them. The following sections will therefore try to illustrate how *vakanüvises* construed truth, use, and pleasing form in historiography. It is well to recall, though, that as these works have not been studied in full, any conclusions must be limited to the ideal of the preface.

Amma badu

38 Ibid, 71.

39 *Mehasin*, I: 4. Vâsîf remarks on Hâkim's history in another manuscript: “...it alludes to certain legends and yarns, along with hearsay from liars like that master of travel history Evliya Çelebi...” translated as quoted in İlgürel, xl. See also Kütükoğlu, “Müverrih Vâsîf'in Kaynaklarından Hâkim Tarihi,” 139, n. 1.

40 *Mehasin*, II: 3.

41 Ibid, II: 314.

42 Ibid, II: 315.

43 Jan Schmidt, *Pure Waters for Thirsty Muslims: A Study of Mustafa Ali of Gallipoli's Kühnü'l-Ahbâr* (Leiden, 1991), 275-276.

(But now, to our subject)

VERSE: *When one studies history, one describes the world and perceives
each generation*⁴⁴

*The Truth of History*⁴⁵

History in the pre-modern Muslim world was a moral science. Incongruity between the perfect God-given past of early Islam and the imperfect present endowed history with purpose – its study gave ethical meaning to life because it could help re-orient humankind to God,⁴⁶ hence two of the historian's aims were to admonish and instruct. By presenting exemplars or morals from the past (*ibar* or *ibret*), history guided the conduct of future generations.⁴⁷

By contrast, scholarship on Ottoman court chronicles posits they were largely concerned with fact and accuracy. Bernard Lewis, for example, notes *vakanüvises'* candor in a didactic tradition that, on the whole, “tell[s] it like it was.”⁴⁸ Rhoads Murphey, likewise, claims court historians tried “to provide minutely-detailed, factually accurate description; in other words to attempt to portray the world *wie es eigentlich gewesen*.”⁴⁹ Most recently, Baki Tezcan has argued the “modern nature” of eighteenth-century court histories. In his opinion, these works show “secular” understanding of historical time while representing themselves as “a neutral expression of historical reality.” *Vakaüvises* aspired neither to judge nor instruct, but “merely to show how it has been [*wie es eigentlich gewesen*].”⁵⁰ In light of these views, it will be helpful to examine what the chroniclers have to say about their work, beginning with the idea of truth.

If we credit *vakanüvises'* prefaces, an understanding of truth was very important to their historical writing. This idea is consonant with other pre-modern Muslim

44 Translated from Arabic, *Mehasin*, II: 2.

45 I have taken this tripartite division of truth, use, and form from Baker's lectures on Renaissance historiography.

46 Naff, 124, 127, 132-134.

47 Lewis, “Reflections on Islamic Historiography,” 77.

48 *Ibid*, 77.

49 Rhoads Murphey, “Ottoman Historical Writing in the Seventeenth-Century: A Survey of the General Development of the Genre after the Reign of Sultan Ahmed I (1603-1617),” *Archivum Ottomanicum* 13 (1993-1994): 282; see also Woodhead, 181.

50 Tezcan, 180, 183-184, 196-197. In addition to suggesting a near-Rankean positivism in court histories, Tezcan makes several unsupported claims. Among them is that court histories were regarded by contemporaries as “neutral and dependable bearers of historical truth,” an argument which he fails to substantiate. Also problematic is his contention that by the mid-eighteenth-century court histories established a “monopoly of historiographical expression in the center of the empire,” 180. “Monopoly” here implies an exclusive control that ignores some seventy-five works from the period which, while mentioned in his article, are dismissed as “marginalized.” 182, n. 34. It must be noted that not all agree with the assessment of court histories given by Tezcan, Murphey, and others. Lewis Thomas and Cornell Fleischer have both commented on the didactic function of these chronicles, and especially their inclusion of political criticism. See Thomas, 65-122; Cornell Fleischer, *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire: the Historian Mustafa Ali, 1541-1600* (Princeton, NJ, 1986), 237-238.

historiography, which placed great store on fact and accuracy.⁵¹ Naima's excursus on history, for example, offers perhaps the most detail on truth in historical practice: the historian must be reliable and not record spurious tales, he must prefer documented statements and spurn rumors, and he must speak frankly, justly, and not exaggerate “beyond the bounds of reason.”⁵² Süleyman İzzi for his part depicts truth as a negative quality: truth is the absence of bias. His work was written, he says,

*...so that the elevated circumstances of events shall strip dissimulation from their polluted, dirt-soiled garment and exempt them from the old rag of flattery and slander; to lead about the beloved with veracity and fidelity in her elaborate raiment, to honor her on the throne of these folios, and to unveil her head in integrity.*⁵³

İzzi thus presents his history “without the stain of dubiousness or hypocrisy.”⁵⁴ This view of truth is shared by others, as well – by Mehmet Suphi and Ahmet Vâsîf, who criticize peers for dissimulation which affects “truthful narration and utility,”⁵⁵ and by Mehmet Edip, whom Sultan Selim III ordered to write “with clear formulation and as a historian; un-hypocritically and without sycophancy.”⁵⁶

Court historians say little about truth as the representation of past reality “*wie es eigentlich gewesen.*”⁵⁷ Only in the nineteenth-century did *vakanüvises* seem to develop ideas of truth in a positive sense, given to systematic proof and reason.⁵⁸ Rather, eighteenth-century court chroniclers are apt to speak of truth as fairness: as the absence of partisanship. In this view of history, strict adherence to “what actually happened” was not necessary and permitted creative elaboration.

