

An Ottoman historian, Safai

An important development in the late 15th century Ottoman historiography was the emergence of the anonymous Ottoman histories. These texts were at first marked by the attention they paid to the common people and the general Ottoman elite in terms of their role in Ottoman history. Up until this point, traditional Ottoman historiography was eulogist and ruler oriented. In contrast, newly emerging anonymous history books took a much larger group as their subject. Similarly, earlier history books were composed by writers who enjoyed close relationship with the palace or strong patrons of the time, and in an ornate language, sometimes in Persian and Arabic. But, the new Ottoman histories were composed by anonymous writers who used simple Turkish. Shortly after their emergence, anonymous histories became utilized by writers like Aşıkpaşazade, Oruç and Neşri, who represent the Turkish speaking metropolitan elite. Through these writers, Ottoman historiography became a more inclusive literary genre to the benefit of larger Turkish speaking masses. By the end of the 15th century, there were clear signs that the palace was well aware of this development. During the first half of the 16th century, writers with close ties to the palace, such as Ruhi, İdris Bitlisi and Kemalpaşazade were hired by Bayezid II himself to compose new texts in which they too utilized the new historiography in an ornate fashion which was to satisfy the palace's expectations.

While this transition was taking place, there also emerged a sub-genre of Ottoman historiography, named *fethnames*. Its earliest examples were composed by writers such as Tursun Bey, Uzun Firdevsi, Kivami and Cafer Çelebi, towards the end of the 15th century.¹ *Fethnames* had its roots in the older tradition of *gazavatname*

¹ These texts were Kivami's *Fethnamei Sultan Mehmed* (892/1487), Tursun Bey's *Tarihi Ebülfeth* (895/1490), Uzun Firdevsi's *Kutbname* (c. 904/1499), Safai's *Fethnamei İnebahtı ve Moton* (c.

texts, which were accounts of a group of military campaigns or particular military victories under a specific ruler.² But, unlike *gazavatname* texts, *fethnames* were composed in a colorful language, mixing much verse and Persian vocabulary. They were also eulogist texts, depicting the Sultan as the sole leader of the Islamic *jihad* at the frontier, contained formulaic openings designed to equate the Islamic concept of *jihad* with the Ottoman concept of *gaza*, do so with direct quotations of familiar *hadith* and offering endless pages of depictions regarding sultans entourage.³ The implications of these characteristics were manifold. They suggest that *fethname* writers came from good educational backgrounds and the works were designed to be presented to the palace court. In fact, in their works, Tursun Bey and Kivami did ask

905/1500), and Cafer Çelebi's *Mahrusei İstanbul Fethnamesi* (905/1500). There is also a further text named *Gazavatı Midilli*, an anonymous work written in Turkish, composed in verse. This final text appears to be related to Uzun Firdevsi's *Kutbname*, since its opening lines and chapter titles, as well as its meter and style match that of *Kutbname*. It also shares the same subject, the expedition and capture of Midilli. However, the text is incomplete and ends with two blank folios numbered 7 and 8, therefore missing its last page and colophon. Anonymous, *Gazavatı Midilli*, Cambridge University, MS, Browne, Dd.4.4.

² Ménage, who also classified these texts as *fethnames*, called them “quasi-historical accounts and equally out of the literary tradition.” Similarly, in his study, Agah Sırrı Levend placed this group of texts in the category of *gazavatname*. V. L. Ménage, “A Survey of the Early Ottoman Histories, with Studies on Their Textual Problems and Their Sources”, Unpublished PhD. Thesis, University of London, 1961.vol. 1, p. 51. Agah Sırrı Levend, *Gazavat-nameler ve Mihail-oğlu Ali Bey'in Gazavat-namesi*, Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1956, pp. 16-22.

³ Some of the best examples of this opening formula are found in the works of Kivami, Cafer Çelebi and Safai. Safai, *Fethnamei İnebahtı & Moton*, İstanbul: Topkapı Revan Kütüphanesi, No. 1271, v. 131, f.11.b.-13.a. Cafer Çelebi Tacizade, *Mahrusei İstanbul Fethnamesi*, İstanbul: İstanbul Üniversitesi Nadide Eserler Kütüphanesi, TY 2634, f.4.a. Kivami, *Fethnamei Sultan Mehmed*, ed. Franz Babinger, İstanbul: Maarif Basımevi, 1955, pp. 76-9.

for recognition, suggesting that they used their works as a tool to become acknowledged by the palace.⁴ There was also Kaşifi's who wrote that he composed his work because he was told that such work will get him recognized.⁵ In short, evidence suggests that *fethname* was a genre mainly explored by writers who enjoyed close proximity to the palace or wished to do so.

