

ATATÜRK SUPREME COUNCIL FOR CULTURE, LANGUAGE AND HISTORY  
PUBLICATIONS OF THE TURKISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY

XXVI. Serial - No. 13

IX<sup>th</sup> INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF  
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL HISTORY OF  
TURKEY

Dubrovnik - Croatia, 20-23 August, 2002

ANKARA, 2005

TOWARDS A PROSOPOGRAPHY OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE:  
GENERALISING FROM A PROJECT ON THE STUDENTS  
READING FOR HIGHER DEGREES ABROAD

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**Introduction**

This paper makes the case for a comprehensive prosopography of the Ottoman Empire: why such a prosopography is important for the Ottoman studies and how that could be achieved. Specifically, a methodology based on the relational database technology is described.

I start with a definition of the term prosopography. It is a method of investigation of the common background and characteristics of a group of actors in history by means of a collective study of their lives. It may focus on a small family group, or may be used to develop insights into the relatively large groups of people who are linked by common educational or cultural backgrounds, or by business or political interest. It is also a means of explaining the behaviour of historical actors with reference to their social, economical and political affiliations. The investigation of such a network of relationships is an increasingly important aspect of historical studies. The theoretical (ideological) justification for such a prosopographical study lies in the belief that the true history resides only in the actions of individuals, in their lives and behaviours. Many of the actions of individuals are indeed extremely minor and affected only a few people at the time and none since. But, accumulation of such actions became major events of history.<sup>1</sup>

Prosopography is one of the oldest historical methods. There has, however, been an increase in interest in this approach in the last thirty years. Application of data processing technology led to an increase in both quality and quantity of the prosopographical studies. One area that well developed is classical and medieval prosopography. Among the many, *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire (PLRE)*, *Prosopography of the Byzantine Empire (PBE)* and *Prosopographisches Lexicon der Palaiologenzeit (PLP)* are invaluable reference works, and successful

\* The author wishes to thank Dr. Fatma Acun, for her help and advice concerning traditional Ottoman prosopographical works.

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Stone, 'Prosopography', *The past and the present*, (London, 1981), 45-46

examples of prosopographical research with new technology. The monumental PLRE lists all members of the leading Roman families up to the year 641. PBE, from 641 to 1261 and PLP covers the Palaiologan age from 1261 to 1453.

I will give here information in some detail only on the *Prosopography of the Byzantine Empire*, the predecessor of the Ottoman Empire. *Prosopography of the Byzantine Empire* records in a computerised relational database all surviving information about every individual mentioned in Byzantine sources during the period from 641 to 1261, and every individual mentioned in non-Byzantine sources during the same period who is 'relevant' (on a generous interpretation) to Byzantine affairs. The prosopography covers the period from 641 (the terminal date of Volume III of the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*) to 1261 (the commencement date of the *Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit*).

The six-hundred-year period is divided into three roughly equal sections: 641 to 867; 867 to 1025; and 1025 to 1261. The work of the prosopography begins therefore when the Byzantines were struggling to cope with the Arab conquests in the Levant and the spread of Islam, and ends with the restoration of the Empire in 1261 after the loss of Constantinople to the crusaders and the period of exile in Nicaea (İznik).

PBE is based at King's College London on the Strand. It is supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Board (in Britain) and the British Academy. PBE works in collaboration with the Berlin-Brandenburg Akademie's prosopographie der mittelbzanischen Zeit; and the Evergetis Project. It is available on the Internet <<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/humanities/cch/PBE>>.

Returning back to the case for the Ottoman prosopography, in many cases understanding the contents of the documents used in research, require knowledge about the persons who created them as well as the persons mentioned in them. Furthermore, as I mention at the beginning, we need to explain the behaviors of historical actors with reference to their social, economical and political affiliations. All these justify the creation of a comprehensive Ottoman prosopography. But how can we achieve this? In view of the number of documents that need to be processed (~150 million), the answer is: may be never, at least in the foreseeable future.