As an illustration of this, one can consider how *vakanüvises* handled source material. Ahmet Vâsîf, for instance, revised the work of several court historians during his

51 Naff, 134.

52 *Târih-i Na'imâ*, I: 4-5; as cited in Thomas, 112-113.

53 *Tarih-i İzzi*, 2.

54 *Ibid.*, 3.

55 *Subhî Tarihi*, 14. *Mehasin*, I: 4.

56 Hatt-ı Hümayun 11187, translated as quoted in Karal, I: 167.

57 There is a roughly equivalent phrase in Arabic, *ala ma hüve'l-vaki*, which I have also come across once in my research, cf. note 25 above. Here the significance of the phrase is not entirely clear. Depending on how one interprets the passage, Hâkim might alternately associate or dissociate recording events “as they happened” with giving “an account of cause and motive.” It is not clear what relation *ala ma hüve'l-vaki* has to accuracy, causation, and “soundness.”

58 See for example Mehmet Şanizâde, writing in the 1820s in *Şânî-zâde Târîhi*, haz. Ziya Yılmaz (İstanbul, 2008), esp. his section on historiography, I: 14-24, “Introduction to the Precepts of the Science of History and the Tenets of the Study of Histories (*el-Mukaddimetü fi kavaid-i fenni't-tarih ve usul-i mutalaati't-tevarih*).” Şükrü Hanioglu discusses the development of criticism and analytical frameworks in late Ottoman historiography, beginning particularly with Ahmet Cevdet, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, 2008), 98. Şerif Mardin highlights Ahmet Vefik Paşa's contributions to the furtherance of scientific method in history during the 1860s, *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought: A Study in the Modernization of Turkish Political Ideas* (Syracuse, NY, 2000), 261-262.

career.⁵⁹ In his revision of Sadullah Enveri's chronicle, he draws on other sources such as Ahmet Resmi's history of the 1768-1774 Russian-Ottoman War. A comparison of passages reveals how Vâsîf could elaborate without being untruthful.⁶⁰ Here both authors present Yenişehirli Osman Efendi, a statesman and negotiator during the war, as described by the Russians:**Resmi**

"Were we to say, 'This Efendi is crazy!' it would be impolite, so let us say that he is smart, but it is simply not of intelligence we have known or seen!"

<<Bu efendi delidir disek edepten hariç ancak şöyle diriz ki bunun akılı var, ama bizim bildiğimiz gördüğümüz akıllardan değildir>>

Vâsîf

"Were we to say, 'This man is crazy!' it would be ill-mannered. Were we to say he is reasonable, his actions are beyond the scope of reason. This intelligence is simply not of the intelligence which we know and have learned of!"

<<Bu adam divanedir disek sev-i edeptir. Akıldır disek tavrı daire-i akıldan hariçtir. Ancak bu akıl bizim bilup işitdiğimiz ukuldan değildir>>

Vâsîf's version is, firstly, longer and more descriptive than Resmi's. The added phrase "Were we to say he is reasonable, his actions are beyond the scope of reason," may heighten the effect of the passage, but does not suggest an author strictly recording events "as they happened." Vâsîf also changes Resmi's language, replacing some Turkish words with Persianate equivalents. *Deli* thus becomes *divane*, and *akıllardan* the proper Arabic plural *ukuldan*; *edepten hariç* is changed to *sev-i edeptir*. Resmi's sentence, moreover, which reads like spoken Turkish, becomes more grammatically correct in Vâsîf, with use of the *-dir* suffix and gerund *-up*. It seems unlikely either author meant to record what the Russian interlocutor literally said about Osman Efendi. The point, instead, was to depict Osman as an obstinate and ineffective negotiator, with more or less pleasing language.

Rather than things "as they happened," truth to the eighteenth-century *vakanüvis* was closer to what Nancy Partner calls "moral truth," or accounts "unbiased and free from self-interest." Pre-modern histories usually lack a distinction between truth and bias; they

59 These revisions are the subject of my as yet unfinished doctoral dissertation. Bekir Kütükoğlu also published two studies examining Vâsîf's use of sources, "Müverrih Vâsîf'in Kaynaklarından Hâkim Tarihi," and Mustafa Reşit Çeşmizâde, *Çeşmi-zâde Tarihi*, haz. Bekir Kütükoğlu (İstanbul, 1959), vii-xxiv.

