The Frontiers of the Ottoman World: Fortifications, Trade, Pilgrimage and Slavery

In February 2007 a multidisciplinary international workshop took place at the British Academy, organised by the Academy-sponsored overseas schools and institutes that support research on aspects of Ottoman history and archaeology. The workshop brought together archaeologists and historians to consider the results of British research on the Ottomans in a broader context. **Dr Andrew Peacock**, *British Institute at Ankara, highlights the importance of frontiers in understanding one of the major Empires of the world.*

THE IMPACT of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the attendant rise of nationalism can be felt across its former territories to this day, in conflicts in places as far-flung as the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Sudan. Yet this vast, multi-ethnic, multi-faith empire survived from the fourteenth century to the twentieth, at its height stretching from Central Europe to Iran, and west and south as far as the Maghreb and the Sudan. Its military power and political influence were exerted even further afield, in India, Indonesia and Zanzibar. Although it posed a significant threat to the Christian powers of early modern Europe, almost capturing Vienna on two occasions, the Empire's tolerance to the faiths of its own peoples, such as the numerous Jews and Christians who lived alongside the Muslims, contrasts favourably with the policies of their European counterparts such as the Hapsburgs. Indeed, many Jews sought refuge in the Ottoman Empire on their expulsion from Spain in 1492.

Compared to Western European states, the history of this vast – and vastly important – empire is still little known. Many historical sources are still unpublished, and the enormous resources of the Ottoman archives in Istanbul are only just beginning to be exploited. Likewise, the study of the Empire's archaeology is still in its infancy despite the numerous significant buildings of every sort it left across the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa. For every geographical area or period of the Empire that has been adequately studied, there exist many more that have scarcely been touched, making it difficult to understand the development of the Empire as a whole. Above all, the nature of the Empire's frontiers has never been studied in depth. Crucial to understanding the nature of the Ottoman state and its relations with its neighbours, the Ottomans' frontiers throughout history were the focus of this workshop organised by a number of Academy sponsored overseas schools and institutes.

Frontiers are, of course, of great importance for every state. They are a zone of both contact and conflict with neighbouring peoples and states, representing a potential security problem yet at the same time offering opportunities for trade. For economic, political and military reasons, then, all states are preoccupied with defending and administering their frontiers. Yet it is no exaggeration to suggest that frontiers possessed an even greater importance for the Ottomans than for most states. The very origins of the Ottoman state were as a frontier principality on the edges of the Islamic world, facing Byzantium across the Sea of Marmara. The nature of the early Ottoman state is hotly debated by scholars, but by the fifteenth century the sultans appear to have adopted an ideology of holy war (*ghaza'*) as a source of legitimacy. Inherent in this ideology was not the idea of converting non-Muslims, but rather that the Empire's frontiers positively should be unstable as it constantly expanded at its neighbours expense – an ideology which, of course, could not be sustained as the Empire declined and its borders shrank during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Other factors too gave frontiers a particularly vital importance for the Ottomans. The Ottoman sultans derived massive prestige from their role as protectors of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and in organising the pilgrimage to them; this not only bolstered their legitimacy with their own Muslim subjects, but also allowed them to vaunt their superiority to the numerous pilgrims from

Figure 1: *The Ottoman port of Suakin on the Red Sea coast of the Sudan, an important entrepot of the slave trade (with thanks to Jacke Phillips)*

other Muslim powers, often rivals of the Ottomans. Yet Mecca and Medina lay in what was for the Ottomans a distant frontier province that was always hard to control from Istanbul, in the midst of desert populated by bedouin whose loyalty to the sultans was tenuous at best and often non-existent. Controlling this desert frontier and securing the pilgrimage routes represented a problem of the first order for the Ottomans throughout the Empire's lifespan; the final phase of this struggle was the Arab Revolt during the First World War in which T.E. Lawrence played so famous a role.