Safai's work named *Fethnamei İnebahtı ve Moton* surfaced at the heart of this activity. As the religious leader of a convent in Galata, he composed his *fethname* somewhere between 1503-12. The book follows the traditional formula of the *fethname* texts mentioned above, but it is hard to describe it as a generic example. For example, unlike other *fethname* texts, it is not written for self promotion. It is also not a text overbearingly concerned about a high literary style, mainly composed in simple Turkish. Unlike the works of Kivami, Uzun Firdevsi and Cafer Çelebi, it is not concerned with Sultan's grandeur, persona, itinerary and entourage either. Instead, it is a collection of the memories of both ordinary and distinguished sailors who were engaged in the 1499-1503 Lepanto expedition. It reads almost as a report of the expedition from the front line, or as a call for justice composed on behalf of the wrongfully accused navy commanders. The writer explains that he was responsible to report the painful realities of the expedition. In all, it is more aligned with the emerging tradition of composing works interested in the experiences of the more ordinary members of the Ottoman society. Nevertheless, the manuscript bears the library stamp of Bayezid II, which indicates that it was accepted to the palace collection before 1412 and possibly read in Sultan's court.⁶ It is an evidence of how a

⁴ Tursun Bey, *Tarihi Ebul Feth*, ed. Tulum, p. 132. Tursun Bey, *Cihan Fatihî*, p. 90. Kivami, *Fetihnâme-i Sultan Mehmed*, ed. Babinger, pp. V-VI.

⁵ Ménage, "A Survey of the Early Ottoman Histories", vol. 1, p. 153.

⁶ Safai, *Fethname*, f.1.a and f.131.b.

religious guide was able to acquire the position of an advocate for his followers and gain access to the palace given he had the right connections.

His contemporaries describe Safai as a poet and a sheikh who was born in Sinop and died in İstanbul in 927/1521.⁷ In his work, Safai states that he had moved to İstanbul, in 1453, as a recruit serving during the conquest of the city. He adds that he had been involved in six more expeditions, but he does not name them specifically.⁸ He is also known to have served as a personal secretary of İskender Paşa, and secretary of the sheikh of Beyoğlu Mevlevihane.⁹ He is reported to have died at the age of 110 and buried in his house behind the docks of İstanbul where at the time he had been running his own convent. Safai is described as a knowledgeable man in the arts of seamanship and maps, and as a religious guide to all captains of the period who are said to have regularly visited his convent.¹⁰

Sources also state that Safai composed a book on the activities of Kemal Reis, famous Ottoman navy commander who performed throughout Bayezid II's reign and was deeply involved in the 1499-1503 Lepanto expedition.¹¹ Franz Babinger informs us that Safai composed two specific works, one called *Gazavatı Bahriyye* and the

⁷ Franz Babinger, *Osmanlı Tarih Yazarları ve Eserleri*, trans. Coşkun Üçok, Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı, 1992, p. 55-6.

⁸ Safai, *Fethname*, f.21.a.

⁹ On İskender Paşa and his career, see 7th volume of Kemalpaşazade's *Tevarihi Ali Osman*. Ahmet Uğur, *İbn Kemâl Tevârih-i Âl-i Osmân, VII. Defter*, Ankara, Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1997.

¹⁰ *Tezkirei Sehi Bey* in *Heşt Bihişt the Tekire by Sehi Beg*, ed. Günay Kut, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978, p. 139.

¹¹ It must be noted that *Tezkirei Sehi Bey* does not mention *Fethnamei İnebahtı ve Moton* but states that Safai wrote a book on Kemal Reis's activities and a remarkable proportion of the *Fethnamei İnebahtı ve Moton* involves the affairs of Kemal Reis. *Tezkirei Sehi Bey*, p. 139.

other *Fethnamei İnebahtı ve Moton*, but, he adds, both works were lost.¹² However, we do know that a copy of *Fethnamei İnebahtı ve Moton* does exist in the collections of Topkapı Müzesi, Revan Kütüphanesi, catalogued as No. 1271. The first and last folios of the manuscript bear the seal of Bayezid II, which, along with the writers praises to the same sultan, confirming that it is the original itself, composed before 1512.¹³

In *Fethnamei İnebahtı ve Moton*, Safai writes that Bayezid II's order for an expedition for Lepanto in 1499 was made public in Beşiktaş and soldiers were invited to join. He claims to have decided to join Kemal Reis's fleet and was recruited in Galata.¹⁴ However, if he had died in 1521, at the age of 110, in 1499 he would have been 90 years old, an unlikely age to be recruited. Throughout the text, Safai also comes across as someone whose precise occupation is undisclosed, freely travelling between several boats, holding conversations with important commanders and common sailors alike, and accessing to some military court meetings of high importance. This almost unlimited eyewitness access to the expedition from different perspectives makes his claims questionable. The book progresses at times through long sections which the interviews Safai had with captains like Reis Ali or Kemal Reis. But, he claims that these were interviews he had as he himself was present at the battle. Also, a large proportion of the text deals with the activities of Davud Paşa and Kemal Reis, and we know that both these men were alive and serving the Ottoman navy before and after the Lepanto expeditions.¹⁵ Since it is stated that the sailors of

¹² Babinger, *Osmanlı Tarih Yazarları ve Eserleri*, p. 55-6.

