

**HENRY BLOUNT'IN YAKIN DOĞU'YA SEYAHAT (1634)
ADLI ESERİNDE “BARBAR TERİMİNİ” ANLAMINI
YENİDEN YORUMLAMASI***

*Hasan BAKTIR***

ÖZET

Henry Blount'ı *Yakın Doğu'ya Seyahat* (1634) adlı esri bir Rönesans metnidir. Bu metin Osmanlı ve Türkler konusunda yazılan ve Şarkiyatçı yaklaşım olarak da bilinen geleneksel bakış açısında biraz daha farklı bir yaklaşımla yazılmıştır. Öncelikle, Blount Türkler konusunda dürüst ve adaletli olacağına söz vermiştir. Seyahatname yazarlarının önyargılarından uzak duracağına ve gördüklerini tarafsız olarak yansıtacağını iddia etmiştir. Blount Osmanlı toplumunu anlatırken, onların ilerlemesini ve güçlü bir medeniyet olmasını “kılıç” metaforu ile açıklamıştır. Blount'a göre Osmanlıların medeniyetinin gücü kılıçlarındaki güçten, yani savaştaki başarılarından kaynaklanmaktadır. Burada ilginç olan ise Blount'ın “kılıcı” bir ilkelik ölçüsü olarak değil bir medeniyet ölçüsü olarak kullanmasıdır. “çok eşlilik, içkinin yasak olması” bir taraftan ülke nüfusunu artırırken, bir taraftan da askerlerin karakterinin daha sağlam olmasına katkıda bulunmaktadır (78)-82). Ayrıca Osmanlı İmparatorluğu bir zamanlar antik kültürlerin beşiği olan ülkelerin yönetimini ele geçirmişlerdir. Bu durum zamanla Osmanlı kültürü ile bu antik kültürlerin kaynaşmasını sağlayacak ve Osmanlı kültür seviyesi daha mükemmel bir duruma gelecektir (84). Bu çalışmanın amacı Blount'ın *Yakın Doğu'ya Yolculuk* (1634) adlı eserinde Osmanlı toplumuna bakışını anlatacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Osmanlı, Yakın Doğu, Sömürgecilik, Rönesans, Seyahatname.

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Turkish Studies

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**TRANSFORMING THE MEANING OF BARBARISM:
TURKS IN HENRY BLOUNT'S *A VOYAGES INTO THE
LEVANT* (1634)**

Constantinople 'stands almost in the middle of the world and therefore capable of performing commands over many countries, without any great prejudice of distance' (Blount, 26).

ABSTRACT

Henry Blount writes *A Voyage into the Levant* is a Renaissance text. Blount's *Voyage* is different from the general travel writings to a certain degree. Firstly he claims to be honest and objective about Turks. Secondly, he claims to avoid the general subjective tendency of the travelers and describe the Turks as objectively as possible. He thinks that the common tendency of the travelers to repeat the stereotypes blinds the perspective and makes us ignorant of the advancement of the civilization. Blount uses the 'sword' as a metaphor to interpret the advancement and victory of the Ottoman Empire. He says: 'The Turkish religion favors hope above fear and paradise above hell thus fills the mind with courage for the military purpose'. According to Blount, the permission for polygamy 'makes numerous People', the prohibition of wine 'hardens the Soldier, prevents disorder, and facilitates public provision' (78-82). In addition, since the Ottomans inhabit countries once filled with wits, wise men and 'the greatest Divines, Philosophers and Poets in the world' it seems likely that the marriage with the ancient, local and Ottoman culture will in the process of time 'gentlize' the military spirit of the Empire (84). The present study aims to discuss Blount's perception of the Ottoman society in *A Voyage into the Levant*.

Key Words: Ottoman, Levant, Colonialism, Renaissance, Travel Writing.

Turkish Studies

*International Periodical For the Languages, Literature
and History of Turkish or Turkic
Volume 5/4 Fall 2010*

In “Learning to Curse: Aspects of Linguistic Colonialism in the Sixteenth Century”, Stephen Greenblatt explains the origin of the word “barbar” with reference to the idea of linguistic colonialism. He begins with Samuel Daniel’s poem about the New World [America]. Introducing the English language as a ‘treasure’ to be shared with the native American Indian who ‘had no language’ (17), Samuel Daniel considers the New World ‘a vast rich field for the plantation of English language’ (16). Greenblatt refers to an aspect of linguistic colonialism and argues that for the colonizer ‘to speak Language means to speak one’s own language’ (18). The perception and description of the “other” as *barbarous* is an aspect of linguistic colonialism. He writes:

A man is apt to be called barbarous, in comparison with another, because he is strange in his manner of speech and mispronounces the speech of the other ... According to Strabo, Book XIV, this was the chief reason the Greek called other people barbarous, that is, because they were mispronouncing the Greek Language. But from this point of view, there is no man or race which is not barbarous with respect to some other man or race (19).