But this does not mean that nothing can be done. There are already a number of prosopographical collections compiled by various persons using traditional methods for the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, Ottomans themselves had a rich tradition of biography (*tezkire* or *tercüme-i hal*). This tradition created some monumental works that are used even today.

### Traditional Prosopographical Works

An early example of this tradition is Dictionary of Poets by Sehi Bey, which also contains samples of verses. One of the most famous representative of this tradition is Taşköprülüzade's work, *Şakaik-i Numaniyye*. Being himself a scholar, Taşköprülüzade, provides a compendium of scholars and sheiks, in many cases together with an assessment of a contribution of given author to scholarship. Another famous example is the *Osmanlı Müellifleri* (Ottoman Writers) by Bursalı Mehmed Tahir (1861-1925). His monumental work consists of biographical sketches and descriptions of written works of 1691 Ottoman-Turkish authors who lived during the entire lifetime of the Ottoman Empire. The work subdivides the authors according to their occupations such as, sufis, scholars, poets and historians, and their fields of specialisation such as medicine, mathematics and geography. Biographical information includes birth and death date and place of the author, his occupation and works, and, if available his education and career.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, *Sicill-i Osmani*, (Ottoman Records) or *Tezkire-i Meşahir-i Osmaniyye* (Biographies of the Well known Ottomans) is a kind of dictionary of biographies of well known and lesser known persons who lived during the time between the establishment of the Ottoman Empire and 1899. Compiled by Mehmed Süreyya (1845-1909) from among the countless documents and tombstones, the source includes biographies of the Sultans, members of the imperial family, including women members, persons at the service of the Sultan, high officials, governors of some provinces, khans of Crimea, some prominent persons and families, Islamic scholars and many other persons of lesser importance.<sup>3</sup> The same author also has undertaken another work concerning appointments and date of deaths of high Ottoman officials between 1831-1875.

<sup>2</sup> The work has been re-edited from its original in Turkey and abroad since its first publication in 1915. For the latest edition in Turkey, see Bursalı Mehmed Tahir, *Osmanlı Müellifleri*, ed. Mustafa Tatcı-Cemal Kurnaz, Ankara 2000. One of the examples of the biographical descriptions in the source is as follows: *Şakir Paşa (Mirliva), Mekteb-i Tıbbiyye-i Askeriyye'den 1288 tarihinde neşet itmiş ezkiya-ı etıbbadandır. Fizyoloji tahsili için Paris'e gönderilmiş ve meşahir-i fizyolojijyundan (Claude Bernard) 'ın rahle-i tedrisinde ikmal-i tahsil eylemiştir. Dersaadete avdetinde 292 tarihinde Mekteb-i Tıbbiyye-i Askeriyye ve Tıbbiyye-i Mülkiye fen menafiül-aza muallimliğine tayin olunmuş ve tıbbın menafiül-aza şubesinde ibraz eylediği mesaiden dolayı alem-i tıbb-ı Osmaniyyede bekayı nam itmiş ve yüzlerce şakird yetiştirmiştir. Fikr-i ahrarane sahibi gayet ciddi, feylesof meşreb bir zat-ı kemalet semat idi. Ahir ömrüne kadar tahrirat ve tedkikat-ı ilmîyyede bulunmuş ve elinden bir gün kitab düşmemiştir". Osmanlı Müellifleri, new edition, p. 223.*

<sup>3</sup> The work is available in both old and modern Turkish letters; Mehmed Süreyya, *Sicill-i Osmani yahud Tezkire-i Meşahir-i Osmaniyye*, Maarif Nezareti Celilesinin izniyle tab' olunmuştur, Matba'a-ı Amire, 1308, 2 volumes; Mehmed Süreyya, *Sicill-i Osmani yahud Tezkire-i Meşahir-i Osmaniyye*, ed. Ali Aktan-Abdülkadir Yuvalı-Mustafa Keskin, Sebil Yayinevi, İstanbul 1995. 4 volumes. Biographies varies between one line and a page in length. One of the standart ones is as follows: "*Dürri Abdülkadir Efendi, Bahri Hasan Efendi mahdumdur. 990 (1582) de tevellüd eyledi Müderris olub 1025 Ramazanında (Eylül 1616) fevt eyledi. Elsine-i selasede şair ve ehl-i mahir idi". Sicill-i Osmani, new edition, vol. II, p. 371.*

