

ONE

The Debate to Date

Before embarking on such an analysis, it may be useful to review briefly the nature of the debate which preceded that sparked by Wittek and his thesis. For Wittek himself was not living in a vacuum, but rather responding to a still earlier debate which predated his own “*Gazi Thesis*” by some twenty years. The steps in this earlier discussion may be summarized as follows:

In 1916, with the publication of Herbert Gibbons’ *The Foundation of the Ottoman Empire*, the first stone was cast. Gibbons set out (without benefit of a knowledge of Ottoman Turkish), to show that the Ottomans were in fact a new “race,” one formed by the commingling of Greek and Balkan Slavic converts to Islam, together with Turkish peoples.¹ In the ensuing admixture the Christian element was by far the most important. He accounted for Ottoman growth by arguing that the formation of this new “race” ensured the continuity of Byzantine administrative practices under an Islamic guise. That is, since the Ottomans were in fact the inheritors of Byzantine traditions and administrative practices, they remained (until the conquest of the Arab world at the beginning of the sixteenth century) a kind of Islamic-Byzantine admixture. Implicit in his interpretation was his belief that the mighty Ottoman Empire could not have emerged from purely Turco-Muslim roots, hence its Byzantine-Christian origins. Further, he stressed that it was the religion of Islam which served to cement the new amalgam thus formed. Finally, he argued that in attempting to look at the reasons for Ottoman success one should first focus on the fact that they benefited from a variety of peripheral factors, such as Byzantine dynastic struggles, which led to frequent internecine wars. In short, they were bound to succeed because they were both a superior racial admixture blending “wild Asiatic blood” with “European stock,” and, administratively, the lineal descendants of Byzantium.²

Within a few years of its publication, Gibbons' work drew both an indirect and a direct critique from two Ottomanists. First in 1922, the Turkish scholar M. Fuat Köprülü, authored a long study in which he rejected that portion of Gibbons' reasoning, positing a Byzantine origin for the Ottomans administrative apparatus.³ In this work, which was actually addressing an earlier article by the German Ottomanist Franz Babinger,⁴ he successfully demonstrated the extent to which early Ottoman institutional roots derived from Seljuk and Ilhanid precedents.⁵ In so doing, he strongly rejected the idea that the Ottomans were not equipped culturally to create a state. Then, two years later, in 1924, the German scholar Friedrich Giese, in an important article responding to Gibbons' analysis of the origins of the Ottoman state, stressed the bridge role played by the *Akhi* federation of craftsmen and merchants in the towns of Anatolia in transferring the administrative infrastructure of earlier Anatolian Muslims states to the emerging Ottoman entity.⁶

Despite these reservations, many Western specialists in the next generation continued to accept the basic thrust of Gibbons' argument, namely, that the Ottoman state was formed by an amalgam of peoples which included a significant number of local western-Anatolian and Balkan-Christian converts to Islam. Specifically, prior to Paul Wittek, W. L. Langer and R. P. Blake, in a seminal 1932 essay, focused attention on the heterodox nature of Islam practiced by the Turks in Anatolia and argued that this helped to explain the ease with which Byzantine Christians converted. They also contributed the important observation that it was the geographical position of the Ottomans, namely, their location on the weakened Byzantine frontier, which helped account for their rapid expansion. They did however reject Gibbons' view that the administrative structure of the Ottomans was fully inherited from Byzantium, and argued persuasively (*à la* Giese) that the infrastructure provided by the *Akhi* federations in the towns of Anatolia provided the underpinnings of early Ottoman administrative practice, as well as serving as a "bridge" to bring the Bithynian peoples together.⁷

In 1934, Köprülü went one step further and, in a series of lectures delivered at the Sorbonne, advanced the thesis that the Ottoman state was purely Turkish in nature, that is, he responded to and categorically rejected Gibbons' argument that it was formed from a commingling of Byzantine, Slavic, and Turkish peoples; he averred that it was derived from an amalgamation of various Turkish groups (tribes) that lived in Anatolia. These groups were the inheritors of an administrative tradition which passed to them from Seljuk and Ilhanid roots.⁸ Here, once again, he rejected Gibbon's premise that the early Ottomans were

unequipped to create a state without the institutional framework inherited from the Byzantines.

