The Ottoman Balkans and the Middle East Compared: How Might This Be Accomplished?

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A comparison of the Balkans and the Middle East during the Ottoman era is an obvious project for historical research. The nations of each of these regions share the experience of extended Ottoman sovereignty over a period measured in centuries, although the Ottoman legacy to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in each place is far from identical. Yet cross-regional comparisons of Ottoman rule have most often been anchored in Istanbul and western Anatolia, looking out separately *either* towards the Balkans or the Middle East. Only rarely are the Balkans *and* the Middle East (not to mention the remainder of the Arab provinces) juxtaposed in an attempt to see how the experience of the one can shed light on the other, on the nature of Ottoman rule, or to explore interactions between the two regions in Ottoman times and beyond. The working assumption seems to be that they have no significant shared experience.[1]

The centrality of Istanbul in most internal Ottoman comparisons may have distorted perceptions of Ottoman norms. The hubs of the empire were, successively, Bursa, Edirne and Istanbul. The centre of the empire was these three capital cities and their hinterlands, the provinces of Rumeli and Anadolu, essentially the eastern end of the Balkans and north-west Anatolia. There are some 270 kilometres from Bursa north-west to Edirne, as the crow flies, 214 from Edirne east to Istanbul and 100 kilometres from Istanbul south to Bursa. Altogether, they delimit a rather diminutive triangle, when compared to the entire geographic span of the empire. Another distortion has perhaps been imposed by contemporary political geography, which dominates our imagination of the comparative units of the empire: Anatolia, that is, the area of the modern Turkish Republic, has come to occupy a greater space and coherence than was represented by the historical province of Anadolu and the provinces east of it in Anatolia. Eastern Anatolia, therefore, is just as much a subject of comparative investigation with the centre as are the Arab provinces or the Balkans.

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[1] Among the rare examples of these cross-regional comparisons are: Isa Blumi, *Rethinking the Late Ottoman Empire: A Comparative Social and Political History of Albania and Yemen, 1878–1918* (Istanbul: Isis, 2003); Maurus Reinkowski, *Die Dinge der Ordnung. Eine Vergleichende Untersuchung Über die Osmanische Reformpolitik Im 19. Jahrhundert* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2005); and Eyal Ginio, 'Between the Balkan Wars (1912-13) and the "Third Balkan War" of the 1990s: The Memory of the Balkans in Arabic Writings', in *Untold Histories of the Middle East: Recovering Voices from the 19th and 20th Centuries*, ed. Amy Singer, Christoph K. Neumann and S. Akşin Somel (London: Routledge, 2010).

This article considers why there is such an absence of comparisons between the Ottoman Balkans and the Middle East, including the relative paucity of interaction between scholars of the Ottoman Balkans and scholars of the Ottoman Arab provinces. In actuality, scholars of these regions meet each other regularly in research venues, in conferences and in the pages of conference proceedings or festschrifts. In such cases, the studies of the one sit happily alongside those of the other; the scholars may discuss their work, exchange ideas, and occasionally the work of one will find a place in the footnotes of the other.[2] Yet the individual studies are not examples of comparative research. After considering the factors that have contributed to the absence of comparative studies of the Ottoman Balkans and the Arab provinces, this article makes a concrete proposal for how comparative Ottoman studies might be facilitated over the long term.

For the remainder of this discussion, 'Arab provinces' is used as a shorthand for 'Arabic-speaking provinces', and instead of 'Middle East', since the 'Middle East' does not necessarily represent a coherent unit in Ottoman history. The Arabic-speaking provinces (in which there were linguistic minorities as well) are distinguished as a unit in some sense for having been Muslim before the Ottoman conquest. Beyond these two shared features of language and history, however, there may be no significant factor unifying the Ottoman experience of the Arab provinces. In the Balkans, it should be noted, the only shared common feature of the region under Ottoman rule is that the entire region was not Muslim before the Ottoman conquests began in the fourteenth century. Even after the conquest there remained a significant Christian population in some places. Yet these Christians were Catholic, Orthodox in several forms and Armenian (to name only some of the Christian denominations), and it is probably superfluous to mention that no unity of language existed in the Balkans, either before or after the Ottoman conquest.

Creating the vacuum

No single cause should be sought for the vacuum of Balkan-Arab provinces comparisons in Ottoman studies; rather, many factors together influenced trends in historical scholarship and popular perception alike. Since the regions in question share no common borders nor any common languages, comparisons between them might not readily have suggested themselves to scholars. Yet it is too facile to claim that lack of reflection or insufficient historical scope or vision are at the root of this vacuum. The discussion below suggests a list of contributory causes, without assigning them any particular hierarchy or priority.