60 Ahmet Resmi, *Hulasatü'l-İtibar* (İstanbul: Mühendisyan Matbaası, 1869), 55; *Mehasin*, II: 225

do not aim to give a literal account of what happened in the past.⁶¹ In light of pre-modern Muslim historiography's instructive aim, it is also possible to think of truth in a broader, exemplary sense. In Herschel Baker's words, truths in exemplary history are “paradigms of moral and political behavior, which, authenticated by famous men's experience, provide patterns that can shape our own response to perennially recurring situations.”⁶² In this sense, truth was closely linked to history's utility. While accuracy and fact were important to eighteenth-century Ottoman court chroniclers, more important was the *ibret* conveyed and fact's “validity to life-vision.”⁶³

But only God knows the truth

VERSE: *Hünere terbiye gerek; hünerin terbiye fi'l-hakikat illetidir*⁶⁴

The Use of History

Like most pre-modern historians, eighteenth-century Ottoman *vakanüvises* held that history had a definite practical function. Ahmet Vâsıf defines history as primarily useful, a science whose benefit is “admonition and good counsel” and which offers analogies for present conduct.⁶⁵ In like manner, Süleyman İzzi writes that history is the forebear's gift of admonition to posterity; the behavior of past rulers in particular edifies those of the present. To him, history is a dialogue between “predecessors” and “successors”:

It is clear and evident that histories of manifest esteem which issue continually from predecessors are mementos of illustrious rank for the sagacity of successors. Because, by this means, good-fortuned predecessors speak truth and establish for their successors a manner of absolute benevolence...[the latter] strive for the excellent path of endeavoring utterly to rectify their affairs, and of sparing no efforts to perpetuate numerous advantages...While consideration is given, which

61 Partner takes this idea from Dr. Johnson's distinction between “moral” and “physical” truths: “moral truth is when you tell a thing sincerely and precisely as it appears to you.” Partner, 117, 187, 190-191. In classical historiography, a like distinction was made between “true” and “biased” rather than “true” and “false.” This did not, however, mean that classical history avoided judgments, as its purpose was largely to convey proper models of conduct and evaluate men and deeds. John Marincola, *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography* (Cambridge, 1997), 158-174; T. J. Luce, “Ancient Views on the Causes of Bias in Historical Writing,” *Classical Philology* 84 (1989): 17.

62 Baker, 16.

63 See Marshall Hodgson, “Two Pre-modern Muslim Historians: Pitfalls and Opportunities in Presenting Them to Moderns,” in *Towards World Community*, (The Hague, 1968), 62-63.

64 “Skill requires moral education; verily, moral education is the source of skill.” *Mehasin*, II: 313.

65 İlgürel, 3; cf. Naima's words on the study of history: “Those erudite adepts who successfully sail to an understanding of the essential truth of this shoreless sea [of history] attain jewels of perfection and pearls of truth...For him they serve as standards of judgment and as useful analogies...Through much experience and much application, he can foresee what will be the result of actions, provided he understands the men who do those actions, and can comprehend the affairs of great men, provided he knows what the causes prior to those affairs were. In his mind's mirror, the consequences of circumstances become clear, and the forms of good and evil distinct, as if by intuition. Thus the science of history is the pursuit of a glorious pathway, noble of purpose and full of usefulness.” Translation by Thomas, 110-111; *Târih-i Na'imâ*, I: 3.

*the predecessor renders as a deserving favor to the successor according to this ancient method and age old practice, it is with a view to procure prayers and otherworldly benefits. Thus, just as the predecessor is obliged to supplicate the successor; the successor also ensures that the predecessor has numerous benefits...In whatever manner, by expending the efforts of men or perfecting the honor of glory, the successor is indebted to the predecessor with the strongest of obligations.*⁶⁶

The idea that history served to instruct was also shared by non-court historians. Ömer Cabi and Ahmet Resmi, for example, assumed that the past held admonitory significance, indeed the very title of Resmi's history *Hulasatü'l-İtibar* ("A Summary of Admonitions") declares it a didactic work.⁶⁷

While useful, the scope of Ottoman court histories was limited. The eighteenth-century *vakarıvis* recognized the benefit of history mainly as an aid to political decision making. In this way, history was a school of politics – in Montaigne's words, "a nursery of ethical and political dissertations for the benefit and improvement of those who hold a place in the management of the world."⁶⁸ Mehmet Suphi, for instance, narrated conquests, holy raids, and other gestes for the reader's benefit. These, he writes, "ink the inner-heart of what shall be a work of great import, containing many principles and objects meriting the attention of eminent men."⁶⁹ İzzi describes his history's contents similarly – worldly deeds, holy war, jihad, and conquests.⁷⁰ Ahmet Vâsîf, moreover, insists that history must serve as "royal counsel," since

*...naturally laudable sovereigns unto whose judgment the affairs of the entire world and importance of various events of the nations are admitted require, with strongest need, this science, because they are charged with advancing or repelling the good or ill, the profit or injury, that occurs in their reigns.*⁷¹

To Vâsîf, deeds of great men form the subject of history, prophetic tradition and saintly and regal tales foremost among them.⁷² The *vakarıvis*' main purpose was to supply rulers and statesmen *ibret* from past events as a guide to present action. To illustrate this, he relates an anecdote from Abbasid history in which certain non-Muslims came to the caliph to claim ancient immunity from the poll-tax. According to Vâsîf, a local chronicler demonstrated to the caliph that their proofs were forged. "There is no need for proof or deliberation," he concludes, "that the justice and cognizance of this man increased the revenues of the treasury, nor that the honor and necessity of the science of history shall henceforth be known!"⁷³ In Vâsîf's case, his royal patron took history's lessons seriously – during one

66 *Tarih-i İzzi*, 2.