Far more than just a military problem, frontiers also represented lands of economic opportunity, for both the Ottoman state and even junior soldiers. The frontier with Hapsburgs, for instance, seems to have offered many Ottoman soldiers the opportunity to get rich quick through participation not just in campaigns, but more importantly constant cross-border raiding. On a much grander scale were the trade routes that ran across the Ottoman frontiers, bringing, for instance, silks from the east to Europe. For the Ottomans, perhaps the most vital of these trade routes were those of the slave trade. Slaves played an important part in the Ottoman economy and military, and even at the beginning of the twentieth century black slaves were still to be found in the imperial palace at Istanbul, where they often held positions of great power. Slaves were brought to Istanbul via routes running from Darfur to the Red Sea, through the Ottoman port of Suakin in modern Sudan (currently being excavated by a joint British-Sudanese team sponsored by the British Institute in East Africa) and thence by sea to the capital, or through the long land route across the Egyptian Western Desert to Cairo. Nor was the slave trade limited to Africa; much less well known, but also of great importance was the East European slave trade. Female white slaves, above all Circassians, were especially prized for the imperial harem, although most white slaves were employed in fairly menial tasks, particularly agriculture. White slavery also persisted until almost the end of the Empire.

The strategic and economic importance of frontiers thus means they offer an invaluable insight into the functioning of the Ottoman state, and allow us to address major questions historians have not yet resolved. For instance, the comparison of different frontiers at various times allows us to examine how effectively the Ottoman Empire was able to exert its power in distant places and how this changed over time. It also allows us to compare the Ottomans' policies with their neighbours across the borders, such as the Hapsburgs, Russia, the Safavids in Iran and the Funj sultanate in Sudan. This allows us to address debates about how the Ottomans fit into the early modern world system and how they compare with the other great empires of the period. Meanwhile, the archaeological examination of remains on the frontiers – slaving stations, fortresses, settlements – gives us an insight into the daily life of ordinary people and soldiers that is rarely mentioned in the chronicles and archival sources upon which Ottoman historians have traditionally been reliant.

The organising schools and institutes support a wide variety of research on Ottoman frontiers. The British Institute at Ankara, for instance, sponsors an international project that is examining the impressive Ottoman fortress of Akkerman on the shores of the Black Sea in Ukraine. This is a particularly innovative project because it seeks to understand the archaeological remains in the context of the rich documentation on the fortress and its construction and repair that survives in the archives of Istanbul – this is the first occasion on which this sort of research has been attempted on such a scale. Fortifications are a focus of the research supported by several other schools and institutes, such as the Egypt Exploration Society's longstanding investigations of the remote but vital frontier fort of Qasr Ibrim in southern Egypt and the study of First World War remains in Jordan conducted under the auspices of the Council for British Research on the Levant. However, to date the various schools' and institutes' research on the Ottomans had often been conducted in isolation. The workshop offered

Figure 2: *Akkerman Fortress, Ukraine, built by the Ottomans to protect their northern borders and the Black Sea from Russia (with thanks to Ihor Zhuk)*

Figure 3: *Qasr Ibrim, a major Ottoman fort in southern Egypt (with thanks to Pam Rose)*

archaeologists the opportunity to link up their work with that conducted elsewhere in the Ottoman world in the nascent discipline of Ottoman archaeology as well as considering their research more broadly in the context of Ottoman history. This was assisted by the historians and specialists in Ottoman archives from a wide range of countries who attended. As the first ever attempt to consider the Ottoman frontiers as a whole, the workshop obviously did not answer all the profound questions that were raised about the nature and effectiveness of the Ottoman state. However, as a result of the workshop a number of the organising institutes plan a future larger scale comparative research project on the Ottoman frontiers (if funding allows), which will shed further light on this vital aspect of one of the major Empires that helped forge the world we live in today.

The Frontiers of the Ottoman World workshop was organised by the British Institute at Ankara, British Institute of Archaeology in Iraq, British Institute in East Africa, British School at Athens, Council for British Research in the Levant, Egypt Exploration Society and Society for Libyan Studies. The workshop was funded by a grant from the Board for Academy-Sponsored Institutes and Societies. A volume arising from the workshop, edited by Dr Peacock, will be published in the Proceedings of the British Academy series.

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