1. Trends in scholarship, what is called 'fashion' in other contexts, have always had some influence on the directions of historical research, and they are shaped,

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[2] An example of such a work which pointedly includes the two regions in its frame is the volume: L. Carl Brown, ed., *The Imperial Legacy: The Ottoman Imprint on the Balkans and the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

like other fashions, by a mixture of prevailing political, economic, social and cultural ideas, ideals and realities. The early generations of Ottoman historians, fifty to a hundred years ago, were asking a rather different set of historical questions than those we have asked in the period dating roughly from the end of the Second World War, the opening of the Ottoman archives, and the turns to economic, social and cultural history. Beginning roughly from the early twentieth century, scholars focused on questions such as: what was the nature of the early Ottoman polity and how did the Ottomans succeed? The scholars worked largely from Ottoman literary sources, although some worked from no Ottoman sources at all, but in the Rankean tradition relied instead on foreign archives, diplomatic correspondence and travellers' accounts.[3] As far as comparisons were concerned, the early scholars of modern Ottoman history writing were preoccupied by questions such as why the early Ottomans succeeded where the neighbouring *beylik*s (principalities) did not and why the later Ottomans failed to keep pace with Europe and experience similar processes of modernization, industrialization, political change and nation-state building.[4] It was not only historians of the empire (or the imperial centre) who asked this question. Local historians of Balkan and Arab countries contemplating the Ottoman eras of their countries might wonder why they 'lagged behind'. Yet the identification of the years of Ottoman rule as the 'cause' of this lag, Ottoman decline having dragged the provinces down with the centre, did not provoke any studies comparing the various negative experiences of Ottoman imperial rule in the different provinces.

A second comparative framework existed, this time not looking beyond the empire to Europe but inward, asking why the nature and pace of certain kinds of changes were different among Muslims and Christians. While this framework might well have prompted a small industry of Balkan-Arab comparisons, in fact the greater axis of comparison was between the Muslim and Christian communities

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3 Among the early scholars who used Ottoman Turkish sources were M. Fuad Köprülü, *Les Origines de l'Empire Ottoman*, reprint, 1978 (Philadelphia; Paris, 1935); M. Fuad Köprülü, 'Bizans Müesseselerinin Osmanlı Müesseselerine Te'siri Hakkında Bāzı Mülāhazalar', *Türk Hukuk ve İktisat Tarihi Mecmuası* 1 (1931): 165–313; and Paul Wittek, *The Rise of the Ottoman Empire* (London, 1938). Among those who wrote without consulting Ottoman Turkish sources were Herbert Adams Gibbons, *The Foundation of the Ottoman Empire: A History of the Osmanlis up to the Death of Bayezid I (1300–1403)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1916); A. H. Lybyer, *The Government of the Ottoman Empire in the Time of Suleiman the Magnificent* (Cambridge, 1913); and William L. Langer and Robert P. Blake, 'The Rise of the Ottoman Turks and Its Historical Background', *American Historical Review* 37 (1932): 468–505.

4 Notable among the earlier works of this kind were H.A.R. Gibb and Harold Bowen, *Islamic Society and the West: A Study of the Impact of Western Civilization on Moslem Culture in the Near East,* vol. 1, *Islamic Society in the Eighteenth Century,* 2 parts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950 and 1957); and Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, 3d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), first published in 1961. For a critical discussion of the modern historiography of the early Ottomans, see, in particular, Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 29–59; and Heath W. Lowry, *The Nature of the Early Ottoman State* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 55–94.

within the Levant or within Anatolia. To the extent that there was any comparison between the Balkans and the Arab provinces, it might be extrapolated from the others but was not constructed directly.