67 On Resmi's stated intent of admonition see *Hulasatü'l-İtibar (A Summary of Admonitions)*, 18; on his view of history, 11-12. See also *Câbî Târîhi*, 1.

68 As quoted in Baker, 51.

69 *Subhî Târîhi*, 13.

70 *Tarih-i İzzi*, 2.

71 İlgürel, 2.

72 *Mehasin*, I: 2. İlgürel, 3.

73 İlgürel, 4.

campaign late in the century, Selim III even recommended his military commanders study Vâsıf's chronicle for edification.⁷⁴

Moral history was hardly unique to the pre-modern Muslim tradition. European historiography from classical times to the Renaissance emphasized patterns in history and the lessons which could be derived therefrom.⁷⁵ As scholars have observed, this approach was in large part concerned with finding a useable past. It assumes that history is not a random sequence “but the record of a process, linear or cyclic, or maybe even both, that defines the moral contour of events,”⁷⁶ in which the past is evaluated in terms of the present and the meaning of facts is more important than the facts themselves.⁷⁷ With any number of possible morals, furthermore, such an approach can serve numerous interests.⁷⁸

In pre-modern Muslim historiography, this type of narrative has been called “ethical-rhetorical history.”⁷⁹ As part of its instructive role, exemplary history sought to persuade rather than simply convey facts. This is not to say accuracy was unimportant; great care was paid to both detail and fact.⁸⁰ But rather, as Marilyn Waldman suggests, in ethical-rhetorical history facts formed the “raw material of problem-solving, or at least problem-raising.”⁸¹ The chronicler elicited significance from his materials to create a narrative which couched the past in meaningful terms, and perhaps argued a point.⁸²

Ottoman chroniclers, it should be noted, often undertook ethical-rhetorical historiography. According to Rhoads Murphey, seventeenth-century historians were frequently critics of social mores and moral auditors of those in power. Not only did this history-writing glorify the dynasty, but it edified those responsible for the dynasty's continuance.⁸³ Nor is there any reason to think that *vakanüvises* wrote differently. Naima, for one, argues that good history-writing must include more than facts; it must provide what is today called an “interpretive framework”:

Whatever the sphere of human life to which the question of which an historian is treating belongs, he should not be content to simply tell the story but should also

74 As cited in Karal, 64. “*Vasıf Tarihini çok mütalaa eyle gördüğü seferlerde zahmeti neden çekmişler bir hoşça malum idin.*” “Study Vâsıf's *History* extensively; may you learn well why they suffered hardships in previous campaigns.”

75 On the Renaissance, see Baker, 45-70. Partner is very insightful on medieval historiography. For the classical Roman tradition, see T. P. Wiseman, “Practice and Theory in Roman Historiography,” *Historia* 66 (1981): 375-393.

76 Baker, 64-65.

77 Numerous scholars have argued this point, including Waldman and Meisami; see also Hodgson, “Two Pre-modern Muslim Historians,” 62-63; Lewis, “Reflections on Islamic Historiography,” 72-73, 77; T. El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Harun al-Rashid and the Narrative of the 'Abbasid Caliphate* (Cambridge, 1999), 216-220; Konrad Hirschler, *Medieval Arabic Historiography: Authors as Actors* (New York, 2006), 3-6.

78 Baker, 46, 67.

79 This phrase belongs to Meisami. See esp. 12-13, 282-285, 290.

80 See Naff, 132-134.

81 Waldman, 9.

82 Meisami, 290.

83 Murphey, 294-295.

*incorporate useful information directly into his narrative. It is of no great consequence merely to recount campaigns and seasons of repose from campaigning, arrivals and departures, appointments to office and removals from office, and peace and war. Rather, historians ought first to inform themselves...of what was the divinely ordained condition of any age in history; of how, in a given century, the affairs of men were going forward, and in what direction; of what ideas and counsels were predominating in problems of administration and finance – in short, historians must first ascertain what it was that men thought and what it was over which they disagreed, what it was they believed to be the best course in the conduct of war and in making terms with the foe, what were the causes and the weaknesses which were then bringing triumph or entailing destruction...But simple annals, devoid of these useful features, are in no way different than so many Hamza-names.*⁸⁴

Naima's sentiments, notably, are not isolated. Several other *vakanüvises* express them, in criticism of either their own or other's works.⁸⁵

