

Empires and Diversity: Inclusion and Control in Roman, Mughal and Ottoman Polity

The word “empire” often calls to mind images of marauding, powerful people, often Europeans, oppressing large groups of innocents. There is a copious historical narrative that documents empires as rapacious, depersonalized, dehumanizing entities. Certainly, in the modern era, this has been the case. The late British and French empires, for instance, display some of the worst impulses of the imperial state—economic exploitation, legal depredation, and racism all in a single coherent package.¹ But this story of empires does not do justice to the full range of expressions of imperial political and social logic across time. The story of late empire, infused by the boundary drawing, exclusivist logic of nationalism and the ethnocentric impacts that follow, is the story of a certain kind of empire in the modern world. There are, however, other models of empire from earlier (and, this is key, *prior to the rise of nation-state thinking*) that can serve as cases to examine forms of inclusion and the large-scale tolerant management of diversity. Examining pre-modern empires sheds light on the tensions which inform the administrative impulse to include or exclude certain groups. Further, it reveals that imperial states often tolerated difference in the interest of growth, stabilization, and the consolidation of power. In other words, out of sheer pragmatism. This study will briefly examine the ideas of diversity and inclusion, and their relationships to forms of control, in the Roman, Mughal, and Ottoman empires, and present some possibilities for understanding diversity and inclusion within world empires that may enrich contemporary discussions of diversity in world history whether they occur in or beyond the classroom.

A Diversity Framework

Diversity has become a crucial topic in recent public discourse. A recognition of diversity in its many forms is the basis for social justice movements across the broad array of identities—race, gender identity, sexual preference, and ability, for instance—that have rightfully

taken center stage in our contemporary social, political, and cultural conversation. In the recent historiography of world empires, there are developing conversations about the role of diversity and inclusion as elements of their political logic, stability, and longevity.² As Burbank and Cooper note at the very outset of their work, empires “self-consciously maintaining the diversity of people they conquered and incorporated—have played a long and critical part in human history . . . Despite efforts in words and wars to put national unity at the center of the political imagination, imperial politics, imperial practices, and imperial cultures have shaped the world we live in.”³ These conversations move our attention to how empires have functioned for centuries. The prevalence of a focus on diversity (and the controversies it provokes) shows how the study of empires can provide tools for opening discussions of diversity, inclusion and toleration as modern ideas with deep histories.⁴ As Arjun Appadurai notes, “diversity remains a basic feature of human societies, and of how human societies organize difference itself. In this sense, I would say that diversity is a lens on the idea of culture itself.”⁵ Discussions of diversity, therefore, serve as entry points into current debates about the nature of diversity in our own societies, and potentially, models for understanding some of our own polities marked by broad racial, ethnic, and cultural differences.

Our contemporary discourses on diversity encompass a wide array of issues and intellectual approaches to the topic, as Steven Vertovec very clearly outlines.⁶ Historians will benefit from attending to his analysis of the positive impacts of thinking about diversity. He notes that diversity studies allow us greater “understanding of modes, mechanisms and outcomes of social differentiation.” This comes about through an analysis of “*modes of social differentiation*: how categories of difference are constructed, manifested, utilized, internalized, socially reproduced,” and through understanding diversity as creating “*complex social environments*,” by looking at how modes of difference interact in differentiated social contexts.⁷ In the examples below, I seek to illuminate the ways that homogeneity and heterogeneity exist in tension in these imperial moments, thereby attending to how social differentiation is negotiated in these societies. Further, by looking at the ways that the diversity of peoples within these imperial spaces becomes instrumental to the political logic of empire, I will demonstrate the importance of the differentiated social and cultural space for the operation of empire itself. Understanding this tension in a range of historical contexts opens avenues of discussion and potential connection to contemporary issues of identity construction and interaction.

Each of the examples I use are from a moment in time before nationalism and the nation-state ideal became the dominant political discourse, emanating in the modern period (roughly from the nineteenth century) from Europe out into their imperial territories. My argument here is that the turn towards nationalism within modern empires resulted in a firming of territorial and ideological boundaries due to competition between nations for

land area, economic gain, and national pride. Bonnie Smith notes that this new imperialism was concerned with “promoting modern state power, ensuring national prosperity, and making citizens feel that their nation was better because it had colonies.”⁸ Modern empires competed to create wealth for their nation, projected the superiority of European race and culture over that of the colonized, and sought increased territorial expansion as part of the global competition between European nations.⁹ This process of firming territorial and ideological boundaries and their accompanying logic of exclusion and homogeneity, became translated from the imperialist center to the far-reaching peripheries of their imperially claimed spaces.¹⁰

In contrast, the early logic of empire—pre-modern and not Eurocentric—was marked by an inclusive impulse that relied on the recognition and acceptance of geographically, ethnically, and religiously diverse populations to achieve the rapid expansion and stability necessary for the establishment of a strong foundation on which to build. Burbank and Cooper make this the very definition of empire, noting that empires are “large political units, expansionist or with a memory of power extended over space, polities that maintain distinction and hierarchy as they incorporate new people.”¹¹ The logic of empire itself “presumes that different peoples within the polity will be governed differently.”¹² The ruling ideas of empires changed dramatically when national sentiments became part of the calculus of empire, shifting the emphasis away from the embrace of diversity to a focus on distinction between rulers and colonized, identity and belonging, and discourses of inclusion and legitimate national citizenship.

World history is first and foremost the history of encounters between peoples, and the spread of empires was one of the main drivers of that encounter.¹³ Because of this, a constant issue within history is how people manage this encounter with difference. Sometimes this encounter is marked by violence, either through direct aggression or sometimes by cultural distancing or “Othering.” Within the histories explored in this study, there are many examples of intolerant, oppressive and aggressive relations between the imperial center and many of their subjects or outsiders to their realm. My intention is not to minimize these facets of the imperial histories. Rather, I want to show that there are also histories that tell the story of much less damaging encounters, and in a way represent what I believe is a widely prevalent historical tale—that of diverse peoples working together.