To these trends, one should add the impact of the analytic paradigms of Ottoman history that prevailed for much of the twentieth century. Wittek's 'gazi thesis' stressed the Muslim identity and the fervour of religious war as motivating factors for the first Ottoman conquests in the Balkans. The 'Lybyer-Gibb-and-Bowen thesis', critiqued by Norman Itzkowitz, conceived of the classical Ottoman elite as composed of a ruling institution of Christian-born fighters and administrators and a Muslim institution of theologians, teachers and judges. Ottoman undoing came from the infiltration of the ruling institution by Muslim-born Ottoman subjects.[5] The 'decline thesis', articulated clearly in Bernard Lewis's *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (1961), built on the previous two large ideas, relying in part on the writings of what Lewis called 'Ottoman observers of Ottoman decline' as well as archival evidence, to posit that the empire went into a long, slow and irretrievable decline following the 'golden age' of Sultan Süleyman I, the so-called 'magnificent'. The 'decline thesis' framed the reform era that opened with Selim III and intensified during the Tanzimat period in the nineteenth century – not as the result of internally-generated recovery for the empire; instead its renewed strength was credited to foreign, European influences. This era did, however, lay the groundwork for the establishment of the Turkish Republic, the unique post-war 'success story' of the Middle East. Essentially, the Ottoman Empire saved itself to be reincarnated as Turkey while the post-Ottoman states of the Balkans and the Arab provinces (in the eyes of their own historians and others) struggled to overcome the handicaps with which they were left by the Ottoman experience.[6] Had there been other factors connecting the post-Ottoman states, they might have made common cause, at least analytically, in discussing the experiences that created their presents. The prevailing historical theses (cited above), however, emphasized the separate and discrete nature of their Ottoman experiences, by suggesting: 1) that the Ottoman empire was born of Islamic fervour; 2) that it succeeded due to Christian administrative talent; and 3) that the centuries immediately preceding the end of the empire were anyway an unhappy time of failures.

2. The **late-Ottoman and post-Ottoman experience** in each region also turned the countries in question away from the Ottoman past. In many cases,

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5 Lybyer, *Government*, and Gibb and Bowen, *Islamic Society*, were the focus of N. Itzkowitz, 'Eighteenth Century Ottoman Realities', *Studia Islamica* 15 (1962): 73–94. This classic article demonstrated the extent to which research into the workings of Ottoman administration, based on the documentary records of the Ottoman administration as opposed to its prescriptive or idealized portrait in literary sources, could shift the entire conceptualization of the nature of Ottoman administration.

6 See B. Lewis, 'Ottoman Observers of Ottoman Decline', *Islamic Studies* 1 (1962): 71–87; and Bernard Lewis, *Emergence*, 1–174.

the final years of Ottoman rule were periods of extended violent conflict as the Ottomans fought against several powers for control of contested regions that had once been integral parts of the empire. Usually, it was the region itself that suffered the most, since the conflict took place directly in its territory. In addition, the nineteenth-century reform era brought changes not always appreciated by the subject populations. One example is the attempts at a general military draft. Another is the creation of a centralized *waqf* (endowment) administration, which led to the impoverishment of many local endowments, resulting in the deterioration of buildings and the penury of local imams, teachers, Sufi dervishes and others. The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century intellectual movements of pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism each, at separate junctures, raised anxieties and irritation among the non-Muslim and non-Turk populations of the empire.[7]

The memory of Ottoman rule was usually scarred by the violence or tension that accompanied the political separation of any province or area. Negative memories of Ottoman rule were essentially a necessary feature of the national identities and ideologies that shaped the newly independent countries of the Balkans. Nor was the post-Ottoman experience in the Arab provinces such as to create nostalgia for the imperial rulers responsible for facilitating foreign rule, whether it was French occupation in Algeria and Tunisia that began in the nineteenth century or the mandates of England and France established in the Middle East after World War I. Beyond a generally negative cast to late Ottoman rule are more complex rememberings of the Ottoman periods and, in the future, these could form the basis for a comparative investigation of Ottoman legacies.

3. The fact of a **Christian majority population in the Balkans and a Muslim majority in the Middle East** may have dissuaded their respective populations from a comparison, even working as a subliminal suggestion that a comparison between them was neither possible nor potentially fruitful. As noted, the lack of shared borders and languages also created a natural barrier. Moreover, the Western cultural emphasis on the importance of religious difference, particularly between Muslims, on the one hand, and Christians and Jews, on the other, did nothing to offset the distance created by geography and language, and neither did the sectarian nature of some Middle Eastern and post-colonial conflicts.

4. **Language** needs to be considered as a factor inhibiting comparisons, whether in face-to-face meetings or in the shaping of written scholarship. The shared languages of Ottoman history are Ottoman Turkish and modern Turkish, necessary tools for effective and honest research. The common knowledge of modern Turkish could have created a lingua franca for extensive scholarly