That eighteenth-century court chronicles show the past as a “neutral expression of historical reality” seems unlikely; their *mukaddimes* suggest otherwise. Rather, scrutiny of these histories reveals that *vakanüvises* interpreted events for various persuasive or legitimacy ends.⁸⁶ Naima's defense of the 1699 Peace of Karlowitz is one such example. At Karlowitz, the Ottoman Empire made peace with European states at a disadvantage. Naima, however, actively defends the treaty. Arguing that temporary peace will strengthen the dynasty, and citing the Prophet himself as historical precedent, Naima then describes the state's internal condition in order to cast the treaty and reform policy of Grand Vezir Amcazâde Hüseyin, his patron, in the best possible light.⁸⁷ Naima's account, far from being neutral, seeks to justify controversial political acts – it is a “masterful” piece of political propaganda.⁸⁸

Court chronicles, moreover, treat the 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca in a similarly persuasive manner. Ahmet Vâsîf defends the treaty itself and even, unlike Naima, argues that peace is desirable in all situations. Vâsîf wrote following bitter debate over compliance with Kaynarca. Drawing on his own experience during the war, and on sources like Ahmet Resmi's *Hulasatü'l-İtibar*, a partisan work which spiritedly defends the treaty and peacemaking in general, Vâsîf's account is accurate but by no means disinterested. Emphasizing that the treaty was necessary, that those who desired peace acted in the state's interest, and that peace is always preferable to war, Vâsîf's chronicle offers a view of peace

84 As translated by Thomas, 113; *Târih-i Na'imâ*, I: 4-5. *Hamza-name* refers to the wondrous exploits of the Prophet's uncle Hamza, and was a byword for a yarn or tall-tale.

85 On Hâkim see Kütükoğlu, “Müverrih Vâsîf'in Kaynaklarından Hâkim Tarihi,” 146, n. 35; also “Teşrifatî Na'im Efendi Târîhi,” 70; *Mehasin*, I: 4.

86 By contrast see Lewis, who claims that pre-modern historians rarely attempted to legitimate or persuade. “Reflections on Islamic Historiography,” 77.

87 Rifaat Ali Abou-El-Haj, “Ottoman Attitudes Toward Peace Making: The Karlowitz Case,” in *Der Islam* 51 (1974): 135-136; Thomas, 65-71.

88 Thomas, 82.

different from that in Naima, but which perhaps also served to legitimate the reform efforts of his patron, Sultan Selim III.⁸⁹ In any case, the examples of Naima and Vâsîf clearly show the interpretive aspect of court chronicles. It is a subject which deserves much further study.

VERSE: *Budur layık ki erbab-ı mekarim
Ola vaz-ı eser semtine azim
Bulup bir münşi-i azbü'l-beyanı
Nigah-ı lutfâ mazhar ede anı
İbarat-ı beliga ola kadir
Vekayi zabt ede yaza measir
Olur celb-i duaya bir vesile
Eser bais olur zıkr-i cemile⁹⁰
The Form of History*

Form in Ottoman historiography has attracted little attention either on a structural or rhetorical level. This is unfortunate since, at least as chroniclers claim, form was an important part of history-writing. When Ahmet Vâsîf criticized Mehmet Hâkim's chronicle, for example, it was not due primarily to factual error. Vâsîf objected most to the work's lack of utility and poor style.⁹¹ Although he profited from Hâkim's information, Vâsîf claims he was obliged to rewrite it – to make it more useful and palatable.⁹² Vâsîf believed that changing the work's style and arrangement would render it more suitable history. Likewise, most other eighteenth-century court historians cite the importance of form in their *mukaddimes*, in sometimes extravagant metaphors. To İzzi, histories are garments of different warp and weft, “here as fine, well-proportioned kerchiefs, there as dyed shawls or particolored cloth.” Each historian plies a different “trade-for-profit” in the “bazaar of linguistic fineries.”⁹³ Mehmet Suphi thus earned İzzi's praise largely for style:

*The pleasing speech of his annals' 100 rose-petalled pages was the ornamental rosebush in the rose-garden of composition and exposition; the nightingale in the musical palace of his pen's learned rhetoric sang in the meadow of description.*⁹⁴

89 On Ahmet Resmi and the historiography of this period, see Aksan, *An Ottoman Statesman*, esp. 184-205; also her article, “Ottoman Political Writing, 1768-1808,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25 (1993): 53-69. On the connections between Vâsîf's and Resmi's chronicles see *Hulasatü'l-İtbar (A Summary of Admonitions)*, 12-15; Ethan L. Menchinger, “Peace, Reciprocity, and the Discourse of Reform in Late Eighteenth Century Ottoman Didactic Literature,” *Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal* 2/2 (2007). www.lurj.org. Accessed 25 November 2009.

90 “This is proper, that noble patrons // Should strive towards writing such a work. // Let them find an author of graceful style // And show him their favor. // Let him be able to write in a convincing fashion, // Let him fix and set down events effectively, // Thus it becomes a means to win men's prayers hereafter. // The work becomes an expounder of the noble litany.” Translated by Thomas, 115; *Târih-i Na'îmâ*, I: 6.

91 *Mehasin*, I: 4.

92 *Ibid*, I: 4, II: 3; as cited in İlgürel, 401. Kütükoğlu studies these alterations in “Müverrih Vâsîf'ın Kaynaklarından Hâkim Tarihi,” though imputing many of the changes to carelessness.

93 *Tarih-i İzzi*, 2.

94 *Ibid*, 3.

