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FROM TRABZON TO ISTANBUL : THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN SÜLEYMAN THE LAWGIVER & HIS FOSTER
BROTHER (*SÛT KARINDAŞI*) YAHYA EFENDİ *

Heath W. LOWRY

«A perfect historian must possess an imagination sufficiently powerful to make his narrative affecting and picturesque. Yet he must control it so absolutely as to content himself with the materials which he finds, and to refrain from supplying details by additions of his own. He must be a profound and ingenious reasoner. Yet he must possess sufficient self-command to abstain from casting his facts in the mould of his hypothesis. Those who can justly estimate these almost insuperable difficulties will not think it strange that every writer should have failed, either in the narrative or in the speculative department of history.»

T. B. Macaulay's essay on 'History'

As the cycle of conferences focusing on the life and reign of the Ottoman Sultan Süleyman winds to a close, it becomes increasingly apparent that we have been unable (with few exceptions) to reach beyond *Kanunî's* official façade or persona and catch a glimpse of the man behind the image. It is this lacuna which, albeit in a very modest manner, the present paper seeks

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to address. It does so by focusing attention on one little-known and totally unstudied aspect of Süleyman's life : his life-long relationship with his foster brother or *süt karındaşı*, one Yahya Efendi, also known as Beşiktaşlı Yahya Efendi. To my knowledge Yahya was the only individual who literally knew Süleyman from birth to death. As such, it seems reasonable to assume that by focusing our attention on a series of vignettes, or points in time, where their paths crossed, we may be able to briefly draw aside the official façade guarding Süleyman from the probing eyes of the historian.

Our narrative must needs begin in the eastern Black Sea port city of Trabzon in the closing decade of the fifteenth century, with the lives of the two key Ottoman officials of the province : Şehzade Selim, the Governor, and, one Amasyalı Ömer Efendi, variously described as the *kadı* (religious judge) and/or *müftü* (legal expert) in Trabzon. These two individuals, one embodying the secular and the other the religious authority of the state, were the representatives of Ottoman power in Trabzon. Indeed, it is not beyond the realm of conjecture to postulate a student-teacher relationship between the religious scholar, Ömer Efendi and the youthful Ottoman prince Selim.

Whatever professional relationship existed between Şehzade Selim and Ömer Efendi must have been strengthened when in late 1494 or early 1495 Ömer Efendi's wife gave birth to a son, just weeks or months before Selim's wife gave birth to the infant Süleyman. For, it was to the wife of Ömer Efendi, the mother of the Newborn Yahya, that Süleyman's mother turned when she needed a wet nurse for the infant prince. With this action Süleyman and Yahya became *süt karındaşları* (milk brothers), or 'Foster Brothers.'

One does not have to strain the imagination to project that logically the two sons of the leading Ottoman officials in the town continued to see one another on a daily basis as they grew into beyhood. Indeed, they may well have both studied together at the feet of Süleyman's first tutor, one Hayreddin Efendi. As to another facet of their education, their training as apprentices in the art of the goldsmith, here there is no need for speculation.

A passage in the *Seyahatname* of the seventeenth century cosmographer Evliya Çelebi, in which he describes the arts and handicrafts of Trabzon, contains the following description :

«The goldsmiths of Trabzon are the best in the world. Sultan Selim, being brought up in this town, was taught the art of goldsmith, and cut dies for the coin of his father Bayezid, so skillfully, that they appeared as if engraved in marble; I saw some of this coin at Trabzon.» [Von Hammer, Evliya : Vol. II., p. 48]

The passage continues :

«*ve Süleyman han dahi bu Trabefzunda [Trabzon] doğup Beşiktaşta medfundur Yahya Efendi ile süt karındaş olup, onunla Kostantine nam bir ruminin şagirdi olup, Süleyman han üstad zerger olmuşdu.*» [Evliya, *İstanbul Üniversitesi Kütüphane //5939 : V259r*]

that is :

«..and Süleyman Han was also born in Trabzon. Yahya Efendi, who is buried in Beşiktaş, was his foster-brother, and together with him he was apprenticed to a Greek goldsmith named Kostantine. Süleyman Han became a master goldsmith.»

This passage not only serves to establish the relationship between the young Süleyman and Yahya, but also provides an explanation for the life-long interest Süleyman maintained with the goldsmith's art. Given the fact that Evliya's father Derviş Mehmed was the chief of the goldsmiths guild in Istanbul, plus that the traveller himself had been trained in this art, it is easy to understand the degree of detail provided in the *Seyahatname* relative to Süleyman's special affinity for the goldsmiths' guild. That this affinity continued after Süleyman became the Ottoman ruler is illustrated by the following passage from Evliya :

«Süleyman having ascended the throne, in order to show his favor to the goldsmiths, built for them the fountain called Sakaçeşme, with a large factory provided with a mosque, a bath, and assembly-room, and numerous other rooms and cells. He founded there, as a *vakıf*, a thousand plates, with five hundred kettles and pans. Every twenty years they were allowed to make a great feast, for which purpose ten purses were given them from the treasury, and the imperial drums and kettle-drums granted to them. These feasts lasted for days and nights. I, poor Evliya, myself a goldsmith by profession, saw this feast at three different times....» [Von Hammer, *Evliya* : Vol. I., Part II., pp. 188-189].