Ancient Greek writers first created the term to admit that it is difficult to pronounce oriental Persian language. Francis Hertog in *The Mirror of Herodotus* (19...) also writes that Greek historiographer, Herodotus identifies the Persians as barbarous on the basis of linguistic differences between the Greek and Persian language. The term, “barbar” derivates from the combination of two Greek words; “bar” and “bar” which means to bubble. The Persian language is complex and incomprehensible for the Greek. Since the Greek did not understand the Persian language, they thought that the Persians were mispronouncing the sounds and bubbling. Hertog’s argument is an aspect of linguistic colonialism which unmakss the Colonizer’s [here European] tendency to decscribe ‘civilized’ European identity in contrast with ‘primitive’ oriental identity. Herodotus’s earlier appropriation of the antonyms and dissimilar terms to identify Eastern civilization is a rhetorical strategy that establishes an analogy between familiar and unfamiliar, sameness and otherness. On the one hand, there exists all knowing European subject. On the other hand, there is the unknown oriental object. The unknown world is inverted by introducing what is not same ‘there’ and ‘here’. The East, for instance, is in a distant and unknown part of the world thus it belongs to different spatial order with people of different customs and life-style. The spatial [geographical] and linguistic distances locate the Eastern subject to the world of the “barbarian”. In the context of the present analogy, the differences between Eastern and Western civilization are

Turkish Studies

*International Periodical For the Languages, Literature
and History of Turkish or Turkic
Volume 5/4 Fall 2010*

made to emphasize “the otherness” of the Orientals from the Europeans. This linguistic strategy introduces the Eastern world through inversion, analogy and marvels to enable the Europeans to see, measure and reevaluate their sense of identity, culture and world.

Similarly, Said’s extensive critical approach in *Orientalism* (1979), though valuable in many ways, constructs the representation of the East upon the notion of presumed continuity of actual Europe vs. fictional Orient. Referring to Said’s project of *Orientalism*, Kabbani discusses the so-called binary opposition between Orient and Occident in *The Imperial Fiction: Europe’s myth of Orient*. In particular, she argues that ‘travel writing’ is a means for the Europeans to claim a higher political, economic, intellectual, and spiritual strength. Travelers’ attitude creates a certain discourse to meet the expectation of the European readers (1). The travelers’ description of distant eastern lands and people by exaggeration and through marvels serve to the ancient Greek strategy that confirms the barbarism, thus inferiority of the East. Kabbani states that religion [here Christianity and Islam] sets the basic distinction between the *primitive* and *civilized* world. She writes:

Islam was seen as the negation of Christianity; Muhammad as an impostor, an evil sensualist, an anti-Christ in alliance with Devil. The Islamic world was seen as anti-Europe, and was held in suspicion as such. Christian Europe had entered a confrontation with the Islamic Orient that was cultural; religious, political and military, one that would decide from then on the very nature of the discourse between West and East (5).

According to Kabbani the Orient as the expression of ‘the other’ and as a place of ‘lascivious sensuality’ and ‘inherent violence’ (6) becomes ‘a pretext for self-dramatization and differences; it is the malleable theatrical space in which can be played out the egocentric fantasies ... [which] affords endless material for the imagination, and endless potential for the Occidental self’ (11).

However, the complete set of distinctions based on civil vs. barbar, and the conventional tendency of the Orientalist to use a similar discourse to identify east are retrospective and incomplete. Just representation of the “other world” requires a particular cultural, historical and even linguistic awareness by the traveler. In the lack of such awareness, it is possible that English and Ottomans fail to construct a fair interaction. Goffman’s argument in *The Britons in the Ottoman Empire Between 1642-1660* is illuminating for our discussion. He writes:

Turkish Studies

*International Periodical For the Languages, Literature
and History of Turkish or Turkic
Volume 5/4 Fall 2010*

“ambassadors, consuls, and factors in the Levant ... generally failed to bridge the cultural gaps between Turkey and England or to develop meaningful contact with the Turkish people ... [authors studied Ottoman world] largely neglect even substantial English-language scholarship on Ottoman social and economic history ... [and] they seem unable to do much better than to allude to that complex and subtle realm -which was after all England’s primary communicant in the region- as “Turkey” or “Turkish state” or even more absurdly to personalize this largest state in the world “as the sultan”. Such phrases comprise banal and crude reductions of the Ottoman and their civilization ... [which is] in part an expression of a national hubris ... pervasive ... [British peculiarity] (8-10).