This first phase of the debate culminated with the series of lectures given by Paul Wittek in London in May 1937, where he laid forth what has come to be known as the “*Gazi Thesis*,” to wit, the idea that the early Ottomans were not a tribe, or people linked genealogically, but were rather groups of Anatolian Muslims bound by a common desire to fight the Christian infidels. They were, in his words, motivated by the “*ghazi ethos*,” which meant that they were “a community of *Ghazis*, of champions of the Mohammedan religion; a community of Moslem march-warriors, devoted to the struggle with the infidels in their neighborhood.”⁹ He saw their roots as emerging from the late Seljuk period, at which time the *gazi* frontier guards had grown in strength and ultimately produced a society of their own (the Ottomans) which grew in influence and in turn finally came to dominate the former Byzantine and Seljuk Frontier territories.

In one generation the explanation for the question of the identity of the early Ottomans had been transformed from one which styled them as an admixture of Islamicized Byzantines and Turks (Gibbons); to Turks who attracted a large number of Byzantine converts to their banner due primarily to the heterodox form of Islam they practiced (Langer/Blake); to an amalgam of Turkish tribes and groups whose administrative skills were inherited from earlier Turkish states in Anatolia, the Seljuks, and the Ilhanids (Köprülü); and finally, to a group of dedicated Muslim *gazis* who came together for the express purpose of fighting and converting the Christian infidels in the border marches of northwest Anatolia (Wittek).

It was this last explanation, the “*Gazi Thesis*” advanced by Wittek which came to dominate the thinking of Western scholars (it was generally ignored or rejected in Turkey) for the next forty years. Indeed, the *doyen* of Ottoman studies in this generation, Halil İnalcık, is the sole Turkish historian to accept and incorporate fully (albeit with one important difference) the Wittek thesis in his works. While accepting that the small frontier principality of Osman *Gazi* was “dedicated to a Holy War against Christian Byzantium,”¹⁰ and wholeheartedly embracing Wittek’s thesis that the “*gaza*,” or Holy War “was an important factor in the foundation and development of the Ottoman state,”¹¹ he has, like Köprülü and unlike Wittek, on occasion, also emphasized the tribal origins of the Ottomans.¹²

Somewhat paradoxically, while on one hand denouncing Gibbons’ theory as “groundless speculation,” İnalcık seemingly adopted its underlying argument in 1973, when he stressed (as had Wittek) that a common

background tied together the Byzantine frontier troops with the Muslim *gazis* and that this led to assimilation. All this in turn shaped what he described as:

a true “Frontier Empire,” a cosmopolitan state, treating all creeds and races as one, which was to unite the Orthodox Christian Balkans and Muslim Anatolia in a single state.¹³

İnalçık leaves unanswered one key question: What were the factors in the early fourteenth century (prior to the advance into the Balkans) which had served to unite the Bithynian Christians and Muslims into a single state? While citing the role played by one Byzantine Greek, *Köse Mihal*, who joins forces with the Ottoman rulers Osman and Orhan “as a famous example of the process of assimilation,”¹⁴ he states that this *Köse* (beardless) Mihal was a “*Gazi*” and “a Greek frontier lord who accepted Islam.”¹⁵ I have encountered no source which alleges that Mihal was a Muslim prior to the closing years of the reign of Osman (1299–1324).¹⁶ Less clear are the reasons behind İnalçık’s insistence on making *Köse Mihal* a Muslim, when in fact he mentions him in support of his contention that the Ottomans in this period were a “Frontier Empire,” marked by its treatment of “all creeds and races as one.” The key point here is that *Köse Mihal* was a *gazi* while still formally a Christian. Only when İnalçık posits that “Holy War and colonization were the dynamic elements in the Ottoman conquests,” and that the administrative forms adopted in the newly conquered territories derived from earlier Seljuk (Turco-Islamic) models,¹⁷ does he totally reject that aspect of Gibbons’ work which argues for the non-Turkish nature of the Ottoman’s institutional base.