¹³ Safai, *Fethname*, f.1.a and f.131.b.

¹⁴ Safai, *Fethname*, f.20.b.

¹⁵ Karanişancı Davud Paşa served as *kaptanı derya* (head navy commander) between 1492 and 1503. Kemal Reis was an Ottoman admiral who was active between 1451 and 1511.

the period recognized Safai as their religious leader and continuously visited his convent,¹⁶ it is safe to suggest that Safai composed a first person account of the expedition in which he was not a participant but heard through these visits.

Nevertheless, in his narrative, Safai places himself at the center of the events. In January 1499, he reports to have set sail with Kemal Reis's fleet to participate in a large scale war against the Republic of Venice.¹⁷ This confrontation lasted until 1503 and it is known as one of the earliest naval confrontation in which cannons were mounted on ships.¹⁸ Its favorable end for Ottomans "signaled a period of unprecedented naval expansion" and established their naval supremacy, writes Palmira Brummett.¹⁹

Safai depicts the certain parts of the 4 years long campaign in much detail but his main concern appears to be informing Bayezid II about the true nature of the events at the frontier. For example, in a section titled *The Quality of the Boats Taken*, Safai describes how a lesser commander named Araboğlu, jeopardized the Ottoman victory because he started to pillage the enemy boats, although he was informed that

¹⁶ *Tezkirei Sehi Bey*, p. 139.

¹⁷ Safai, *Fethname*, f.20.b.

¹⁸ Geoffrey Parker puts the emergence of heavy cannons on galleys to second half of 15th century. Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution, Military Innovation and the Rise of the West*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 86-7. Safai informs us that during the preparations for the Lepanto expedition, 10 cannon botas were made available. Safai, *Fethname*, f.23.b. In another instant, we read that Kemal Reis wanted to install cannons to his boat and he was allowed to made alterations to the boat, with the help of 40 carpenters. However, the process was brought to a halt when he is not given the boat. In fact, it is reported that due to these alterations Kemal's boat was always two miles ahead of all others, which was a serious disadvantage. Safai, *Fethname*, f.59.a-60.a.

¹⁹ Palmira Brummett, "The Overrated Adversary: Rhodes and Ottoman Naval Power", *The Historical Journal*, 36, 3 (1993), p. 517.

this was against the orders. Araboğlu seems to have stopped paying attention to his colleagues' affairs while engaged in pillage, as a result of which another navy commander named Reis Ali and a number his men were taken captive by the Venetians. In fact, this section opens with a general definition of what Safai calls *nişanı nifak*, i.e. sign of discord or enmity. Safai states that there are three particular signs of enmity, described by Prophet Mohammad as breach of trust, not keeping ones agreement and lying.²⁰ This suggests that Araboğlu not only acted against the established guidelines but later lied about the nature of the events as well.

Accordingly, Safai dedicates several folios to Reis Ali's captivity, stating that he was a good sailor from Gelibolu who wanted to stop pillaging and rescue booty for the Ottoman state but encountered problems. Safai states that he had met with Reis Ali in person and heard the events from him.²¹ Folios 67 to 71 almost exclusively cover the capture, confinement and release of Reis Ali. There are vivid descriptions of the local Venetian prisons reportedly filled with scorpions, Turkish prisoners and much discomfort. Reis Ali appears to be taken prison together with several of his men. In the end, the Venetian guards inform Reis Ali about the people of a nearby island named Duklaş who are experienced traders of war prisoners. Through guards help and islanders involvement, Reis Ali arranges himself to be bought back by his relatives in Anatolia.²² Transfer of 13,000 *akçes* between the family and the Venetian authorities are handled by a man named Abdullah, a name that indicates he is a convert, and whom Reis Ali describes as his life long brother.²³

²⁰ Safai, *Fethname*, f.63.a-b.

²¹ Safai, *Fethname*, f.64.a.

