

Christian-Muslim Interplay in Late Medieval and Early Modern Balkans: Power Networks and Regional Lordships during the Ottoman Conquest

*International workshop, organized by IHB, Austrian Academy of Sciences the Balkan Studies unit
28 September 2020, Vienna*

Call for papers

The workshop aims at investigating the evolution of the entangled power networks in the Balkans in both trans-regional and intra-imperial Ottoman perspectives on the eve of, during, and after the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans. It seeks to address, discuss, and hopefully overcome deficiencies of scholarship to date that arise from strict disciplinary limitations, dominant historiographical trends, or tradition in national schools of history in the Balkans. The still dominant polarizing approach, which narrates how the “Ottomans” have conquered and subsequently controlled and administered the region, often depicts the main actors in the process in dichotomous opposition of “invaders” and “invaded ones”, thus discarding almost completely the perplex political and religious complexity of Late Medieval and Early Modern Balkans.

The functioning power networks of the medieval Balkan elites confronted a similar system of hierarchical networks of dependencies, initiated and led by the Ottoman dynasty. Following its own strategic agenda the established power networks in the Balkans either bitterly opposed and resisted the advance of the Ottoman polity or intermingled with the power networks presided by the Ottoman rulers. Ironically, not so rarely the conquerors of a given Balkan region, who in the mind frame of dominant historiographic tradition can be portrayed as the “Ottoman invaders”, appear to have originated from the local nobility thus being foreign to the conquered lands no more than those who resisted the “invasion”. In light of this, it seems little surprising that Balkan elites and their dependent power networks intermixed quite successfully with those networks that originated in Late Medieval Bithynia and carried the Ottoman banner into the Balkans. The complex mixture of mighty families of Anatolian or Balkan elites on Ottoman service, who had at their disposal substantial revenues and significant military contingents shaped entirely the history of the early Ottoman Balkans. Until the mid-sixteenth century, when the Ottoman central power gradually managed to replace the power networks of these elite families, they not only held big landed estates as private property, administered large parts of the Balkans, initiated close interaction with neighboring Christian rulers, shaped the Ottoman relationships with foreign powers by channeling the communication, but were also decisively involved in the enthronement of virtually every Ottoman ruler until Suleyman I (1521-1566), which reflected the political bids for power voiced by the noble families in the Ottoman Balkans and their clientelistic networks, manifested by patronage over religiously non-conformist groups’ literary, and architectural traditions.

Evolving around these considerations the workshop seeks to move away from the state- and religion-centered approach to the early Ottoman Balkans and invites for a more thorough examination of the complex web of political and personal relationships that extend beyond the local Balkan or imperial Ottoman boundaries tangled in a complex interplay of different relations between states, empires, elites and individuals with varying interests and agendas. In light of that, it suggests a thematic focus on the following intertwined themes:

Dynamics of power relations in a trans-imperial and regional context

- motives for joining a power network
- alliance building and collaboration within and outside the Ottoman domains
- alienation and factional politics within and outside the Ottoman domains
- political coalitions of Balkan elite families in Christian and Muslim context
- dynastic factionalism and the formation of networks
- power networks in times of dynastic struggles and political instability
- servants, agents and elite slaves as part of the power networks

Notables and their elite households

- royal and non-royal courts within and outside the palace
- extended households, kinship ties and clients
- military-administrative households and their clientelistic networks
- military contingents and manpower
- social groups manning the retinues
- exchange and mobility of soldiery
- trans-imperial and regional household relations

Regional lordships, large domains, and land tenure

- power bases and regional lordships: motives for reuse of seats of power and/or for establishing new ones
- spatial patterns of regional Balkan lordships
- hereditary rule over territories before and after the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans
- military fiefs, hereditary and tenancy rights
- pious foundations and landed estates

Patronage of the Balkan Christian and Muslim elites

- architectural patronage legitimizing local power and political authority
- literary patronage
- patronage over religious groups
- patronage over spiritual leaders
- patronage over shrines and other places of worship

Prospective speakers are invited to consider a contribution within the framework of one or several of these themes, or to propose a different topic that concurs with the general concept of the workshop.

Please send an abstract of max. 500 words to grigor.boykov@oeaw.ac.at no later than **15 March 2020**.