Further, the examples used here are historically bound up with processes of expansion and consolidation of empires. I am not making the claim that evidence of toleration and inclusion mark the whole history of these empires. Violence and domineering techniques increasingly become part of almost every imperial story, especially as the center begins to lose confidence in its hold on power. The examples in this essay reflect very specific moments in the histories of these empires and are not totalizing claims for these empires.¹⁴ I submit here, however, that the histories I explore display a pragmatic logic of inclusion that is well-suited to moments of geographic expansion and political stabilization, and that

different moments in the trajectory of an empire's history display vastly different administrative logics.

Rome: Commerce, Citizenship, Consumption

At its height, from about the first century BCE to the second century CE, the Roman Empire encompassed lands and peoples across three continents, from Europe to North Africa and into Western Asia. This imperial spread built on the history of the Roman Republic, which from the sixth century BCE until the founding of the Empire in 27 BCE spread from the city of Rome to control of the entire Mediterranean world. The Republic had a diverse array of Latin, Etruscan, and Greek peoples, and the political constitution of the Republic enshrined forms of citizenship at the core of what it meant to be in the Roman polity. This negotiation of citizenship was a key element of the way Roman emperors managed their diverse population and provided a means of inclusion in the empire, but also served as a powerful means of control.¹⁵



Image 1: "The Roman Empire in 117AD". Source: Public Domain at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:RomanEmpire_117.svg

A crucial, early step in the expansion of the empire, however, was knowledge of the peoples with whom the Romans would come in contact. Commerce is a central driver of cultural encounter. One example of an early Roman attempt at understanding and managing the wide diversity in their commercial realm comes from a text entitled *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*.¹⁶ This text is a commercial handbook and navigation manual covering the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf. The dating of this text has been the subject of much scholarly investigation and debate, but prevailing research places the text at some time between 95–130 CE. The text is written in Greek, and little more is known about the author than that he was likely a sailor and merchant who had first-hand experience with the area.¹⁷

In sixty-six short entries, the text presents an overview of the various trading ports, goods, peoples, and customs from the area beginning near Egypt and the African coast, and then moving as far east as ports in India. Primarily, the text provides information that is useful for navigation and trade. For example, the author explains “And at a distance of nearly 800 stades there is another very deep bay, at the mouth of which on the right hand is a great sandbank, in the depth of which is found the opsiian stone, which occurs in this place only.”¹⁸ Further on, the author warns navigators that, “After the river Sinthos there is another gulf running northwards, not yet explored . . . [the sea] is shoaly with continuous shifting whirlpools far from the land, so that . . . ships run aground; and if they are pushed farther in by the current they are wrecked.”¹⁹ There are other sections with such practical information as which materials are available in certain ports and what ports are home to immigrants who can speak a variety of languages.

There is an additional ethnographic narrative in the piece, as well. The author provides a catalog of some of the various peoples and groups who inhabit these areas, and in so doing opens a path to understanding cultural difference to enhance trade. The text is not without judgements, of course; for instance, the author deems the merchants of a place called Moundou “stubborn,”²⁰ and he notes that a particular merchant named Zōskalēs is “mean of life and with an eye on the main chance, but otherwise high-minded, and skilled in Greek letters.”²¹ Occasionally, there are more general statements about various peoples. For instance, there are places in which there “are many barbarous tribes . . . with squeezed noses, and savage,” and there is another group “who are said to be cannibals.”²² The key point to note is that cultural difference here is not read as inferior but is simply a fact of the place being described. The judgements are localized. The author provides verdicts about individual people(s), not overly broad cultural judgements or condemnations of entire populations in a given geographic region. The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, therefore, serves as an early attempt at presenting a kind of tableau of the diverse peoples, goods, and lands under an expanding Roman polity.

Nandini Pandey, in a recent article and video seminar, presents the later Roman version of this focus on the fully diverse panoply of their realm as Roman leaders displayed the

diversity of empire as a form of consumption.²³ Pandey rehearses the history of inclusive practices of empire, which includes bestowing citizenship, incorporating various peoples into military service, manumitting slaves, and assimilating gods into the Roman pantheon. She then ties this to the deep roots of inclusive ideas in the founding myth and central literatures of the empire. She also notes, however, that the use of these techniques of inclusion also served as a mechanism for controlling the oppressed. “Rome’s social and belief systems were remarkably unbiased with regard to race or origin; belonging and advancement had little to do with blood or soil . . . Rome was at its heart a nation of immigrants, built on a foundation of pragmatic pluralism. And Roman identity was an expansive category, based ultimately on shared practices and values rather than accidents of birthplace.”²⁴ In effect, therefore, what made for a Roman was the opportunity, open very broadly, to become part of the Roman state system. Inclusion was indeed a real opportunity that had a real benefit for the empire and a real cost for the included—shared *Roman* practices and values spread through this nation of immigrants. Roman citizenship exacted a form of social expectation and control over these citizens.

The intersection of inclusion and control becomes clear in the Edict of Caracalla in 212 CE. Emperor Caracalla (r. 198–217, and a man who himself had North African and Levantine heritage, but was able to become emperor²⁵), issued an edict granting citizenship to all free inhabitants within the bounds of the empire. There are a wide variety of opinions about the nature of this move. Some sources state that this was to raise taxes for the imperial coffers. Others argue that it was a way to increase the size of the Roman army in the service of an emperor who engaged in many military campaigns under his reign. Still others see this as an attempt to extend Roman law into the provinces and to therefore curtail the private law that had held sway for much of the Roman population, thereby bringing them closer to a consolidated, Romanized legal state.²⁶ Regardless of the motive, the logic of the act was, through broad inclusion in the Roman state, to also provide an enlargement of social controls through Romanization. As Peter Heather explains, the social, cultural, and economic advantages of Roman citizenship that many people sought as a means of individual empowerment through “self-Romanisation” did indeed give way to increased taxation, imperial service, and a severe narrowing of religious options in favor of a centralized Christianity.²⁷

In the end, Pandey argues that the Romans were deeply proud of the diverse and broadly inclusive nature of their empire, to the point that this diversity became commodified for consumption within Rome itself. As Pandey notes, “[M]ost Romans knew and admired their empire’s expanse in tangible forms: through goods, pictures, people and stories that came from distant lands.”²⁸ The enjoyment of empire through the elevation of goods from around it was not simply a celebration of the grand diversity within the realm, but consumption is also control. Possession of the goods of empire, like the power to grant status to varied peoples within empire, were forms of power that Romans held over the breadth of the imperial state. What had started in the *Periplus* as a catalog of the commercial

diversity available to the then Roman world—a statement of power in knowledge—reached a mature stage in the later empire through the mechanisms of control implicit in Roman practices of political inclusion and economic consumption.