English travelers may and may not be able to develop the awareness in advance to face possible challenges of the Ottoman world. For instance, there has been very rare direct and mutual interaction between Ottoman and Britons during the 15th and 16th centuries and in any instance of the interaction the Ottoman and British citizens are both ignorant of language and culture of the other party. The British ambassadors, merchants and travelers need to use dragomans to communicate with the Ottoman authority and Turks, who were usually Armenian, Jewish or Greek Orthodox Ottoman subjects who serve as salaried retainers. The dragomans are no more than interpreters who could not negotiate any verbatim (ibid. 16).

The homogeneity of the British cultural context and the heterogeneity and diversity of the Ottoman cultural world also create a contrast between the two worlds and challenge the interaction and negotiation of any party. Daniel Goffman compares the late 17th century cultural and religious contexts of the two civilizations which, according to him, made it difficult for a British citizen to develop a comprehensive image of Ottoman society. He says:

The most fundamental contrast probably lays in the attitudes of England and Ottoman Empire toward religious and cultural diversity. England, on the one hand, shared with the rest of the Christian Europe a demand for uniformity. ... Furthermore, although there were some corporate divisions within England, it utilized a ponderous system of customary laws in order to construct a civic impartiality for those whom it defined as English (in language, religion and culture) (19).

Different English travelers from the Crusades to the Renaissance visited the Ottoman Orient and observed the Ottoman world in its own context. Encountering first time such a diverse and different world, it is possible that English travelers fail to understand

Turkish Studies

*International Periodical For the Languages, Literature
and History of Turkish or Turkic
Volume 5/4 Fall 2010*

the character of Ottoman world. It was not very easy to acquire a sufficient knowledge and understand the disparate and contradictory Ottoman world and civilization and to learn about the peculiarities of the political and cultural context of this world for a traveler, who is alien and not familiar with this world and who developed an identity in a different cultural and social structure. Thus, they either relied in their judgment on preconceived stereotypes or develop contradictory, ideology-based, imaginary and generally deceptive images about the Ottoman Empire. However, not all of them had a same perspective to represent the Ottoman world. An English traveler to the Ottoman Empire, Henry Blount, for instance, develops a unique perspective to explain Ottoman society. Then, it is also possible to find out heterogeneity rather than homogeneity. Considering the representations of the Ottomans by certain traveler from a unique perspective, it can be argued that the Ottoman world, though different and complex, was a familiar and knowable reality to the Europeans.

Henry Blount was one of the rare travelers to the Ottoman Empire who criticizes “barbar” vs. “civil” dichotomy and develops a unique Renaissance perspective to interpret the Ottoman world. He decides to visit the Ottoman Empire when he is in Venice. On the seventh of May in 1634 he ‘embarked on a Venetian Galley with a Caravan of Turks’ and leaves the Venice for Constantinople (4). Considering Blount’s revolutionary renaissance tendency and his liberal identity, he attempts to emulate particular vision concerning the view and description of the Ottoman world. He was kindly hosted in the house of Sir Peter Weych, the ambassador of Majesty of England (26). Referring to an Englishman he met, he says: ‘our King had not only league with Great Seignior, but continually held an ambassador at his court, esteeming his the greatest monarch of the world. ... The Turks are honored not only for their glorious actions in the world but also loved for the kind commerce of trade which we find among them (15).

What interest Blount most as a traveler in the Levant is the customs and manners of ‘*Turkes*’ which make them a great empire in the world? As an eye-witnessing traveler, Blount expect to have a more complete, strong and rational view of things: ‘a traveler ... with his eyes and ear’ (2) can see the things in a natural order, ‘fresh’ and ‘sincere’, ‘receive’ the world free from the affection, prejudice and delusion, rather than false and ‘untrue’ (4). Blount thinks that it is also necessary during the travel to avoid the general tendency of the

Turkish Studies

*International Periodical For the Languages, Literature
and History of Turkish or Turkic
Volume 5/4 Fall 2010*

voyagers to describe other nations from the store of the books or ‘by their own silly¹ education’.

Esteeming army, religion, justice and customs as the most important parts of the state organization, Blount writes that his journey to the Ottoman Empire would be an intellectual inquiry into religion, manner, and policy of Turks, condition of non-Muslims in Turkey, Turkish military institution and science. He says:

My general purpose gave me four particular cares: First, to observe Religion, Manners, and policie of *Turkes* ... Secondly, to acquaint myself with those other sects which live under *Turkes*, ... Thirdly, to see Turkish army ... Lastly, to find some spark of cinders [science] (2-3).