In 1982, İnalçık published an article specifically addressing the “Question of the Emergence of the Ottoman State.”¹⁸ While stressing the importance of the migration of large numbers of Turcoman tribes into Anatolia, he also highlights the importance of a Holy War ideology as the unifying factor which prompted these “*ghazi* mercenary bands” to conquer and enslave the indigenous population.¹⁹ In one sense, İnalçık’s article may be viewed as an attempt to reconcile Köprülü’s emphasis on the tribal origins of the Ottomans with Wittek’s *gazi* thesis.

In a more recent general work, his important contribution to the 1994 volume he coedited with Donald Quataert: *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300–1914*, İnalçık is seemingly arguing more strongly for the *gazi* character of the early Ottoman state. His earlier depiction of the Ottomans as “a cosmopolitan state, treating all creeds and races as one,” is watered down. In its place:

The Ottoman state came into existence around 1300 as a small frontier principality which devoted itself to the *gaza*, Holy War, on the frontiers of the Seljukid Sultanate in Asia Minor and of the Byzantine Empire. Its initial *gazi* frontier character influenced the state's historical existence for six centuries.²⁰

İnalçık here has further modified Wittek's *Gazi* Thesis by emphasizing (in keeping with Köprülü) the basic Turkish origins of the state while fully endorsing the premise that it was the *gaza* which provided the *raison d'être* for Ottoman growth and expansion. In 1994 (as in 1973) he is still equating the *gaza* with Holy War, rather than as a term whose primary meaning was raiding and pillaging, that is, he is providing a clear religious connotation for a term which may well have had a far more secular meaning in the early fourteenth century. In so doing, he is de-emphasizing the interactive symbiosis which typified the early Ottomans. If, as we shall see, the early Ottoman forces included Christians (e.g., *Köse Mihal*) in their numbers, we are faced with the possibility that any reference to *gaza* and *gazis* in contemporary sources may indeed reflect the literary meaning of these terms rather than the social-cultural reality which actually existed in the formative years of the Ottoman state. Alternatively, as will be highlighted in the ensuing analysis of Ahmedî's work, the *gaza* ethos may be a retrospective reading projected backwards in time for political and dynastic reasons.

With three exceptions the debate to date has been engaged in primarily by Ottomanists/Turcologists. However, the earliest book length critique of the Wittek-Köprülü responses to Gibbons appeared in the aforementioned 1947 study by the Greek scholar, George Arnakis. This work, *Hoi protoi othomanoi* has been largely ignored in the subsequent debate (modern Greek is a language not generally accessible to Ottomanists). However, Arnakis touched on the major weaknesses of the Wittek thesis by emphasizing that the connotation of the title *gazi* in that context did not mean that the early Ottomans were motivated by the goal of converting the Bithynian Christians, but rather by amassing plunder, slaves, and booty. He argued persuasively that in the conquest of Bithynia, which stretched over half a century, there simply was no manifestation of Islamic fanaticism. To the contrary, he pointed out that the Ottomans initially encountered a peasantry which had been abused by their Byzantine rulers with a resultant loss of morale. He stressed the lenient attitude of the Ottomans which facilitated widespread conversion and subsequent assimilation. Ultimately, Arnakis highlighted the fact that the physical growth and success of the early Ottoman state can be directly linked to its absorption of the indigenous Greek population of Bithynia.²¹