[7] General accounts of late Ottoman rule include: Bernard Lewis, *Emergence*; Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (London, 1964); Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 3rd ed. (London: Tauris, 2004); and Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700–1922*, New Approaches to European History (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

interaction and exchange, and it did to a limited extent. Turkish has been important, first as a basis for learning Ottoman Turkish as well as for reading scholarly literature. However, it never attained the status of a real lingua franca, spoken more or less fluently by everyone working in the field. To the extent that there is such a language, it might in the past have been German or French, while today English fills the role. Yet a significant number of works of Ottoman history have been and are written in local languages in the post-Ottoman provinces. These works may be based only on sources in regional languages or on foreign sources from never-Ottoman countries, usually deal with aspects of local or community history and sometimes treat that history in isolation from the larger Ottoman story. While such works may seem marginal to the central Ottoman Empire, in fact, these local histories are the building blocks of imperial history. Without access to them, it becomes difficult to interpret which practices and institutions are empire-wide norms and which constitute local exceptions. One might argue that it is nearly impossible to understand what functional norms were without multiple perspectives on the implementation of imperial policies and practices in the different parts of the empire. Absent these perspectives, it becomes nearly impossible to understand the dynamics of any cross-empire influences.

The main issue concerning languages in Ottoman history is their number and diversity: Ottoman Turkish, Turkish, Arabic, Persian, Greek (Byzantine and modern), Latin, Bulgarian, Serbian, Italian, French, Romanian, Hungarian, Kurdish, Armenian, Hebrew, Russian, Polish, German, Ladino, and English. (There are twenty here and the list is incomplete.) Any or all may be considered 'primary research languages' in that they are necessary in order to read different kinds of original sources. In addition, scholarly research has been published in most of these languages. There are a few gifted individuals who have the talent and time to learn more than half of the languages on this list well enough to use them for research. Most of us believe our accomplishments to be at least respectable if we can manage (somehow) in half a dozen. Yet comparative research between the Balkans and the Arab provinces obviously demands knowledge of quite a few of these languages, ones separated by the most significant grammatical and lexical differences.

6. **Geography** is another stumbling block on the route to comparative studies, because not a small amount of Ottoman history relies on intimate knowledge of place, whether a local urban fabric, the names of villages or the provincial terrain. Such familiarity, together with a natural curiosity about one's home, has enabled many scholars who come from post-Ottoman lands to examine Ottoman provincial administrative records effectively, since they recognize the names of important families, key structures, settlements, local fauna and flora, and natural features. Without such knowledge, their research would have been possible, but it would be more difficult and perhaps more prone to technical error. There has thus been a certain tendency in Ottoman history to 'stay close to home' when embarking upon studies of the provinces, except among those coming from beyond the old

Ottoman boundaries.

The area of research most crucially and immediately affected by geographical knowledge is the study of the *tapu tahrir defterleri*, the Ottoman fiscal registers that surveyed the potential revenues of the entire empire, down to the level of individual villages. In order to read these registers and make sense of the detailed information they contain, one must be familiar with the local historical geography, and even then it is often a real challenge to identify places whose names have changed or whose location has shifted.[8]

7. **Contemporary politics** create yet another barrier to comparative study of the Balkans and the Arab provinces. While one might think this is the key barrier, such is not necessarily the case. Yet it is a simple exercise to look at the list of contributors to this volume (and many others) to apprehend the unhappy and undeniable impact of regional political conflicts and the challenges they pose to comparative historical research and discussion. Barriers were thrown up by the Cold War fifty years ago just as they are today by the Arab-Israeli conflict (mentioning only two obvious political obstacles). Israel has been and continues to be a centre of Ottoman studies and there are local and foreign scholars of Ottoman history working in all the Arab countries of the region, yet cooperation among them is rare.

8. A **time** factor works against comparative Ottoman research as well. The pace of research in Ottoman history can be notoriously slow as a result of the difficulties of palaeography and/or language in many Ottoman documents. Yet these contain the raw material for analyzing provincial administration, taxation, judicial proceedings, salaries etc. Literary manuscripts may be somewhat more readable in their form, but no more immediately accessible as a result of linguistic or textual challenges.[9] Realistically, a single person would be hard pressed to go through materials from several different locations in the time available during even a lifetime of research (based on the average research position in a reasonably funded teaching university, including sabbaticals). For example, scholars such as Ömer Lutfi Barkan and Lajos Fekete, who established the basis for much Ottoman socio-economic history, first faced the challenges of learning and explicating the palaeography and diplomatics of their sources, which left them little time to undertake the kinds of comparisons we are talking about today.

[8] A varied overview of defters can be found in the following: Heath Lowry, 'The Ottoman *Tahrir Defterleri* as a Source for Social and Economic History: Pitfalls and Limitations', in *Studies in Defterology: Ottoman Society in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 1992), 3–18; A. Singer, '*Tapu Tahrir Defterleri* and *Kadi Sicilleri*: A Happy Marriage of Sources', *Tārī□* 1 (1990): 95–125; and John C. Alexander, 'Counting the Grains: Conceptual and Methodological Issues in Reading the Ottoman Mufassal Tahrir Defters', *Arab Historical Review for Ottoman Studies* 19–20 (1999): 55–70.