The Mughals: Syncretism and Stability

The Mughal Empire in India was founded by Babur (r. 1526–1530 CE) in 1526 CE and ended with the British taking control of India in 1858 CE. The key Mughal figure to examine in looking at inclusion and the management of difference is the Emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605 CE). After a turbulent beginning that saw Babur’s establishment of the empire lost and then regained by his son Humayun (r. 1530–1540, 1555–1556 CE), it fell to Akbar (who took the throne at the age of thirteen) to stabilize and expand this domain. The Mughal Empire grew rapidly under Akbar, almost tripling in size, and it developed a strong foundation for the generations of Mughals to follow. At this time in India, centuries of migration and invasion had produced a multi-ethnic, multi-religious culture that contained elements of North African, Central Asian and a nascent European presence in the Subcontinent. Under Akbar’s near fifty-year reign, the empire eventually also encompassed parts of Afghanistan, Kashmir and Panjab in the North and Northwest, Rajputana and Gujarat in the West, Bengal and Bihar in the East, and into the Northern Deccan plateau in central India. Such a rapid and widespread expansion brought a remarkably diverse array of people and cultures under the umbrella of the Mughals, who were then, and remained throughout their more than 300-year history, a ruling minority in India.²⁹ They initially were able to attain this feat through Akbar’s central tenets of political and economic inclusion and openness to cultural diversity, particularly in the realm of religion.

One of the most famous aspects of Akbar’s rule was his deep curiosity about the range of religions that existed in the Indian Subcontinent. Akbar was known to spend a great deal of time in the company of Brahmans, Jains, Buddhists, Sufis, Jesuits, and others who came to visit him at court. Akbar’s interests were wide ranging, and over time he began to develop a syncretic set of ideas that came to be known as the *din-i-illahi*, or “religion of light.”³⁰ This faith statement explored the idea of a single truth behind all other religious ideas. As such, it represented a deeply tolerant and accepting evaluation of a remarkably diverse set of beliefs. Additionally, the impact of this approach provides important insight into the way that a syncretic idea developed in the crucible of this imperial moment could have both a literal and metaphorical unifying force.

The reign of Akbar was diligently recorded by his court historian, Abu’l-Fazl. In one of a series of detailed treatments of Akbar’s meetings with religious officials, Abu’l-Fazl notes that on an October evening in 1578 CE:

A general proclamation was issued that, on that night of illumination, all orders and sects of mankind—those who searched after spiritual and physical truth, and those



Image 2: "Interior of Diwan-i-khas, Fatehpur Sikri, India. The pillar has Hindu, Muslim and Christian elements, representing Akbar's religious tolerance." Source: Public Domain at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Diwan-i-Khas-2.jpg>

of the common public who sought for an awakening, and the inquirers of every sect - should assemble in the precincts of the holy edifice, and bring forward their spiritual experiences, and their degrees of knowledge of the truth in various and contradictory forms in the bridal chamber of manifestation.³¹

Akbar made a broad call to the adepts of the various religions in India to gather in his palace, and to share their knowledge and experience of their faiths. This call served to forward Akbar's genuinely wide-ranging interest in spiritual matters, but it was also explicitly tied to the administration of his empire. The account continues:

His sole and sublime idea was that, in the external administration of the dominion, which is conjoined with eternity, the merits of the knowers of the things of this world had by profundity of vision, and observance of justice, been made conspicuous, and there had ceased to be a brisk market for pretence and favouritism, so might the masters of science and ethics, and the devotees of piety and contemplation, be tested, the principles of faiths and creeds be examined, religions be investigated, the proofs and evidences for each be considered, and the pure gold and the alloy be separated from evil commixture.³²

Beyond Akbar's spiritual propensities, the expressed aim of these conversations was to enhance the functioning of his domain by making it a space in which sham and artifice were decreased in favor of pious ethics and contemplation. This was to be accomplished first, as the passage shows, by an authentic engagement with the practices of spiritual seekers and a genuine desire to avoid falsehood and seek truth. Akbar's vision for stable administration of his empire, therefore, began with the deep understanding of the variety of faiths and practices under his realm. Along with the engagement with spiritual truths, there is also a clear and recognized pragmatism tied to his program. The next step in this process was the recognition of the extraordinary variety of religions and spiritual disciplines within India. As Abu'l-Fazl noted:

The wide capacity and the toleration of the Shadow of God were unveiled. Sufi, philosopher, orator, jurist, Sunni, Shia, Brahman, Jati, Sîûrâ Cârâbâk, Nazarene, Jew, Sâbî (Sabian), Zoroastrian, and others enjoyed exquisite pleasure by beholding the calmness of the assembly, the sitting of the world-lord in the lofty pulpit (*mimbar*) and the adornment of the pleasant abode of impartiality. The treasures of secrets were opened out without fear of hostile seekers after battle. The just and truth-perceiving ones of each sect emerged from haughtiness and conceit, and began their search anew. They displayed profundity and meditation, and gathered eternal bliss on the divan of greatness. . . . The conferences were excellently arranged by the acuteness and keen quest of truth of the world's Khedive.³³

The account of a court historian is clearly biased in favor of the emperor, but I submit that a genuine executive program comes through. From the gathering of many people of diverse faiths, there emerged a discourse of unity that was both a literal outcome of their meeting and a metaphorical aspiration for the administration of the empire. People of diverse ideas come together, and move forward together, with humility and openness, as a unified whole. Without Abu'l-Fazl's reference to the "external administration" of the empire, this could simply have remained in the realm of religion. With that reference, though, it becomes clear that the syncretic moment has evident political advantages in the management of the empire.