The part of the work covering the period between 1831 and 1852 has been published under the name of *Nuhbetü'l-Vekayi*.<sup>4</sup>

The last representative of the Ottoman *tezkire*/prosopography tradition is İbnülemin Mahmud Kemal İnal (1870-1957). His major works are: *Son Sadrazamlar* (the Last Grand Viziers), *Son Asır Türk Şairleri* (Turkish Poets of the The Last Century) and *Son Hattatlar* (The Last Calligraphers). The most famous of these works, *The Last Grand Viziers*, consists of biographical notes, copies of various official documents, extractions from journals, inscriptions from tomb stones, photographs etc. of the last 37 grand viziers of the Ottoman Empire. This work is actually the final part in a series of biographical works about the grand viziers started with Ahmed Taib Efendi in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Taib Efendi's *Hadikatü'l-Vüzerâ*, includes the grand viziers from the time of the Sultan Orhan to the first quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. After that, various biographers continued the task of recording biographies of the grand viziers in a series.

To these one can add the *Devhatü'l-Meşayih* (or Biographies of Şeyhülislams) by Ahmed Rifat Efendi, *Meşahir-i Nisa* (or Famous Ottoman Ladies) by Mehmed Zihni and *Tarih Musahabeleri* by Abdurrahman Şeref Efendi, which gives information about statesmen of the Tanzimat era, *Osmanlı Devlet Erkamı* (or High Ottoman officials) by İsmail Hamid Danişmend, *Tanzimat Maliye Nazırları* (or Finance Ministers of the Tanzimat Era) by Mehmed Zeki Pakalın and *Son Sadrazamlar ve Başvekiller* (or The Last Grand Viziers and Prime Ministers) by Mehmed Zeki Pakalın.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from the above mentioned sources, such modern works as *Encyclopedia of Islam* and Alderson's *Structure of Ottoman Dynasty* may provide biographical information about members of the Ottoman elite groups. These are, in part, prosopographical catalogues / prosopographical dictionaries providing adequate biographical sketches of prominent persons. (Note: the list given here is not exhaustive list.)

Although all the works mentioned here are valuable sources for historians, finding information about a person or a group of persons may be too difficult because the information is scattered on a number volumes located at various libraries and archives. Analysing the information about a selected group is not even

<sup>4</sup> Mehmed Süreyya, *Sicill-i Osmani*, new edition, p. xii,

<sup>5</sup> For further information on the biographies written in the 19th century the following articles can be consulted, Erdal Yavuz-Orhan Kurmuş-Şevket Pamuk, "19. Yüzyıl Türkiye İktisat Tarihi Kaynakları: Bir Bibliyografya Denemesi", *ODTÜ Gelişme Dergisi 1979-1980 Özel Sayısı, Türkiye İktisat Tarihi Üzerine Araştırmalar: II*, pp. 344-345 Mehmet Seyitdanlıoğlu, "XIX. Yüzyıl Türkiye Yönetim Tarihi Kaynakları: Bir Bibliyografya denemesi", *Kamu Yönetimi Disiplini Sempozyumu Bildirileri*, Vol. I, Ankara 1995, pp. 357-358.

a question. A computerised Ottoman prosopography is what is needed to remedy this situation.

#### Computerised Ottoman Prosopography?

Work on a computerised Ottoman prosopography can begin by integrating all these and similar works into a single database. Doing this will multiply many times the value of the information contained in the above mentioned works. Because, in that way, not only will it be much easier and quicker to search and find the required information within large quantities of data, but it will also be possible to analyse the biographical information to answer the questions regarding births and deaths, marriages, religious affiliations, social origins, education, amounts and sources of personal wealth, place of residence, occupations and so on.