Leaving aside a degree of exaggeration, which undoubtedly stemmed from his father's role as chief of the goldsmiths' guild, Evliya's account leaves little doubt but that in the seventeenth century Sultan Süleyman was viewed as the patron par excellence of the goldsmiths. Not only had he personally endowed their headquarters in Istanbul, he also had established (at twenty year intervals), a major celebration in their honor, which he (and his successors) graced with their presence. Indeed, Evliya proudly states that the goldsmiths «attained the high degree of consideration they enjoy» as a direct result of Sultan Süleyman's having been «brought up at Trabzon as apprentice in the art of the goldsmith.» Clearly, Süleyman's youthful training (which he underwent in the company of his foster-brother Yahya) was a matter of some pride for him, and, upon assuming the Sultanate, he used his authority for the benefit of his fellow craftsmen.

I have focused on the accounts of Süleyman and Yahya's training as apprentices in the goldsmiths art for two reasons. First, this shared experience may well have been the 'cement' that resulted in their life-long relationship, and, secondly, it illustrates that during both their Trabzon years, they shared more than Yahya's mothers milk !!

Another shared interest, which may well have begun during their boyhoods in Trabzon, was a love of poetry. In later life, both

men were to author *divans*, or collections of verse : Süleyman, under the pseudonym of *Muhibbî* (the Lover), and Yahya Efendi under the name of *Müderrisî* (the teacher or professor). From the fact that Şehzade Selim's 'court' in Trabzon was known as a gathering place for poets and men of letters, it does not seem beyond the realm of supposition to postulate that the life-long interest in the poet's art which was manifested in both Süleyman and Yahya had its roots in their boyhood in Trabzon [Lowry, *Trabzon* : p. 101 & Footnote 60].

Without straying too far from the confines of Macaulay's injunction in regard to the ideal blend between the 'narrative' and 'speculative' aspects of the historian's craft, we may state that that Yahya is the only childhood acquaintance of Süleyman to have found his way into the contemporary literature.

However, this results less from the coincidence of their shared childhood in Trabzon, than from the fact, that following their departure from that city (ca. 1510), both made names for themselves in other spheres. One was to emerge as a major figure in the political life of the sixteenth century, while the other became a well-known Muslim mystic, whose tomb in the hills above Beşiktaş remains a place of religious pilgrimage today. Stated differently, both Süleyman and Yahya were to follow in the paths of their fathers. Likewise, both were to spend the remainder of their lives in the Ottoman capital of Istanbul.

While the subsequent career of Süleyman is a matter of public record, that of Yahya Efendi is understandably much less known. He continued his education in the capital as a student of the scholar Zembilli Ali Efendi, and appears to have at one time followed a conventional learned career as a *müderris* in the *Fatih Medrese*.

The sources which do provide us a glimpse into Yahya's life tend to be hagiographical in nature, and focus on his piety and goodness. Typical of the surviving examples in this genre, is the following account describing the manner in which he acquired the site of the *derviş* convent which still bears his name in the hills above Beşiktaş :

«One day Yahya's neighbor, a [Greek named] Apostol, had been caught in a storm at sea; although he was a Christian he prayed to Yahya Efendi that his life be spared. His prayers were answered. Upon his return to Istanbul he brought a jug of old wine to Yahya. As he walked up the hill to present his gift the wine was transformed into pomegranate juice. Apostol was so amazed by this miracle, that he gave the site of the *derviş* convent to Yahya Efendi as a gift, converted to Islam, changed his name to Ali, and became one of Yahya's most devoted followers. He now lies at the foot of the *Şeyh*.» [Uyan, *Menakibelerle* : p. 2033].

This account, while in all likelihood apocryphal in nature, does contain one verifiable fact : namely, Yahya Efendi was the founder of an *Üveysi Dergâh* [a *derviş* convent of the Üveysi order], in the hills to the west of today's *Yıldız Park*. Most of the surviving hagiographical accounts on his life stem from his role as *Pir* or *Şeyh* of this *derviş* convent.

Yahya Efendi is also hailed in the writings of this genre, as a devout and pious man who paid no attention to the world or worldly goods. Indeed, he reportedly seldom strayed from his Beşiktaş retreat, and then, only to approach his foster brother, Kanunî Süleyman. When faced with a situation he did not approve of, he would admonish his foster-brother in harsh tones, and, if his advice were not heeded, he would retreat to his convent and refuse to set foot in the palace for months or even years at a time. [Ayverdi : *Tarih* : pp. 169-70].