It is not the case, however, that Akbar was being overly solicitous only in public for purely political purposes. Evidence for this comes from the genuine consternation of a chronicler of the time named Badauni. Badauni was a committed, mainstream Sunni Muslim, who eventually became the first Grand Mufti (a high Islamic official) of India. In his history, he took the bold step of criticizing Akbar for so intensely engaging with the range of religious beliefs and believers that Akbar allowed air in his court. For instance:

His Majesty used frequently to go to the 'ibadat-khana, and converse with the 'ulama and the shaikhs, especially on Sabbath evenings, and would sometimes pass the whole night there. The discussions always turned upon religion, upon its principles, and upon its divarications. The learned doctors used to exercise the sword of their tongues upon

each other, and showed great pugnacity and animosity, till the various sects at length took to calling each other infidels and perverts. * * * Innovators and schismatics artfully started their doubts and sophistries, making right appear to be wrong, and wrong to be right. And so His Majesty, who had an excellent understanding, and sought after the truth, but was surrounded by low irreligious persons, to whom he gave his confidence, was plunged into scepticism. Doubt accumulated upon doubt, and the object of his search was lost. The ramparts of the law and of the true faith were broken down; and, in the course of five or six years, not one trace of Islam was left in him.³⁴

Clearly, Akbar's commitment to embracing novel religious concepts and to questioning mainstream Islamic thought was real enough to be seen as a moral threat by Badauni. Beyond this, however, the underlying metaphor of this segment is an aggressive one. For Badauni, the meeting of these religious figures was akin to battle among the low, not unity among high-minded seekers. In this reading, the convergence of diverse individuals and ideas results in conflict and disagreement. Concomitant with this, the "ramparts of the law" are broken down, and all traces of Islam leave Akbar. For Badauni, the results of such inter-religious dialogue are not the political benefit of a unified realm, but rather a cacophony of views in conflict that eventually degrade a central pillar of Mughal governance—the emperor's adherence to Islam as the true faith.

Akbar's understanding of inclusion was also evident in the economic and political realms. As the religious conversations outlined above were occurring, Akbar began to reorganize the system of tax-free pious land grants to religious practitioners, removing some illegally obtained by Muslims and making such pious land grants available to learned officials of all religions.³⁵ Given the growth of the empire, in order to understand the reasonable levels of economic contribution that regions coming under his control could make, he commissioned surveys and the computation of a ten-year average output from each area.³⁶ These moves assured a kind of economic justice in these newly acquired areas, and stabilized the treasury by ensuring reasonable, predictable tax targets.

Akbar (again to the chagrin of many of his advisors) chose his nobility to represent the diversity of the ethnic groups in India. He had "Rajputs, Afgans, Indian Muslims, Arabs, Persians, Uzbeks [and] Chagatais" within the upper ranks of his court.³⁷ Though most were Sunni Muslim, there were also Shi'ites and Hindus among them. Finally, no single ethnic or religious group was large enough to form a political challenge to Akbar.³⁸ This nuanced management of diversity, therefore, was also a carefully calculated mechanism of political control. Particularly important here is the inclusion of the Rajputs within the nobility. Rajputs were the ancient princes in the northern Indian desert area of Rajputana, and much of their self-image was defined by a fierce independence from submission to outside powers. One of the key conquests during Akbar's expansion of the empire, however, was Rajputana and the multiple princely states that comprised the area. In a display of political acumen, Akbar legitimated the power of these princes by granting them sole right

to their lands, forging strong military relationships with the princes, and finally by taking offers of Rajput women (who were Hindu) in marriage.³⁹ The Rajputs theoretically retained complete freedom to control their own polities, and maintain their religions and customs, owing economic concessions to the court, along with their fealty, presence, and support of the emperor. Their residence at the court, however, was a tangible sign of relationship to a higher authority and was a source of controversy among Rajput princes.⁴⁰ From the Mughal perspective, Akbar's inclusive political moment demonstrates his acceptance of a deeply diverse set of groups beneath the imperial umbrella, and the ways that acceptance and imperial stability worked in tandem.

To help structure this "complex, heterogeneous nobility with divergent experience and cultural expectations,"⁴¹ Akbar employed a system of ranks that used ranking policy as a mechanism of inclusion for the broad array of ethnic groups in the empire. The word *mansab* referred to the system of ranking, and the holder a rank was the *mansabdar*. All nobles, and many others held these ranks. The ranks reflected a salary (*zat*) and a designation for the size of the military contingent (*sawar*) that individual needed to maintain to maintain his rank. In this way, a broad array of individuals became stakeholders in the imperial hierarchy.⁴² This highly nuanced and flexible system of granting was a powerful tool for controlling the *mansabdars*, as the emperor could adjust the ranks at will to reward or punish his officers. This inclusive ranking system also provided the means for inculcating a deep sense of belonging in the political workings of the empire and commitment to the person of the emperor. The ranks came with no preconditions other than the requirement to maintain the military contingent, therefore this was not a system designed to homogenize the Indian populace. Instead, the *mansab* system brought the diverse array of caste and ethnic groups under the Mughal umbrella, providing them a fiscal and political space within the empire while at the same time allowing the emperor to deploy a nuanced form of control over his rank holders.

Finally, recent scholarship on the Mughals has begun to demonstrate the degree to which they advertised to the wider Persian world the diversity and richness of the cultures within their empire. Audrey Truschke's work on the role of Sanskrit translation at the Mughal courts shows how the Mughals tried to make this high literary Indian culture part of a larger Indo-Persian tradition. Mughal courts from the founding displayed an amazing multi-lingual awareness, with volumes in Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit, Kashmiri, Hindi, Greek and other European languages housed in the imperial library.⁴³ Akbar commissioned a major translation of the Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata*, working in close consultation with the translators at times and consulting the work regularly, as he saw his relationship to this crucial Sanskrit text as part of a larger project legitimating his imperial power.⁴⁴ Projects of translation into Persian continued for some decades after Akbar's death, and there are instances of transfer of these texts to the leading Persian power of the day, the Safavid court.⁴⁵ Somewhat like the Romans, therefore, the Mughals used the dispersion of literature—in

this case, Sankrit literature in Persian—as a form of display of the diverse cultural fabric of their empire as part of a power project within the court. Textual translation became a symbol of Mughal imperial supremacy within the Indian Sanskritic intellectual world.