The second such work (written by a non-Ottomanist), was a book devoted to the first two hundred years of Ottoman history by the East-German Marxist medievalist, Ernst Werner. Titled *Die Geburt Einer Grossmacht-Die Osmanen (1300–1481)*, it first appeared in 1966 (and was subsequently republished with significant revisions in 1972 and again in 1985 with yet further changes). Werner's work includes a pioneering critique of modern Turkish historiography, in which he highlights its chauvinistic tendencies. This book (in its various redactions), which has had almost no impact upon the thinking of later scholars, is limited by the author's adherence to a very rigid Marxist-Leninist interpretation of early Ottoman history.²²

The third exception is the American Byzantinist, Speros Vryonis Jr., who in his landmark 1971 opus entitled: *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamization from the Eleventh through the Fifteenth Century*, set out to synthesize a variety of Byzantine and Turco-Islamic cultural traditions. He underlined the fact that by the time of the emergence of the Ottomans, the process of Islamization followed by Turkification had been in progress in Anatolia for over two hundred years. Vryonis argued further that the seminomadic Turkish steppe life was ideally suited to the *gaza* (meaning, raiding), and that it was this fact rather than any particular zeal for Islam which motivated the early Ottoman conquests.²³

In the course of the past two decades, a number of other scholars have joined the debate and addressed the *Gazi* Thesis. Among the works in this genre (discussed in order of appearance) are:

The 1979 article of the Hungarian Turcologist Gyula Kaldy-Nagy, who in essence argues that as the Ottomans in the first centuries were only nominally or "superficially" Muslims, neither their early conquests nor their growth can be seen as springing from a *gaza* ethos. Stated differently, for Kaldy-Nagy there simply was no struggle between Christianity and Islam in the early Ottoman period.²⁴

In a 1983 book, the American Ottomanist Rudi Lindner argued (using the tools and methodology of the cultural anthropologist) for the tribal, that is, inclusive, nature of the early Ottoman state. It should be noted that his wholesale adoption of the vocabulary of the anthropologists was not supported by a full exploration of the hard data on the Ottoman side of the equation. His critique of Wittek stressed a few examples of Christians who actually participated in the Ottoman conquests. Most tellingly he argued that later chroniclers, who depicted the early Ottomans as having been motivated by the *gaza* ethos, were in reality projecting their own contemporary views back in time.²⁵

In 1984, Pal Fodor, a Hungarian Turcologist, opened a fresh page in the debate with an important article in which he convincingly demonstrated that the ideas of *gaza* and *gazi* in the work of Ahmedi (Wittek's most important source), were a literary device, whereby "Ahmedi presents the Ottoman rulers as *gazis* in a manner that served well-definable political objectives."²⁶ Fodor's article is in many ways the most original contribution to the renewed debate on Ottoman origins, for it textually challenges one of the pieces of evidence put forth by Wittek in support of his thesis.²⁷

In a 1986 article, the late American Ottomanist Ronald C. Jennings became the next scholar (following Arnakis and Fodor) specifically to criticize Wittek's selection of passages from the early-fifteenth-century epic poem by Ahmedi and the 1337 dedicatory inscription on a mosque Bursa. In so doing, he stressed that as the conquest of the Balkans was clearly the result of a shared endeavor by both Muslim and Christian Ottoman commanders and forces, Wittek's insistence on the *gaza* ethos simply didn't work.²⁸

The English Turcologist Colin Heywood (himself a former Wittek student), in two insightful articles published in 1988 and 1989 respectively, approached Wittek as a demon who must be exorcised (or rather, explained as a piece of cultural history), and correctly suggested that the notion of a *gazi* hero as some kind of idealized figure tells us a lot more about Wittek's upbringing and education in the late Hapsburg capital Vienna, than it does about early Ottoman history.²⁹