Good form was not, moreover, mere embellishment. It could beautify a history but also make it more convincing to readers and listeners.

Form in eighteenth-century court chronicles has recently been evaluated by Baki Tezcan. According to him, these works give “a neutral expression of historical reality,” emphasize dynastic continuity, and ignore larger schemes of universal history.⁹⁵ Tezcan is correct that court histories pay little regard to reigns and emphasize continuity; it is also true that they can seem like neutral accounts. Separated by event, court chronicles often appear disconnected, lacking trajectory, each episode unrelated to others. Lists of yearly appointments and copied documents prove especially hard to reconcile to a coherent textual message.⁹⁶

Such issues of form are not unique to Ottoman court chronicles, though, nor need they imply the texts lack underlying meaning. Similar structure can be seen in a more extreme form in medieval European chronicles, the main characteristic of which is parataxis, or arrangement of material by sentence or section without causal relation. As some suggest, paratactic works may still have conveyed meaning: the reader may have merely filled in connections mentally, outside of the text.⁹⁷ Admittedly, this type of arrangement is far from certain in Ottoman court chronicles. It is quite possible that appointment lists, for example, were just that: factual information. In the small world of the Ottoman bureaucracy,⁹⁸ however, there was much an author could assume readers would grasp without words. The late eighteenth-century work *İbretnâme-yı Devlet*, by Mustafa Kespi, is one example of a paratactic Ottoman history. *İbretnâme-yı Devlet*'s title implies a didactic work,⁹⁹ and yet as a compilation of documents with little explicit connection, one must assume Kespi's arrangement conveys meaning which, though obscure now, was clear to Ottoman readers. Such connections, now unseen, may also underlie court chronicles, and certainly beg our close attention.

Vakanivises claimed, nonetheless, to convey moral truths or *ibret*. Far from neutral, and as seen above, they did in fact interpret events in their histories. Sometimes chroniclers did so openly, interpolating into the narrative or in sections which analyzed specific events.¹⁰⁰ Equally, they could convey meaning by the arrangement of their material. Organization, focus, repetition, and other devices all influenced how historical ideas were expressed.¹⁰¹ To this end, for example, Ahmet Vâsıf adds to his narrative of the

95 Tezcan, 196-197.

96 On this point I have benefited from the thoughts of Dr. Gottfried Hagen.

97 Sarah Foot, “Finding the Meaning of Form: Narrative in Annals and Chronicles,” in *Writing Medieval History*, ed. Nancy Partner (London, 2005), 88-108. Partner, 197-202.

98 Carter Findley places the number of scribes in the chanceries of the Grand Vezir and *defterdar efendi* (Chief Financial Officer) by the late eighteenth-century at about 1,000 to 1,500 scribes, *Bureaucratic Reform in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, 1980), 56, 363 n. 41; Aksan, *An Ottoman Statesman*, 21.

99 *İbretnâme-yı Devlet* might be translated as “A Homily for the State.” This work was recently published as Mustafa Kespi, *İbretnâme-yı Devlet*, haz. Ahmet Ögreten (Ankara, 2002).

100 These are often termed *addenda*, or *lahika*.

101 See Waldman's first chapter “Toward a Mode of Criticism for Premodern Islamicate Historical Narratives,” 3-25.

1768-1774 Russian-Ottoman War a conversation between Russian and Ottoman negotiators of a failed peace agreement in 1772. At length, the discussion turns to Peter the Great, who was defeated on the Prut River in 1711 but spared capture by the Ottoman Grand Vezir. The Ottoman negotiator concludes that, far from losing an opportunity, the Grand Vezir triumphed by obtaining a peace treaty.¹⁰² Whether this discussion occurred as Vâsîf relates it, or at all,¹⁰³ matters less than its value as an *ibret*. Placed strategically, it strengthens the author's defense of Kaynarca and general advocacy of peace.

In general, however, form to *vakanüvises* meant *inşa* – composition. Style was as important a consideration as utility, for the simple reason that Ottoman histories were works of entertainment.¹⁰⁴ Consumption of history occurred through reading as well as oral presentation; as such, they were customarily adorned with verse, written in rhymed prose called *seci*, and otherwise beautified in ways that would delight the mind and ears.

Although there is little information on oral presentation in Ottoman sources, *vakanüvises* sometimes allude to it in their prefaces. Süleyman İzzî, as said above, lists oratorical skill (*best-i makale*) as a quality of the good court chronicler, “according to the rules of historians.”¹⁰⁵ Just as İzzî extols historians of old who were “adornments to the ears of discerning men,” so too the events of his work will be “heard.”¹⁰⁶ Ahmet Âsım, meanwhile, informs us that Ahmet Vâsîf held salons (*meclis*) where he recited his work.¹⁰⁷ To Vâsîf, the study of history depends on hearing. “The two senses of hearing and seeing are the best and most honorable of all the senses,” he says. Hence, “it is clear that, just as the sense of sight is delighted and overjoyed by regarding pleasing images, so the sense of hearing exults in studying the histories of kings and sultans, and the relics of padishahs and khans.”¹⁰⁸ History was thus part entertainment, part instruction, by which “the mirrors of remembrance...are burnished and polished of the film of weariness.”¹⁰⁹

How Ottomans court chroniclers viewed literary style is another difficult matter. Presumably, opinions were influenced by the Arabic theory of style, *belaga*.¹¹⁰ Yet stylistic

102 *Mehasin*, II: 245-247.