Ottoman Empire: Millets and Merit

The Ottoman Empire enjoyed a very long run, beginning in the very late thirteenth century in eastern Europe and northwestern Anatolia, solidifying its position with the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 CE, and remaining active in total for close to 600 years.⁴⁶ The Ottoman Empire collapsed in 1922, with the end of World War I and the realignment of

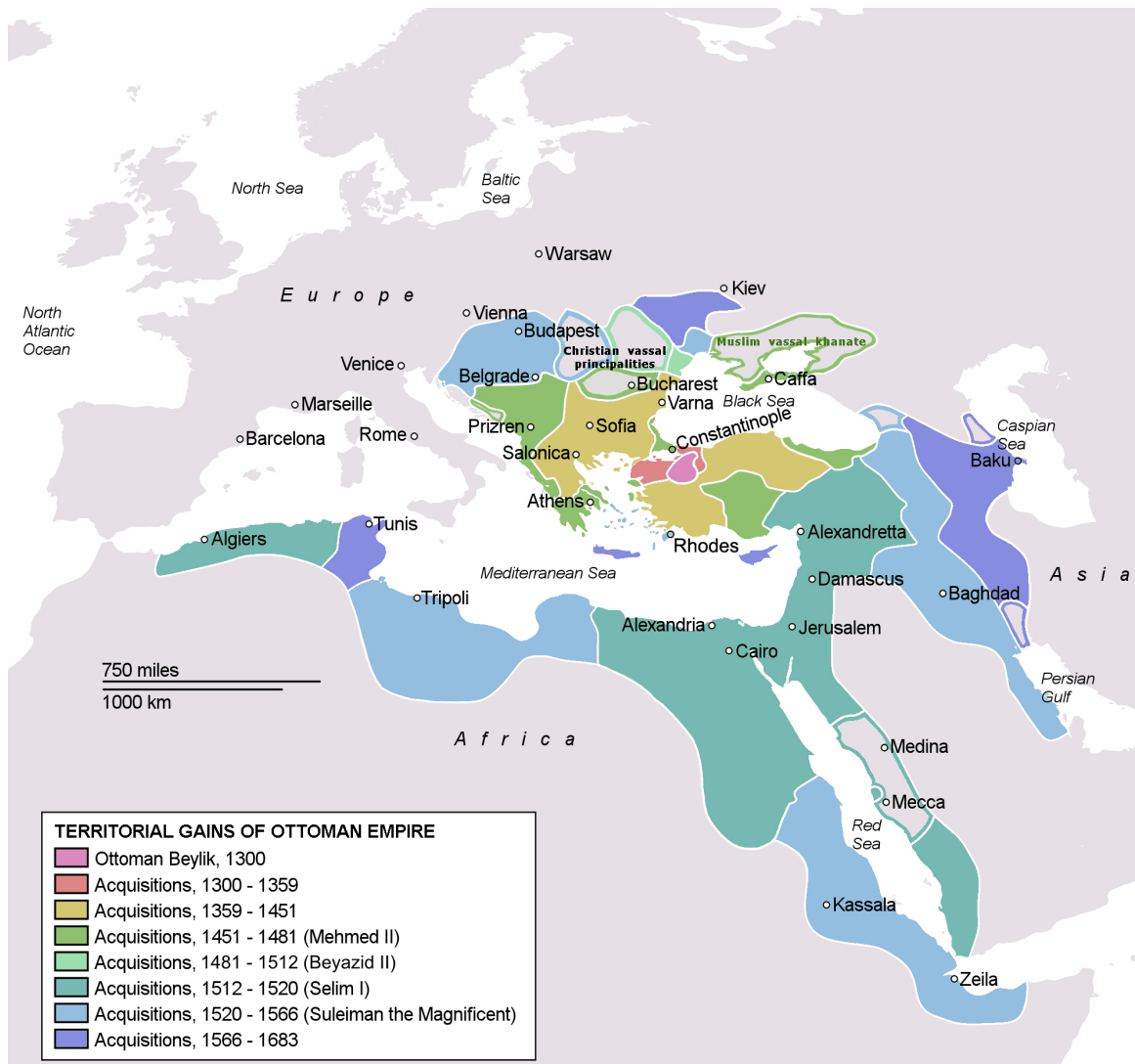


Image 3: “Ottoman Empire in 1683.” Source: Public Domain at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:OttomanEmpireIn1683.png>

the Middle East in its aftermath. From the outset, the Ottoman Empire was built on and influenced by a vast array of cultural and political entities, including Byzantine political and religious institutions, the influence of Mongol and Turkic martial culture, and the development of major Islamic powers such as the Safavids and Mughals. The empire reached the peak of its growth, military, and economic power under the reign of Sultan Suleiman (r. 1520–1566 CE). The spread of the Ottoman Empire brought them into contact with and control over an enormously broad range of peoples from eastern Europe through Anatolia, into North Africa, the Levant and Arabia, and finally across parts of modern-day Iraq.⁴⁷ The court itself, additionally, was “pluri-ethnic and multi-lingual.”⁴⁸ Such an array of peoples, religions, and cultures presented a uniquely complex challenge in the management of so much diversity.

The Ottomans devised a wide range of strategies for governance of this diverse space. Lafi notes that one of the most important aspects of imperial governance “was the delegation of imperial function to local notables, either rural, urban or confessional.”⁴⁹ The governance of cities was often delegated to local notables as a way of managing the diversity in the empire. Davidann and Gilbert, for example, explore the fascinating, cosmopolitan cultures of Jews, Christians, and Muslims under Ottoman rule in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Salonica and Algiers, and their relationships with trading partners in the Mediterranean and North Africa.⁵⁰ In the 1530s, Suleyman continued and expanded the practice of granting special trading privileges (“capitulations”) to Venetian, Genoese, Mamluk, French, and Catalan merchants to form trading communities in North African territories and the Levant.⁵¹ This was a pragmatic assignment of governance power to these local communities, and it was a clear attempt to keep commercial relations stable and healthy.