The question here is: how can we design such a database? The answer to this question is that there is already a prototype of such a database. This is a database designed for a project on Turkish Students Reading for Higher Degrees Abroad from 1834 to present time, that is including Ottoman period. It is given the name YOKÖ Database (YOKÖ being an acronym for *Yurtdışında Okuyan Öğrenciler*). The database allows for storing and analyzing the detailed information collected for each student. The project is just started with a financial support from State Planning Agency (DPT)<sup>6</sup>. When completed, the database will have contained a large amount of data, making it possible to answer the questions regarding social origins, education, career, places of residence and so on. The aim is to assist the policy makers in evaluating the existing policies for sending students abroad, and, at a more general level, in revising the current national policies in the areas of education and science in Turkey.

#### The Database

YOKÖ Database is designed as generic as possible<sup>7</sup>. That means that it can be used to study similar groups, such as military and civil bureaucrats, scholars (ulema), writers, poets and so on. YOKÖ Database is implemented using MS Access Database Management System with a view to upgrade, when necessary, to MS SQL Server.

For the purpose of illustration, sample data concerning some 47 individuals who read for higher degrees abroad at various points during period that project covers are entered into the database. Below are sample screen shots that give an idea of what the database looks like. Figures 1-6 show these screen shots.

<sup>6</sup> DPT, Project No: 01 K 120 700.

<sup>7</sup> Because of the space limitation, the design of the database is not discussed here. It is hoped that it will be discussed in a more detailed paper.

Figure 1 shows main switchboard. Clicking on first item on this switchboard opens the form shown on the Figure 2. This figure shows main data entry form. This form allows entry of data about a person on eight different categories. On the form, each of these categories is represented as a tab page each of which provides access to a number of other forms. These tab pages are: *Eğitim* (Education), *Meslek* (Career), *Adres/Kimlik Bilgileri* (Address/Identity), *Anılar/Anekdotlar* (Memos/Anecdotes), *Eserler* (Scholarly works), *Ödüller/Üyelikler* (Prizes/Membership), *Biyografi* (Biography) and *Kaynakça* (Sources). I think these categories are self descriptive and will not be explained here.

Figure 3 shows opening of a document when clicked on its link (shown in blue) on the *Dosyası* (File) field on *Belgeler* (Documents) nested tab page in Figure 2. Figures 4 and 5 show the details of *Meslek* (Career) and *Kaynakça* (Sources) tab pages respectively.