103 Vâsîf served as a scribe at these negotiations. *Ibid*, II: 237.

104 Partner's book *Serious Entertainments* is based on the idea that medieval history contained no clear distinction between the literary and scholarly. In Ottoman studies, Victor L. Ménage has pointed out that histories were also works of amusement, “The Beginnings of Ottoman Historiography,” in *Historians of the Middle East*, 177-178.

105 *Tarih-i İzzî*, 3.

106 *Ibid*, 2.

107 Ahmet Âsım, *Tarih-i Âsım* (İstanbul, n.d.), I: 258. He does not specify whether the work read was prose or poetry. It could have been either, though Âsım derides Vâsîf's verse. The passage is on the whole unkind to Vâsîf: “As he was without a whit of subtlety or grace, whenever he read or presented work he had composed to those attending his salon, it was his habit to become intoxicated by their admiration and torment those who were silent or who in the least bit the finger of equivocation, vexing them by putting on airs...”

108 İlgürel, 2.

109 *Ibid*, 2.

110 Christopher Ferrard has published some of the only articles on a formal rhetorical tradition in Ottoman history. See his “The Development of Ottoman Rhetoric up to 1882: Part One, the Medrese Tradition.”

commentary in *mukaddimes*, though frequent, is vague. Most commonly, chroniclers pride their works on being simple, a near universal claim. Naima, for instance, recommends histories use “easy phrases,” avoiding complexities and “words that send one to the dictionary.”¹¹¹ Çelebizâde Âsım, Edip, and Vâsif all similarly purport to use measured language.¹¹² These statements seem odd, if not to say baffling, as they are usually couched in the most convoluted of rhetoric, a tendency of Ottoman histories elsewhere noted. It may be that simplicity was, as Schmidt argues, a convention of the preface.¹¹³ It is also simply possible we do not adequately understand Ottoman notions of style. In either case, though, Ottoman court chronicles show an undeniable literary character.¹¹⁴

Criticism within prefaces offers no better indication of what good style in a court chronicle consisted. Authors' evaluations of other histories are generally vague, as attested by Naima:

*In Turkish are the late Hoca's translation of Lârî and Âli's Kühn el-ahbar. Kâtib Çelebi, well known by the name of Hacı Kalfa, wrote the history of the Ottoman state...in truth it is a pretty historical compilation, not overly supple in phraseology or overly saccharine in its expressions, and without affectation. Kara Çelebizade Abdülaziz Efendi likewise made a delightful compilation of the affairs of the Ottoman state. His style is full of beautiful expressions and is not verbose...*¹¹⁵

Little idea of Naima's preferred style can be gained from this passage. Other than Naima, Ahmet Vâsif comments rather more helpfully on some of his predecessors:

*The late Naima organized the events which Şarih-i Menarzâde collected with perfect knowledge in the Imperial harem, and arranged them with important addenda. His history was pleasing to temperaments both high and low. Râşit Efendi and Çelebizâde Efendi who were his successors each wrote a choice history, moreover: the contents of their eloquent works was pleasing to man. The history Hoca Sadeddin wrote had a sort of charm of eloquence, but his composition was disagreeable to his era's scholars, and, in truth, the repetitions with a view to balance his rhymes are excessive, and his history is filled with Turkish and simple verses. As for [Mustafa] Ali Efendi, he was obliged to use the vulgar language of others and the events he recorded were bereft of sweet words or elegant ideals.*¹¹⁶

Here, at least, Vâsif shows distaste for carrying repetition too far, for simple verse, and for

Osmanlı Araştırmaları 3 (1982): 165-188.

111 As given by Thomas, 114; *Târih-i Na'imâ*, I: 5.

112 *Çelebizâde Âsım Târîhi*, 4; “Teşrifatî Na'im Efendi Târîhi,” 71.

113 Schmidt, 213, 274.

114 This can be contrasted with history-writing during the European Renaissance, when authors made similar claims to simplicity. As part of the gradual separation of history and literature into separate genres, Baker argues these statements were usually followed. Bodin's words are telling: “I have made up my mind that it is practically an impossibility for the man who writes to give pleasure, to impart the truth of the matter also,” 85. Such was not the case in Ottoman court historiography.

115 As translated by Thomas, 112; *Târih-i Na'imâ*, I: 3-4.

116 Translated as quoted in İlgürel, xlv-xlvi.

“Turkish.”¹¹⁷ His concept of a good style, however, remains elusive.

To better understand style in Ottoman court chronicles, it may be helpful, again, to examine how authors used source material. Here are two passages, one taken from Ahmet Resmi and the other from Ahmet Vâsıf.¹¹⁸ A comparison shows how Vâsıf altered the original, and may offer insight on his personal style.