Finkel explains that the early Ottoman religious world was not an exclusive one. Fourteenth-century Ottoman rulers had deep ties to Sufi dervishes, who were very influential and popular in northwest Anatolia and who helped to spread the influence of Islam widely before an institutional version of the faith took hold at the center.⁵² In this same period, Ottoman oral traditions recorded that “co-operation between Muslim fighters and Byzantine Christians was frequent” and that “intermarriage was not uncommon.”⁵³ Davidann and Gilbert also note the presence of a syncretic ties between Jewish, Orthodox Christian, and Muslim faiths in folk practice on the Greek island of Salonica in particular.⁵⁴ One clear mechanism for managing religious inclusion and the diverse legal cultures associated with different faiths was the institution of the *millet* system.

The early Ottoman Empire was particularly notable for its open acceptance of large numbers of Jews during the period 1492–1512 CE. These groups migrated both out of Andalusia in the time following the Spanish Reconquista and from other European cities which had formerly been their homelands.⁵⁵ The conquest of Constantinople and expansion into Anatolia brought the Greek and Armenian Orthodox Churches within Ottoman territory. The *millet* system was a key element of the Ottoman administrative state that applied to

these religious groups. Though there is some controversy among scholars as to when the *millet* system came into effect, evidence of the system appears in grants of administrative rights to the heads of the Armenian and Jewish communities from as far back as the late-fifteenth century.⁵⁶ *Millets* were loosely defined “central-local” administrative arrangements that “instituted religious boundaries, marking difference, yet allowing for enough space, movement and parallel alternative structures to maintain a divided, yet cohesive and tolerant imperial society.”⁵⁷ *Millets* were able to define personal law for themselves through grants from the Sultan to community leaders. Christian and Jewish private customary laws were in effect within the empire, but with the proviso that Islamic law had precedence and that the *millets* did not challenge the imperial order.⁵⁸ *Millet* status, therefore, was not a license to operate completely independently, but rather was a space of cultural liberty within the overall framework of the empire. As Barkey notes, this kind of “non-territorial autonomy” was particularly well suited for managing these geographically dispersed minorities.⁵⁹ The Ottomans did not try to impose a version of Islam or royal identity on the *millets*, recognizing the value of allowing individuals to preserve their own ways of life as a way to also maintain order and stability within their enormous political domain.

This broad toleration of a wide array of religious and cultural identities within the empire, however, exists in a clear tension with a drive towards institutional homogeneity at the heart of early Ottoman polity and imperial policy. Two clear mechanisms are the rise of militant Sunni Islam at the Ottoman court and the reliance on merit in admission to the Ottoman state hierarchy. Both represent pragmatism of a different sort in the administration of the Ottoman Empire.

With the rise of the Safavid Empire (1501–1722 CE) on the eastern Ottoman border, the Ottoman state had a powerful political rival, as well as an Islamic rival in the Shi’ite-identified state. The Safavids enjoyed deep support in eastern Anatolia, especially among a Muslim warrior group known as the *kizilbash* (i.e. red-heads, for their distinctive headgear).⁶⁰ Sultan Selim I was reluctant to violate the Muslim restriction on war with other Muslims, so he sought and received a religious opinion declaring the *kizilbash* infidels for their support of the Shi’ite Safavids. In 1514 CE, Selim then waged a violent campaign against the *kizilbash*.⁶¹ Before his death in 1520, Selim also brought Mecca and Medina, the most sacred sites of Islam, under Ottoman control, and provided the Ottoman sultans with a position of primacy among global Muslim rulers.⁶² In the century that followed, influenced by these political and ideological concerns, the Ottomans engaged in a process of “Sunnification” of the state, or the conscious and sometimes aggressive embrace of Sunni Islam.⁶³ Concurrent with its diversity management initiatives, the Ottoman state, therefore, was also engaged in a process of establishing a particular version of Islam under their rule. This eventually culminated in a centralized Sunni religious standard at the center of the empire.

Further, the Ottomans used a strict meritocracy as a way of centralizing their military and state bureaucracy. The early-fifteenth century saw the creation of the Janissary corps

as the most elite Ottoman military force, and the development of the *devshirme* system for recruiting non-Muslim, Balkan youth into the corps and bureaucracy.⁶⁴ As Imber explains, the recruitment system brought Christian youth into Ottoman service under strict selection principles designed not to deplete the populations of the collection areas. The young boys were then trained in physical labor, Turkish language, and “the rudiments of Islam through living in an Islamic environment.”⁶⁵ This system, therefore, acted as a homogenizing force for a population of non-Muslim, non-Ottoman subjects.

Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq (1522–1592 CE) was a Flemish author and diplomat who visited the court of Suleiman and recorded his impressions in his *Turkish Letters*. De Busbecq was deeply impressed by the social institutions of the Ottomans, and in particular the military prowess of the Janissaries. De Busbecq chronicled what he believed to be the source of the power of the Ottoman state, and he notes:

but there was not in all that great assembly a single man who owed his position to aught save his valour and his merit. No distinction is attached to birth among the Turks; the deference to be paid to a man is measured by the position he holds in the public service. There is no fighting for precedence; a man’s place is marked out by the duties he discharges. In making his appointments the Sultan pays no regard to any pretensions on the score of wealth or rank, nor does he take into consideration recommendations or popularity; he considers each case on its own merits, and examines carefully into the character, ability, and disposition of the man whose promotion is in question. It is by merit that men rise in the service, a system which ensures that posts should only be assigned to the competent. Each man in Turkey carries in his own hand his ancestry and his position in life, which he may make or mar as he will. Those who receive the highest offices from the Sultan are for the most part the sons of shepherds or herdsmen, and so far from being ashamed of their parentage, they actually glory in it, and consider it a matter of boasting that they owe nothing to the accident of birth.⁶⁶

Position within the Ottoman institutional structure was not based on a predetermined aristocratic or ethnic order, but on an individual’s merit and ability. In other words, entry into the precincts of the state bureaucracy, theoretically, was open to any who could earn it. Given the extraordinarily diverse nature of the empire, this was a genuinely inclusive policy that not only provided for opportunity across a broad range of constituencies, but also demonstrated, as a ruling ideology, that the power of the state ultimately was in the power of the individuals within it. As Barkey notes, “active state society management and concrete organizational efforts in daily dealings made toleration the desired outcome.”⁶⁷ The strength of the state resided in harnessing the strengths of the people, but in doing so, it also resided in promoting, through meritocratic competition, a standard version of allegiance and devotion to the empire. The Ottoman Empire, therefore, had a deep, almost dialectic, tension between an administrative strategy that embraced a widely diverse array

of cultures under its umbrella, while at the same time using elements of that diversity in the service of unified control.