The Turkish ‘*Armes*’ are very different from the European ones (69). They are admirable with their skills in war and peace. The great difference lies in the way of education of the military forces which has an important role in the advancement of the empire. Blount writes about the aspects of the ‘excellent’ system of education. He writes that the service in the army is excellently performed and the Empire has a natural system of military education more than any Christian country where ‘*Armes*’ are given to men without any education. In the Ottoman Empire children are taken to the army and given a special linguistic (Arabic, Turkish and Greek), aesthetic (music) and moral education before they are accepted to the different segments of the army forces. He writes about the civility of the Turkish mariners as follows: ‘The Strangest thing I found among the *Turkish* Mariners, was their incredible civility’ (74).

According to Blount, ‘Liberty’ is the ‘genius’ of Turkish ‘nation’ [Turks are not very religious, they are rather easy-going] which does not mean that Turks are impious (75). He thinks that ‘Every Novelty draws men for a while; but where the gain is not great, they soon grow weary’ (77). Polygamy and prohibition of wine do not limit the liberty among Turks; rather they bring success. Population is ‘the foundation of all great empire’ and *Turkes* ‘permit polygamy’ to become ‘numerous’; prohibition of wine ‘hardens the *Souldier*, prevents disorder, and facilitates publique provision’ (82). Civility is a common manner the daily life. For instance, each religious belief is based on particular form of virtue: ‘There is no People more courteous of Salutation than Turks; in meeting upon the highway, one ... with his hand upon his breast bids *Salaum Aleek*, the other with like obedience, replays *Aleek Salaum*’ (107). Turks also ‘meet’ during the

¹ Here “silly” means naïve, innocent and lacking.

Turkish Studies

*International Periodical For the Languages, Literature
and History of Turkish or Turkic
Volume 5/4 Fall 2010*

day in the *Mesquites*; ‘Morning, and Evening they salute the *Sunne*, with three general *Shours*, and a Priest saying a kind of *Letany*, every part ending with ... Amen’ (75-76).

Learning and charities are prominent in the Empire: ‘There are very few beggers in Turkey’ (107). Turks do many works of charitie which furnishes Turkey with *Hospitals*, *Hanes* and *Meskeetoos* (87). ‘After ten days stay at *Andrinople*, we rode up and down as business required ... to pretty Towns, all of them adorned with daintie *Meskeetoos*, *Colledges*, *Hospitals*, *Hanes* and *Bridges*’ (23). Turks, as any ‘civil socitie requires’, are well informed about the intelligible world. They are ‘stored with rewards of *honor*, *virtue*, and *knowledge*, with punishment of *infamy*, *vice* and *ignorance* (83). Since the Ottomans inhabit countries once filled with wits, wise men and ‘the greatest Divines, Philosophers and Poets in the world’ it seems likely that the marriage with the ancient, local and Ottoman culture will in the process of time ‘gentlize’ the military spirit of the Empire (84).

Severity, speediness and arbitrariness of the Ottoman justice, as reasonable parts of the civil government, help the Ottoman Empire to expand by constant fighting (89-93). Referring to an Ottoman soldier he met, Blount argues that Christians live happily under the Ottoman rule. He learnt that the Greeks lived happier under the Turkes, then they under the Spaniards (60). It is possible that Sicily will be taken by Turks because Sicilian, who suffered under French, Spanish and Italian for a long time will not resist the Ottomans who can protect them from their long-lasting enemies (60). Blount realizes that the Ottoman state did not deal with the ‘other’ by either expulsion or an imposed uniformity but by encompassing differences within the empire’s political structure. Christian or Jewish are allowed religious and even political autonomy in return for special taxes and certain other actual as well as symbolic liabilities (Goffman, 19).

Conclusion

It is a general tendency in the travelers to the unknown and alien culture to fall into identity and cultural conflict. This creates a gap in the traveler’s perception and the gap is generally filled with preconceived ideas and stereotypes. Travelers to the Ottoman world, especially those who do not know the language, fall into the same mistake. The present condition prevent any attempt for understanding ‘the other’ culture and society. Travel becomes a metaphor for a quest and self-perception; unconsciously, it is an escape from the darkness of the self to the “blinding light” of the other-self. When traveling differences between self and other remains as wonder. Thus, it is a

Turkish Studies

*International Periodical For the Languages, Literature
and History of Turkish or Turkic
Volume 5/4 Fall 2010*

challenge to eliminate the differences between European and Ottoman society due to contradictory differences between the two worlds. For instance, there has been very rare direct and mutual interaction between Ottoman and Britons during the early modern period since the Ottoman and British citizens are both ignorant of language and culture of the other party. The British ambassadors and merchants of the period communicate with the Ottoman authority and Turks through dragomans who were usually Armenian, Jewish or Greek Orthodox Ottoman subjects who serve as salaried retainers to ambassadors and councils. As Goffman states:

The most fundamental contrast probably lays in the attitudes of England and Ottoman Empire toward religious and cultural diversity. England, on the one hand, shared with the rest of the Christian Europe a demand for uniformity. The English achieved relative homogeneity by either banishing or forcing public conformity upon those subjects who seemed too remote from English mores. In contrast, Ottoman society pretended no such exclusive equality. Imagine how unprepared the Englishman who confronted such a society must have been! England' it should be remembered, had for several centuries kept itself free of Jews, Muslims, and Armenian and Greek Orthodox Christians. In truth, before the English travelers met such people in the Eastern Mediterranean, they constituted only abstractions to him. Yet such groups resided even thrived in the Ottoman Empire (23)

The condition of native people in the Ottoman world may not be easily comprehensible to British citizens (who are the 'other' in the Ottoman society) who visit and write about the Ottoman Empire. It was not very easy to acquire a sufficient knowledge and understanding of disparate and contradictory Ottoman world and civilization and to learn about the peculiarities of the political and cultural context of this world for a man from a different cultural and social structure who is alien to this world. Encountering first time such a diverse and different world, Henry Blount was certainly very surprised with the Ottoman world. He admits this as follows:

I who had often proved the Barbarisme of other Nations at Sea, and above all others, of our owne, supposed my selfe amongst beares, till by experience, I found the contrary; and that not only in ordinary civility, but with so ready service, such a patience, so sweet, and gentle a way, generally through them all, as made me doubt, whether it was a dreame, or reall; if at any time I stood in the way, or encombred their ropes, they would call me with a Janum, or Benum, terms of most affection (75).

Turkish Studies

*International Periodical For the Languages, Literature
and History of Turkish or Turkic
Volume 5/4 Fall 2010*

Blount believes that human actions are not always motivated by beliefs. Human beliefs sometimes appeal to passionate ignorance rather than rational understanding. This is very apparent in his encounter with the Ottoman armies that recognize him as a Christian. As he recounts, when the soldiers came he:

Stood still, till they menacing their weapons, rose, and came to me, with looks very ugly; I smiling met them, and taking him who seemed of most port, by the hand, layed it to my forehead, which with them is the greatest sign of love, and honor, then, often calling him Sultanum, spoke English, which though none of the kindest, yet gave it such a sound, as to them who understood no further, might seem affectionate, humble and hearty; which so appeased them, as they made me sit and eat together, and parted loving (98).

According to Blount, Turks were in general admirable for their cleanliness and social manners: 'They are not ... pernicious as *Christians* imagine' (95). Turkish disposition is generous, loving and honest (103). He says: 'If I had hundred lives, I venture them all upo Turks' word' (104). Blount witnessed by experience that clothing like a Christian's was desirable in the Ottoman country. Blount observed that people from different ethnic and cultural background in the Ottoman society identified others from the way they dressed. Therefore, he suggested that travelers to the Ottoman territories would be safer if they made suitable preparations, learned about the customs and expectations of the Ottomans, and wore suitable clothes. He also thinks that Turkish justice is 'honorable for strangers' (91). The only 'piece of injustice' he 'found among the Turkes' was 'their confidence to catch or buy Slave[s]' (102).

Apparently, *A Voyage to the Levant* (1634) is a striking and interesting example for cultural studies and interpretation. The text indicates the writer's growing awareness of the cultural differences between the Ottoman Empire and European society. He thinks that Constantinople 'stands almost in the middle of the world and therefore capable of performing commands over many countries, without any great prejudice of distance' (26). Challenging the conventional idea of the Ottoman barbarism and tyranny, the observer tries to understand the advancement of the Ottoman Empire as the great power of the world. For instance, he uses the 'sword' as a metaphor to interpret the advancement and victory of the Ottoman Empire. He says: 'The Turkish religion favors hope above fear and paradise above hell thus fills the mind with courage for the military purpose' (78). According to Blount, the permission for polygamy 'makes numerous People', the prohibition of wine 'hardens the Soldier, prevents disorder, and

Turkish Studies

*International Periodical For the Languages, Literature
and History of Turkish or Turkic*
Volume 5/4 Fall 2010

facilitates public provision' (82-3). Blount thinks that the things that seem ridiculous and strange to the Europeans and Christians are received as natural and true by Turks because their and 'our very Reason differ' (85).

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Turkish Studies

*International Periodical For the Languages, Literature
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Volume 5/4 Fall 2010*