Resmi

Osman Efendi – a man peerless in the arts of sophistry and disputation and wretchedly conceited by his eloquence among masters of prate and prattle – supposed: “I shall weary the Muscovites with a little blustering and boasting into believing that the akçe may not be coined, nor the job settled.” Frankish people are extremely firm and prudent in these sorts of matters.

Osman Efendi fenn-i mugalata ve muhaverede nadirü'l-vücut ashab-ı laklaka ve şakşakadan çenesine mağrur bir zat namesud olmağın <<Akce kesmez, iş bitürmez biraz laf ü güzaf ile Moskovlu'yı inandırır usandırırım>> zann eyledi. Frenk taifesi bu makule işlerde gayette metin ve müteeni olup

Vâsıf

Osman Efendi was peerless in sophistry and disputation and a cunning calamity in argumentation. He suffered much difficulty, fancying that “I shall weary the Muscovite representatives with words, then settle the matter with akçe,” yet the Russians were convinced neither by the sense of his words nor with suitable recompense for their enmity. In the advancement of claims, men of sobriety and wisdom know that they at first prefer patience and deliberation and are habitually firm when their desires and preferences are shattered, then gradually become obstinate and persistent.

Osman Efendi fenn-i ve mugalata ve muhaverede yekta ve semt-i cedel ve muarazada bir dahiye-i dehya olup <<Moskov murahhaslarını söz ile itab ve masalahat akçe ile tesviye ederim>> zaamına zihab ile hayli ıztırab çekub ancak Rusyalu kelim-i medlul ve garazlarına müvafık bedel ile mülzem olmayup temşiyet-i mutalebelerinde ibtida sabır ve teenni ihtiyar ve ümidleri münkatı oldukça tederrübcü sebat ve giderek metanet ve ısrar-ı izhar edegeldikleri mücerreb-i erbab-ı hünket ve ihtibar olup

To begin, Vâsıf greatly alters Resmi's content. He changes the language significantly, which is clear in aesthetic changes made to Osman Efendi's “speech.” Here Vâsıf retains the sense of the passage but uses Persianate phrasing in place of Resmi's

117 Turkish here is contrasted with Ottoman Turkish, the vocabulary of which was infused with Arabic and Persian loan words.

118 Passages taken from *Hulasat* [1869], 54; *Mehasin*, II: 224-225.

Turkish, according to his stated preference. *İnandırır usandırırım* thus becomes *itab*, and *ashab-ı laklaka ve şakşakadan çenesine mağrur bir zat namesud* is changed to *semt-i cedel ve muarazada bir dahiye-i dehya*. Vâsıf, moreover, laces the passage with internal rhyme (*muhaverede yekta...dahiye-i dehya...söz ile itab...zihab ile hayli ıztırab*), while lengthening Resmi's original description of the Russians.

In conservative literary traditions, authority comes in large part through imitation of recognized models. An author's goal is not to depart widely from predecessors but to conform while adding a personal stamp, including in matters of style.¹¹⁹ Since Ottoman history-writing was such a tradition, it can be hard to perceive elements of personal style.¹²⁰ There were likely certain accepted standards along with some small room for individuality. The above example nonetheless shows how authors could produce what they felt was a more suitable style for history. The addition, alteration, elaboration, and removal of material¹²¹ were ways *vakanüvises* could render their histories enjoyable, while also making them more convincing. Ottoman court histories were heavily rhetorical works, and the use of these strategies and others merits much further study.

Conclusions

Eighteenth-century Ottoman *vakanüvises* had definite notions of the past, its meaning, and the proper nature, use, and form of history. Through their prefaces, these chroniclers offer a view of historiography which is moral, practical, and, not least of all, literary. *Vakanüvises* seem to have tried to create histories which were both true and useful in an exemplary sense, while history's instructive aim required some amount of interpretive effort. There was likely no attempt to represent events "as they happened" in a modern sense. All this, then, presented in appealing form, constituted an ideal practice of history-writing for the eighteenth-century court chronicler.

It remains now for these conclusions to be examined in the full texts of the histories. *Mukaddimes*, though often dismissed as repetitive and clichéd, were venues for literary prowess, eulogy for patrons, and discussions on history, and suggest ideal practice. But do they reflect how court historians actually plied their trade? Certainly, our past judgments of Ottoman historiography have not always proven sound. Ahmet Âsım, describing Ahmet Vâsıf's revision of Enveri's chronicle, reminds us these prefaces had a role, and, also, that we should not applaud ourselves overmuch as scholars and critics:

*If the history printed while [Vâsıf] was still reisülküttâp is compared article by article with Enveri's chronicle, it is clear that the whole of it derivative. Because he took care in his selection, confident in himself, and because in his claim it was quite distinct, it was greatly marveled at. In truth, there is no difference other than the prefaces.*¹²²

119 Marcincola, 13-14.

120 See Andreas Tietze on style in the Ottoman context, "Mustafa Ali of Gallipoli's Prose Style," *Archivum Ottomanicum* 5 (1973): 297-319. Tietze defines style in a manner similar to Marcincola.

121 Waldman, 12.

122 *Tarih-i Âsım*, I: 258-259.

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