Conclusion

This study offered three examples of the ways in which empires have used the management of diverse communities to achieve stability and longevity during their periods of growth and expansion. It demonstrated how the Romans recognized the deep relationships between citizenship, commerce, and the consumption and display of diversity as a means of control within the empire. It then turned to the Mughals, who made syncretism and the concomitant working across difference the centerpiece of their ideology of diversity management. Finally, the Ottomans allowance for the private laws of religious communities within the larger framework of their administrative state provided the blueprint for maintaining their strong Islamic identity alongside the active management of religious and ethnic diversity.

In each case, the administrative imperatives of these empires made the acceptance and administration of difference the most logical course of action to meet the political and economic needs of the empire during periods of growth and stabilization. Further, the logic of inclusion became the basis of arrangements that provided benefits for the diverse communities within these empires, while at the same time devising concomitant and alternative arrangements that incentivized homogeneity to allow the ruling empire to exert its power and maintain control of its domain. Historically, therefore, the acceptance of diversity within these polities resulted in stronger, more vibrant, and enduring states, but that stability and vibrancy was achieved through a balance between the inclusive acceptance of diversity and the drive towards unified imperial identity.

This tension is not simply an historical artifact of these long-dead empires but is also a feature of much of our contemporary conversation around diversity and inclusion. Contemporary consumer culture centers the display of diversity as an element of capitalist rhetoric. Modern debates around immigration and citizenship, for instance, center around language politics and levels of assimilation. Modern conversations on racial identity and inequality are crucially informed by analyses of systemic, institutional logics of inclusion and exclusion. The analysis of diversity in historical context provides depth to our modern discourses and demonstrates the enduring quality of diversity as an issue across human societies.

Jason Freitag is an Associate Professor of History at Ithaca College in Ithaca, NY, specializing in the history of South Asia, Islam, and the British Empire. In addition to courses in these specialties, he teaches World Civilizations at the undergraduate level as well as a graduate seminar in global history for MAT students. He is the author of *Serving Empire, Serving Nation: James Tod and the Rajputs of Rajasthan* (Leiden: Brill, 2009). He can be reached at jfreitag@ithaca.edu.

NOTES

¹ See the vast literature on Orientalism and the postcolonial turn, for example Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 1st ed. (New York: Vintage, 1979); Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994); Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, 1st ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox, Revised ed. (New York: Grove Press, 2008); and Frantz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Homi K. Bhabha, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2005).

² The key text for a broad and magisterial examination of the operation and meaning of difference in world empires is Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference*, 2011. See also the historical contexts section of the very informative volume by Steven Vertovec, ed., *Routledge International Handbook of Diversity Studies* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2014).

³ Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*, 2.

⁴ See, for example, the controversy around the work of Princeton classicist Dan-el Padilla Peralta in Rachel Poser, “He Wants to Save Classics From Whiteness. Can the Field Survive?,” *The New York Times*, February 2, 2021, sec. Magazine, accessed July 30, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/02/magazine/classics-greece-rome-whiteness.html>. See also the 2017 case of Cambridge classicist Mary Beard in “Mary Beard Abused on Twitter over Roman Britain’s Ethnic Diversity,” *The Guardian*, August 6, 2017, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/aug/06/mary-beard-twitter-abuse-roman-britain-ethnic-diversity>.

⁵ “Interview with Arjun Appadurai,” accessed August 7, 2021, <https://www.mmg.mpg.de/50202/interview-with-arjun-appadurai>.

⁶ For an overview of the scope of the concept of diversity in contemporary intellectual discourse, see Peter Heather, “Diversity and the Roman Empire,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Diversity Studies* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 1–20.

⁷ Heather, “Diversity and the Roman Empire,” 10–11.

⁸ Bonnie G. Smith, *Imperialism: A History in Documents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 10. National involvement in the production and understanding of empire is also key to imperial historiography, as outlined by Durba Ghosh, “Another Set of Imperial Turns?,” *The American Historical Review* 117, no. 3 (2012): 772–93.

⁹ Smith, *Imperialism*, 11–15. This echoes Hobson’s critique of empire as a machine for driving national economies. See John Hobson, “Imperialism, 1902,” accessed August 11, 2021, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1902hobson.asp>.

¹⁰ A highly accessible and engaging analysis of the encounter between modern, bounded spaces and a more fluid Mediterranean world is in Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land: History in the Guise of a Traveler’s Tale*, 1994. An historically accurate novel that explores the same territory through the story of a Bengali family’s experience of the partition of India and the literal drawing of national boundaries at the end of the British Raj is in Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 2005.

¹¹ Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*, 8.

¹² Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*, 8.

¹³ For a thorough and engaging analysis of the role of cultural encounter in world history, see Jon Thares Davidann and Marc Jason Gilbert, *Cross-Cultural Encounters in Modern World History, 1453–Present* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019).

¹⁴ The horrific violence of the Armenian Genocide, for example, comes from a totally different historical and political context during the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire rather than a moment of expansion and growth in the early part of the empire that I present here.

¹⁵ For an excellent overview of the history of Rome, see Charles Freeman, *Egypt, Greece and Rome: Civilizations of the Ancient Mediterranean*, 2004.

¹⁶ For this paper, I use the following edition: G. W. B. Huntingford, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, by an Unknown Author: With Some Extracts from Agatharkhides “On the Erythraean Sea”* (Farnham: Hakluyt Society, 2010). An easily accessible online version of the text exists in the Fordham Ancient History Sourcebook: “Internet History Sourcebooks,” accessed June 14, 2021, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/periplus.asp>.

¹⁷ Huntingford, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, 4–11.

¹⁸ Huntingford, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, 21.

¹⁹ Huntingford, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, 42–43.

²⁰ Huntingford, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, 24.

²¹ By which he means somewhat spare in his ways and always seeking opportunity. Huntingford, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, 21.