A second English Turcologist, Colin Imber, in a series of three articles published in 1986, 1987, and 1993 respectively, argued that the fourteenth century is basically a "black hole" which should be accepted as such, that is, that we simply do not have a sufficient number of contemporary sources to allow us to recreate that era of Ottoman history. Further, he argued that scholars who attempt to reconstruct the history of this period are doing exactly what their predecessors the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Ottoman chroniclers did. Namely, they are projecting the contemporary views and concerns of their own period backwards in time.³⁰

In 1993, the Turkish philologist, Şinasi Tekin, published two articles in which he tried (unsuccessfully, as will be demonstrated later in this study), to show that the 1337 Bursa inscription (the second key piece of evidence for Wittek's thesis), was in fact a late-nineteenth century forgery. He argued (correctly) that the inscription's current location on a gateway of the Şehadet Mosque could not have been its original provenance. However, his attempts to argue (on the basis of script and language) that the inscription itself should be dated to the late nineteenth century are unconvincing.³¹

In 1995, responding to Lindner, Jennings, Imber, and Tekin, the Istanbul University Ottomanist, Feridun Emecen, thoughtfully examined fourteenth-century Anatolian sources dealing with *gaza* and *gazis*, and provided an insightful critique of both Tekin and others of the above-mentioned works produced by Western scholars in the 1980s. He highlighted the extent to which the title of *gazi* and the concept of *gaza* appear in a wide variety of texts and inscriptions which have survived from other Anatolian Turkish states in the fourteenth and fifteenth century, and therefore argued against the uniqueness of the appearance of these terms in Ottoman usage.³²

The most important recent book length study attempting to reexamine the emergence and growth of the Ottomans, is Cemal Kafadar's 1995 work: *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State*. Kafadar, a Turkish born and North American trained Ottomanist, tries to look at the fourteenth-century *gazis* as just one element in the patchwork of groups identifiable in Anatolia at that period. Were Kafadar to define what he feels the most salient aspect of early Ottoman frontier culture to have been, he would likely use the expression: "liquidity and fluidity of culture."³³ His view of Islam and Christianity alike emphasizes the "inclusivism" of these two dominant cultures.³⁴ In the harshest criticism yet bestowed on Kafadar's book, the English scholar Imber dismisses it as a

defence of Wittek's famous "gazi-thesis," or more precisely, a defence of İnalcık's modification of the "gazi-thesis" to accommodate it to the traditional view of the tribal origins of the Ottomans.³⁵

Imber, whose criticism of this work reflects as much a defense of his own revisionist "black hole theory" as it does a critique of Kafadar,³⁶ seems to be right on one basic point: Kafadar has not succeeded in advancing the overall debate beyond the point at which İnalcık in 1982 made the accommodation between Wittek's "Gazi Thesis" and Köprülü's insistence on the basic Turkish tribal origins of the Ottomans.³⁷ This fact does not negate the real value of the study, which stems from its bringing together in a new form a great deal of useful information and some interesting new insights on the period it addresses.

Since the appearance of Kafadar's study, two additional works by nonspecialists on the origins of the Ottomans have also appeared. First, a Greek scholar, Dimitri Kitsikis, argues (without benefit of reference to a single one of the aforecited works) that the Ottoman Empire was in reality a "Turkish-Greek Empire."³⁸ Second, Turkish social scientist, Sencer Divitçioğlu, while fully citing both the published texts and the

extant secondary literature, discusses the founding of the Ottoman Principality in a theoretical framework and in a vocabulary which are largely unintelligible to the specialist (or any other reader for that matter).³⁹

In short, half a century of scholarly attention has not succeeded in replacing Wittek's "Gazi Thesis," with a more convincing and nuanced explanation for the emergence and expansion of the Ottoman dynasty. While there has been, and continues to be, a great deal of nipping at his heels, his work remains at the center of the debate.

Indeed, as we enter the twenty-first century, *The Rise of the Ottoman Empire* (which was in print from 1938–1970), is about to reappear in an edition prepared by the English Turcologist Colin Heywood. This will ensure that the next generation of students are likewise exposed to its *Gazi Thesis*.