²² Safai, *Fethname*, f.65-f.72

²³ Safai, *Fethname*, f.71.a-b. Palmira Brummett informs us that in 1504 Ottomans started to negotiate the release of a certain Kemal Beg, a high palace official (*kapıcı başı*) captured by the Rhodian

Reis Ali's story comes across as a charge put against Araboğlu who caused Reis Ali much grief and money, and lied about the true nature of the events in order to disguise that he was engaged in unlawful pillage. Similarly, Safai also writes to defend the military conduct of Kemal Reis. For example, we are informed that during an early encounter near Moton, when Kemal Reis saw the approaching Venetian fleet, he ordered his fleet to disperse. This was not out of cowardice but a caution, Safai explains, for Kemal Reis knew that he could not stand alone against the enemy at this point. The maneuver seems to have Venetians to think that the Ottomans were not there to engage in direct battle but were heading towards Moton. So, they head for Moton to save the port and reposition themselves.²⁴ Meanwhile, avoiding a premature engagement, Kemal Reis makes use of the time he gained, re-groups his small fleet and attacks Navarin, where he executes a decisive victory.²⁵

Such sections indicate that Safai composed his work as a report of the events coming from eyewitness accounts. In another section, we read about Davud Paşa's situation. Here, Safai first fends off what appears to be gossiped around regarding Davud Paşa's conduct. He writes that everyone talks but not everyone knows what had truly happened.²⁶ He explains that at one point Davud Paşa had to desert the battle field, which was interpreted as cowardice, but it was in fact caused by an unexpected

Knights. Due to political climate and Kemal Beg's status, his worth is determined as 2000 ducats and the money was paid by the Ottoman. Such difference in price suggests that Reis Ali was in fact a less important figure. Similarly, the network of war captives exchange suggests that this was a legitimate business practice recognized by both Venetian and Ottoman officers. Palmira Brummett, "The Overrated Adversary: Rhodes and Ottoman Naval Power" *The Historical Journal*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 36, 3, 1993, pp. 517-741.

²⁴ Safai, *Fethname*, f.104-f.105

²⁵ Safai, *Fethname*, f.107-f.108.

²⁶ Safai, *Fethname*, f.36.a.

change in the wind. Apparently the fleet stays out of the battle for two days. Other members of the Ottoman navy thought Davud Paşa was afraid to be on the front line, Safai writes, but Davud Paşa's boats were packed with men who wanted to war.²⁷

It should be noted that Safai does not limit his concern to the distinguished soldiers alone and depicts the situation of the common men. He describes the installation of the cannons to Kemal Reis's fleet, the voyage from Ottoman waters to the Venetian frontier, the lanterns which were lit during the night cruises, musical instruments and the games played by the soldiers and the conversations that were held.²⁸ Instead of those colorful folios in which Uzun Firdevsi and Kivami describe Sultan's entourage, itinerary to the frontier and his religious luminescence, Safai gives us a taste of the reality. In fact, early on he describes his book as an account of a military mayhem.²⁹ He describes explosions, sinking ships, sailors who fear for their lives, beheaded human beings and drowning horses. We read about decapitated Venetian soldiers whose heads were used as cannon balls and shot at the Venetian fleet.³⁰ He refers to the Ottoman sailors who search for fresh water, stealing goats and other staples from the local islanders. At one point they encounter a Christian monk who lives alone in a deserted island, and Safai explains that the "dedicated soldiers of our Sultan" killed the man and burned all his books.³¹

²⁷ Safai, *Fethname*, f.38.a.b.

²⁸ Safai, *Fethname*, f.24.b.

²⁹ Safai, *Fethname*, f.21.a-b.

³⁰ Safai, *Fethname*, f.21.a.

³¹ This section is essentially a general description of how the aftermath of a storm all boats were dispersed and had to take care of their own affairs. Safai, *Fethname*, f.28.a-33.a. Safai must have been familiar with the Islamic tradition that scholars and hermits should not be hurt during jihad. See Rudolph Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam*, Princeton: Marcus Wiener Publishers, 1995, p. 31.

Such details make Safai a peculiar writer. He composes a *fethname* unlike its contemporaries. Its style is closer to the anonymous histories also coming from religious convent tradition and written in simple Turkish. Safai resembles Aşıkpaşazade, Oruç and Neşri, as well, whom I generally term as the Turkish speaking metropolitan writers. Like them, his discourse is more inclusive and refers to all Ottomans who were engaged in the historical events. He is also a sailor and a spiritual leader. He does not appear to be a directly palace sponsored, court poet who composed eulogies and praises to please the sultan. Upon becoming an apologist for his disciples, he borrows a sub-genre of Ottoman historiography mainly preserved to the members of the palace court, probably he became familiar with while serving İskender Paşa. He follows its opening formula dedicatedly, but then transforms it into a collective memoir. His knowledge of the naval warfare and the accounts gathered from his visitors are brought together in a refreshing narrative regarding Ottoman expeditions. He is not the over trained and often pompous servant of the palace who is willing to keep his mouth close to avoid controversial issues but an outspoken religious guide who acknowledges what he sees or knows to be the truth. Moreover, this does not stop him from gaining access to the palace court. On the contrary, his work reaches us from the palace collections. Who he is and what he pens down gives us an unusual access to what Suraiya Faroqhi names as the Ottoman collective biography.

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