²² Huntingford, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, 55.

²³ Nandini Pandey, “The Roman Roots of Racial Capitalism,” *American Academy* (blog), February 10, 2021, <https://www.americanacademy.de/the-roman-roots-of-racial-capitalism/>; American Academy in Berlin, *Roman Diversity: Modern Lessons from an Ancient Empire*, 2021, <https://vimeo.com/517126452>.

²⁴ Pandey, “The Roman Roots of Racial Capitalism.”

²⁵ Pandey, “The Roman Roots of Racial Capitalism.”

²⁶ “Caracalla and His Motives - English,” accessed June 14, 2021, <https://www.constitutio.de/en/constitutio-antoniniana/caracalla-and-his-motives>.

²⁷ Heather, “Diversity and the Roman Empire,” 119–22.

²⁸ Pandey, “The Roman Roots of Racial Capitalism.” The seminar video from the American Academy in Berlin provides useful visuals to support this point, Berlin, *Roman Diversity*.

²⁹ For excellent treatments of Mughal history, see the following texts: Herman Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund, *A History of India* (London: Routledge, 1992) and John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

³⁰ Kulke and Rothermund, *A History of India*, 203.

³¹ H. Beveridge, *The Akbarnama Of Abul Fazl Vol. 3*, 1907, 158, accessed October 1, 2021, <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.55650>.

³² Beveridge, 364.

³³ Beveridge, 365.

³⁴ H. M. (Henry Miers) Elliot and John Dowson, *The History of India: As Told by Its Own Historians. The Muhammadan Period* (London: Trübner & Co., 1867), 526–27, accessed July 15, 2021, <http://archive.org/details/cu31924073036752>.

³⁵ Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, 37.

³⁶ Kulke and Rothermund, *A History of India*, 202.

- [37](#) Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, 60.
- [38](#) Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, 60.
- [39](#) Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, 21–23.
- [40](#) See Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, 20–24. The Rajput relationship with the Mughals, though decried by some princes as capitulation to an outsider, did benefit the Rajput courts by placing them in a wider South Asian political landscape.
- [41](#) Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, 24.
- [42](#) Kulke and Rothermund, *A History of India*, 202 and Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, 63.
- [43](#) Audrey Truschke, *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 9.
- [44](#) Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 102–3.
- [45](#) Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 165.
- [46](#) For an excellent, detailed review of the rise and consolidation of the Ottomans, see Colin Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300–1650: The Structure of Power* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002). Caroline Finkel provides a highly engaging and accessible narrative history of the entire span of the empire in Caroline Finkel, *Osman's Dream: The History of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).
- [47](#) For excellent analyses of the diversity inherent in the Ottoman world from the very beginning, see Davidann and Gilbert, *Cross-Cultural Encounters in Modern World History, 1453–Present*; Nora Lafi, “Diversity and the Nature of the Ottoman Empire: From the Construction of the Imperial Old Regime to the Challenges of Modernity,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Diversity Studies* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2014); and Ayşe Zarakol, “The Ottomans and Diversity,” in *Culture and Order in World Politics*, ed. Andrew Phillips and Christian Reus-Smit (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 49–70, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108754613.003>.
- [48](#) Lafi, “Diversity and the Nature of the Ottoman Empire: From the Construction of the Imperial Old Regime to the Challenges of Modernity,” 127.
- [49](#) Lafi, “Diversity and the Nature of the Ottoman Empire,” 127.
- [50](#) Davidann and Gilbert, *Cross-Cultural Encounters in Modern World History, 1453–Present*, 64–68.
- [51](#) Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, 127.
- [52](#) Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, 8–10. For an in-depth examination of the way that Sufis and other ulama spread knowledge of Islam on the frontiers and margins of its political spread, see Richard Bulliet, *Islam: The View from the Edge*, Revised ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).
- [53](#) Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, 10.
- [54](#) Davidann and Gilbert, *Cross-Cultural Encounters in Modern World History, 1453–Present*, 65–66.
- [55](#) Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, 88.
- [56](#) Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300–1650*, 217. Barkey notes that the system was “never fully codified.” See in Karen Barkey, “Islam and Toleration: Studying the Ottoman Imperial Model,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture & Society* 19, no. 1/2 (September 2005): 16. Zarakol argues that the *millet* system was not institutionalized as such until the nineteenth century, and that its early roots are a sign that there were many Ottoman diversity regimes. She notes that Jews and Christians were known generally as *dhimmi*s and that the Jewish and Christian protected groups were also called *ta'ifa* (groups), a term applied to a wide range of social or economic collectives. The *ta'ifa* groups had the benefit of “internal regulations,” but also the flexibility, if they needed, to seek redress in Ottoman courts. See Zarakol, “The Ottomans and Diversity,” 52–57.
- [57](#) Barkey, “Islam and Toleration,” 15–16.

- ⁵⁸ Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300–1650*, 217.
- ⁵⁹ Karen Barkey and George Gavrilis, “The Ottoman Millet System: Non-Territorial Autonomy and Its Contemporary Legacy,” *Ethnopolitics* 15, no. 1 (January 1, 2016): 24–42.
- ⁶⁰ Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300–1650*, 42.
- ⁶¹ Finkel, *Osman’s Dream*, 105–7.
- ⁶² Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300–1650*, 48.
- ⁶³ Zarakol, “The Ottomans and Diversity,” 59–63.
- ⁶⁴ Finkel, *Osman’s Dream*, 28.
- ⁶⁵ Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300–1650*, 134–42. For a primary source account of the collection system, see James M. Ludlow, “The Tribute of Children, 1493,” accessed August 11, 2021, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/islam/1493janissaries.asp>. An Ottoman painting depicting *devshirme* is at “Children and Youth in History | Devshirme System [Gravure],” accessed August 11, 2021, <https://chnm.gmu.edu/cyh/primary-sources/464>.
- ⁶⁶ Ogier Ghislain de Busbecq, Charles Thornton Forster, and Francis Henry Blackburne Daniell, *The Life and Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, Vol. 1* (London : C. K. Paul, 1881), 154–55, <http://archive.org/details/lifelettbusbecq01forsuoft>.
- ⁶⁷ Barkey, “Islam and Toleration,” 17.