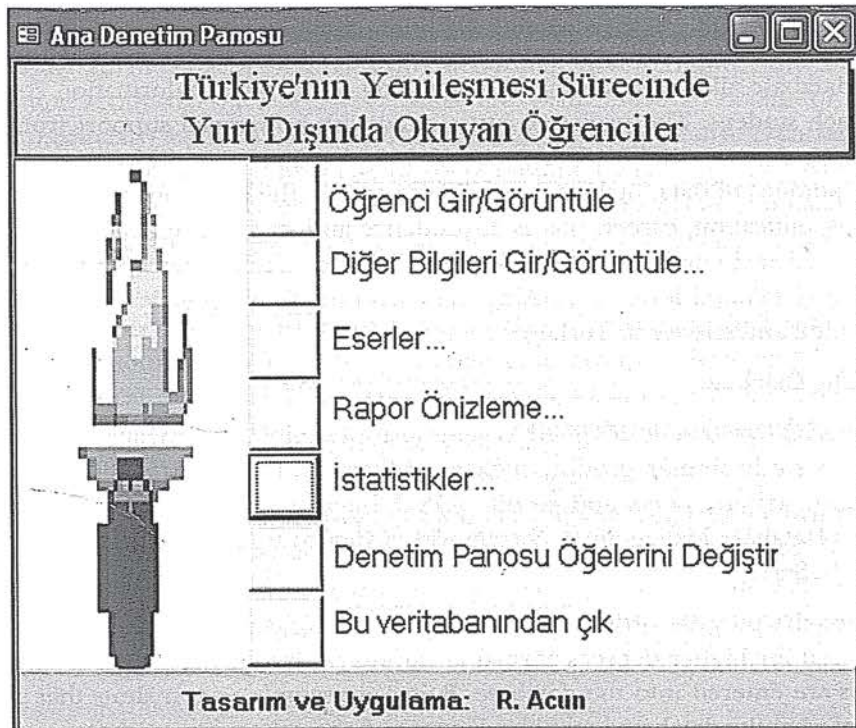


Figure 1: Main Switchboard for YOKÖ Database

Figure 2: Data Entry Form for YOKÖ Database: Education (Eğitim) Tab Page

Figure 3: Accessing a document image from YOKÖ Database



Üyeler

Yurt Dışında Olayın Öğrenciler Veni Giriş Görüntüleme

Eğitim Meslek Adres/Kimlik Bilgileri Anılar/Anekdotlar Eserler Ödüller/Üyelikler Biyografi Kaynakça

Görev Tanımı Subay, Korgeneral Not

Kurum Harita Dairesi, Milli Savunma Bakanlığı

Başlama 16.09.1923 En Son Ana Görev

Bölüş

Ayrılma Nedeni

Ücretler Belgeler Verdiği Dersler

Belgeler Dosyalar

Mehmet Şevki Paşa Korgeneral

Protopography Belgeleri Mehmet

Record: 1 of 1

Record: 6 of 8

Özet

Record: 1 of 47

Figure 4: Data Entry Form for YOKÖ Database: Career (Meslek) Tab Page

Üyeler

Yurt Dışında Olayın Öğrenciler Veni Giriş Görüntüleme

Eğitim Meslek Adres/Kimlik Bilgileri Anılar/Anekdotlar Eserler Ödüller/Üyelikler Biyografi Kaynakça

Belgeler Dosyalar

Haritacı Mehmet Şevki Paşa Harp Okulu Üçüncü sınıfta İken Fotoğrafı

27.07.1886 Mehmet Şevki Paşa Harp Okulu diploması

Paris'te Bir Günü Öğrenci (Hakkı, Hakkı, Tevfik, Mehmet Şevki)

Mehmet Şevki Paşa Kurtuluş Savaşında Samsun'da

Mehmet Şevki Paşa Nişanlı Osmanlı

01.01.1895 Mehmet Şevki Paşa Legion D'Honneur Nişanlı Şovalye rütbe

Mehmet Şevki Paşa Korgeneral

27.07.1886 Mehmet Şevki Paşa Harp Okulu diploması

Haritacı Mehmet Şevki Paşa Harp Okulu İkinci sınıfta İken Fotoğrafı

Record: 1 of 9

Basılı Kaynaklar Sayfa:

Haritacı Mehmet Şevki Paşa Ankara 1980 Kitap 1-90

Türk Haritacılık Tarihi Ankara 1980 Kitap 5-30

Record: 1 of 2

Record: 1 of 47

Figure 5: Data Entry Form for YOKÖ Database: Sources (Kaynakça) Tab Page

As can be seen from the above description, the database is potentially capable of storing almost all aspects of a person's life that could be of interest to a researcher. Once the data are entered into the database, it is relatively an easy task to manipulate them using SQL, the standard query language of the relational databases.

#### Conclusions and Future Work

The database is designed as comprehensive as possible so as to make it suitable for studying other elite groups who played an important part in the process of the development of Turkey such as bureaucrats and high level military officers. Moreover, because the data sets produced as a result of the use of this database will have the same structure, it will become possible to integrate them into a single set in order to do studies aiming inter-group comparisons.

If a database, such as the one described here is used, there will be no limit to the number of persons to be studied. Information can be gathered not only from the published or unpublished biographical works but also from other archival sources such as *vakf* deeds (*vakfiyes*), *Tahrir Defter*s and court registers (*kadı sicilleri*). These are particularly important sources for the study of local elites or non-elite groups of the earlier periods about which information is scarce.

Last word: the tool is here. But, to achieve a significant result, a project needs to be developed with a large team of researchers and of course with a substantial amount of funding.