Typical of the stories illustrating the continuing relationship between Süleyman and Yahya Efendi, between the ruler and the mystic, is the following hagiographical account focusing on the oft-mentioned relationship believed to have existed between Yahya Efendi and the Moslem saint *Hızır*. This highly venerated figure, while unnamed in the Koran, is usually identified with the companion of Moses' travels, who achieved immortality for himself by his discovery of the Fountain of Life [Hasluck, *Christianity*: Vol. I., pp. 319-]. One of the more popular stories concerning the

relationship between Yahya Efendi and Hızır, concerns Süleyman as well :

«Kanunî was well aware of the fact that his elder-brother (*ağabey*), the term by which he always addressed Yahya Efendi, was in 'contact' with Hızır, and frequently expressed his desire to meet with the Saint. One day, while riding in a boat on the Bosphorus, Kanunî glanced up and saw that the boat was passing between Beşiktaş and Ortaköy. He thought of his foster-brother, and sent a retainer ashore with orders to invite Yahya Efendi to join him. Yahya responded to the invitation and approached the landing spot with an acquaintance, whom he neglected to introduce to the Sultan. Both men got on the boat, and from the moment of doing so, the eyes of Yahya's acquaintance never veered from a large emerald ring which adorned the ruler's hand. Noticing his concentration, Kanunî removed his ring and handed it to the stranger, saying : «here, take a closer look.» The man accepted the ring and after examining it closely threw it far out into the waters of the Bosphorus. Süleyman, in order not to offend his elder-brother, said nothing, but he was furious. A short time later the stranger indicated that he wished to be set ashore. As the boat neared land he suddenly reached down into the water, and extended a handful of water to the Sultan. The ring he had thrown into the sea was glistening in his palm. With the exception of Yahya Efendi, everyone on the boat was clearly surprised. As soon as Kanunî extended his hand and took the ring, the stranger disappeared. The Sultan turned to Yahya Efendi and said : «Elder brother, what is happening?» Yahya replied : «that was Hızır.» The Sultan responded : «Why didn't you introduce him to me?» Yahya Efendi answered; «He tried to make himself known to you, but you did not pay any attention.» [Uyan, *Menakibelerle* : p. 2033].

While we may doubt the actual events as related in this story, most hagiographical literature does contain hidden kernels of reality. Here, I would suggest, the 'truth' lies in what we learn about the relationship between Kanunî and his foster-brother, Yahya Efendi. Specifically, that their childhood relationship continued throughout the lifetimes of both men. Further, that the

respect felt by the ruler for his foster-brother is indicated by frequent references to the fact that he always referred to Yahya Efendi as *ağabey*, or elder brother, both in recognition of the slight age difference which separated them, and more importantly as a sign of respect. That Yahya refrained from ever taking personal advantage of his relationship with his all-powerful foster-brother, is a fact repeatedly stressed in the literature as well.

Just as Yahya entered the world before Süleyman, he outlived the Sultan by four years and died in 1570. He was buried next to his Beşiktaş convent in a magnificent *türbe* [tomb], designed and built by the imperial architect, *Mimar* Sinan. An unusual tribute, and one, which Evliya Çelebi informs us was commissioned and paid for by Süleyman's son and successor, Selim II. in honor of his late father's lifelong friend. It is perhaps fitting, that these two individuals nurtured in infancy by the milk of a single mother, subjected to the same verbal and physical abuse in childhood at the hands of the goldsmith Kostantine, were reunited in death by entombment in similar funerary edifices designed and constructed by the same architect. It was in adulthood, however, that their lives had followed different paths, with Süleyman emerging as a major figure on the sixteenth-century stage of world affairs, and, Yahya Efendi, becoming a much venerated Muslim mystic. Ironically, today, the tomb of the reclusive man of God, Yahya Efendi, is a place of pilgrimage thronged by visiting crowds, whereas that of the world conquering ruler stands relatively neglected in the gardens behind the mosque which bears his name.

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In closing, I should like to return once again to the injunction of Macaulay, with which I began this paper :

«A perfect historian must possess an imagination sufficiently powerful to make his narrative affecting and picturesque. Yet he must control it so absolutely as to content himself with the materials which he finds, and to refrain from supplying details by additions of his own. He must be a profound and ingenious reasoner. Yet he must possess sufficient self-command to abstain from

casting his facts in the mould of his hypothesis. Those who can justly estimate these almost insuperable difficulties will not think it strange that every writer should have failed, either in the narrative or in the speculative department of history.»

Bearing Macaulay's advice in mind, I trust that my failures in both the 'narrative' and 'speculative' departments have not served to completely overshadow the hitherto unknown and interesting manner in which the lives of Kanunî Süleyman and his *süt-karındaş* Yahya Efendi were intertwined almost from birth until the present day. To the extent that I have succeeded in removing even a single layer of the gauze with which the life of Süleyman is all too beclouded, i.e., to the extent that his relationship with Yahya Efendi helps to provide him a human persona in place of the diplomatic person behind which he is generally hidden, I will judge this a worthwhile exercise. Without moving too far beyond the materials at hand, that is, without giving too much vent to the powers of imagination, we may accept that Kanunî Süleyman enjoyed at least one life-long relationship, outside the confines of power and politics. Namely, his friendship with his foster-brother, Yahya Efendi.

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