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It is a well-known truth that Ottoman studies display a certain delay in following the historiographical trends and fashions prevailing in the Europeanist academic environment. Due to the availability of huge volumes of archival sources, but also to the special difficulties in learning the linguistic and paleographical skills needed to assess these sources, Ottomanists have long preferred to ignore (or, at least, avoid engaging with) the heavy theoretical discussions connected with postmodernism and concentrated instead—for better or worse—on the close reading of archival and, more recently, narrative sources in the context of economic, social, or cultural history. It is only in the very few recent decades that Ottomanist scholars have begun to use tools associated with the so-called “linguistic turn” in subjects such as gender, legal, or political history. I tend to favor a more concrete approach based on social history; still, I do not deny in principle the usefulness of postmodern analysis, provided it is founded on solid grounds.

Heather L. Ferguson’s The Proper Order of Things is the most recent contribution to this trend. Whereas her subject, namely Ottoman discourses of power and governance, is not exactly a novel one, her approach is very much so. Unlike many other attempts, which try to accommodate a heavily theoretical vocabulary with a lack of actual research, Ferguson’s book rests on a deep knowledge of legal, administrative, and political realities of the Ottoman Empire. Under a distinctly postmodernist vocabulary (“grammar of rule,” “textual technologies,” “textual habitus,” and so forth), Ferguson proposes to examine the administrative and legitimizing practices of the Ottoman state as a system of discourses, which emerged as a result of, and as an effort to accommodate, the economic and political realities of a hugely diversified territory governed by an empire with universalist claims. Through both general surveys of Ottoman bureaucratic production and specific studies of a couple of particular cases of imperial accommodation, Ferguson shows efficiently how the ruling elite developed an ideal of order which helped its negotiations with local power brokers and which was both shaped by and shaping the administrative discourse the same elite produced. Thus, the famous Ottoman flexibility was the result of this “attempt to fit diversity within a hierarchy of control enumerated through imperial record-keeping practices,” rather than a pragmatic goal as often assumed (p. 68).

The book’s structure is lucidly organized through three parts of unequal length, with a clear line of argument connecting them. The first part, the longest one and in many ways the heart of the book, deals with the creation and establishment of genres of administrative discourse, examining the way these genres were interacting with the needs of the complex imperial realities: Ferguson studies the development of bureaucratic structures and the legal and administrative practices they adopted, giving emphasis to similarities common with other Eurasian courts, especially the Habsburgs. She highlights the spatial aspects of sovereignty and the ways imperial titulature and scribal practice shaped a canvass for what was conceived a universal order, one that directed power relations between the taxpayers, the provincial administration, and the imperial center. Special emphasis is given to the
construction of the legal apparatus through the reigns of Mehmed II to Suleyman, with the 
kanunnames seen as a discourse both seeking to make sense of diversity and trying to impose 
a sense of order via a unified “textual terrain.” The second part exemplifies the 
application and interaction of these administrative discourses with the actual terrain of 
administration, taking two areas as case studies: the Hungarian border, where ambiguity 
came from the fluidity of the relations between local governors, irregular troops and impe-
rial demands, and the Greater Syria, where local warlords and notables effectively bro-
ered and negotiated power with the envoys of the imperial center. Ferguson 
highlights with detail the ways central government but also local actors dealt with 
these ambiguous situations, sharing in fact the same language of legitimization and gov-
ernance as formulated by the administrative, legal, and registering practices studied in the 
previous chapters. Finally, in the third part of the book Ferguson returns to discourse, this 
time studying the political literature of the late 16th and early 17th centuries. She analyzes 
how Ottoman elite writers responded to the late 16th-century political and socioeconomic 
crises by putting forth an enhanced vision of world order, one that moved away from the 
personal charisma of the ruler and sanctified an idealized version of past practices; this 
idealization suggested that a set of institutions which had been functioning in the past 
should also be functioning in the same way in the future. In Ferguson’s words, the 
post-16th century Ottoman Empire was an “archiving state,” where (as in other contem-
porary empires) record-keeping and indexing practices created a new order emphasizing 
surveillance and cohesion. One could also add here the Ottoman obsession with list-
making (an obsession attested in other Eurasian empires of the era as well, as shown 
by Douglas Howard), evident in genres so different as Celalzade or Mustafa Ali’s histo-
riography, Koçi Bey’s or Ayn Ali’s political advice, or Aşık Mehmed’s cosmography.

Throughout the book, Ferguson shows the extent of her original research and her famil-
liarity with Ottoman sources as diverse as legislation, administrative documents, and polit-
cal literature. Her scholarly approach, expressed in a heavily theoretical language which 
nevertheless does not obscure the clarity of her argument, is based on a solid knowledge 
of Ottoman realities and of her sources. We may note, however, that it would have bene-
fitted from more careful copyediting: mistakes, such as “both Ottoman and Turkish” 
(p. 57), “Khusros” (Khusrev or Khosroes, p. 58), Bayezid I instead of II (p. 81), min 
ba’d translated as “what went before” instead of “from now on” (p. 104), Mehmed III 
as “governor” (p. 184), “buldurum ki” instead of “buyurdum ki” (p. 226), or “a neticede” 
instead of “l-neticede” (p. 277), could be easily avoided.

In short, this is a very interesting book as it proposes a new way of looking to known 
material and realities. One may think it offers nothing really new for fellow Ottomanists, 
but in fact it opens a fresh path for understanding Ottoman world visions and methods of 
governance through its clever and informed discursive analysis. Historians of other fields 
will have yet another chance to understand Ottoman polity as an integral part of the trans-
formation commonly associated with “early modernity,” one which can be analyzed with 
similar tools and methods and in a similar theoretical context as its neighboring entities. 
As the study of classifying, archiving, and making sense of knowledge and information 
forms a new and promising trend in the history of the Ottoman world, Ferguson’s book is 
a very promising and fertile contribution and, as such, most welcome.