[9] See the discussion in Suraiya Faroqhi, *Approaching Ottoman History: An Introduction to the Sources* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 144–73.

Another aspect of time limitations is the fact of the six-hundred-year existence of the empire, together with its geographic sweep and survival into the modern era. These characteristics contributed to the preservation of a vast amount of documentary, literary and material evidence. Examining and integrating these materials even for a small region is a huge challenge to historians; how much more so for a project that embraces areas distant from each other in space, language and culture.

A plan for comparative study

Having considered some of the reasons for the absence of comparative work, I would like to suggest at least one way to begin to move beyond the limitations enumerated above. These challenges are not insurmountable. Moreover, comparative studies of the Ottoman experience in the Balkans and Arab provinces would surely contribute valuable insights into the general character of Ottoman rule; the interactions between Ottoman provinces themselves and not only their bilateral relations with the Ottoman centre; the specific and shared nature of historical change under the Ottomans; and the relationship of the Ottoman past to contemporary realities. What follows outlines a concrete proposal for a cooperative strategy to enable such comparative research to be carried out in an effective manner utilizing traditional skills and new technologies. It emerges from this author's current research about Ottoman *imaret*s (public kitchens) and some initial experimentation with Geographical Information Systems (GIS) technology as a method for investigating history as it relates to the spatial location of historical information and change.[10] The proposal also integrates existing digital technologies to store, retrieve and manipulate images and large quantities of data. The sources for this project are documentary, literary and material.

The case of Ottoman imarets is used here as an example of how one might conceive and execute empire-wide comparative projects. *İmaret* was the word most commonly used in the Ottoman Empire to describe a public kitchen that distributed food at no charge, at fixed times, to a variety of designated recipients. Over the course of Ottoman history (1300-1923), several hundred kitchens were built; a few continue to operate as centres of charitable food distribution in modern Turkey and in the former Ottoman lands. These kitchens have long been recognized as one signature institution of the Ottoman Empire, although they did not necessarily originate with the Ottomans. Single institutions that fulfilled

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[10] For a basic explanation of GIS and historical GIS, see http://www.hgis.org.uk/what_is.htm (accessed 23 August 2011). For extensive discussions of technology and methodology, and examples of the results of historical GIS studies, see Anne Kelly Knowles, ed., *Past Time, Past Place: GIS for History* (Redlands, CA: ESRI Press, 2002); Ian N. Gregory and Paul S. Ell, *Historical GIS: Technologies, Methodologies and Scholarship* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Anne Kelly Knowles, ed., *Placing History: How Maps, Spatial Data and GIS Are Changing Historical Scholarship* (Redlands, CA: ESRI Press, 2008).

functions similar to those of the imarets had long been familiar in the Muslim world. One example is the *simāṭ al-Khalīl* in Hebron or the *Dashīsha* established by the Mamluks in Egypt for the benefit of Mecca and Medina. Other institutions that distributed free meals included Sufi *zaviye*s (convent), caravanserais, wealthy homes and imperial palaces. However, the imarets were the only sites whose principal activity was the daily provision of meals to fixed and often large numbers of people.[11]

What draws our attention to the imarets is their widespread appearance in the Ottoman Empire, both in space and time. Very little systematic research has been done on the phenomenon as a whole or on the social, economic, political or cultural effects of individual institutions on local populations. No one has considered their interaction with other imarets, or with similar institutions distributing food in a particular location, the changing nature of imarets over time, nor their legacy for the post-Ottoman states where they were found. In a more prosaic vein, there exists no comprehensive survey of imarets, their founders, locations, dates of their founding, longevity and individual characteristics and histories, such as to enable us to understand their architectural and functional typologies, their collective capacity and many other basic features. Scholars have only occasionally devoted some thought to the typology of imaret buildings, to the supply and consumption of food in them, and to their founding as *waqf* endowments. To put things in a somewhat broader perspective, however, no such survey of mosque complexes or *medrese*s (colleges) exists either. Thus, we are very far from having an accurate notion of the extent or duration of imaret building and use in any era of Ottoman history, let alone a sense of imartes' changing nature and roles over time and space.

One of the central conclusions about imarets from my earlier research, based on the evidence from *waqfiyya*s (endowment deeds) and from *muhasebe defterleri* (accounts registers) of individual kitchens, is that imarets were not conceived as soup kitchens to feed the poor. They were public kitchens whose purpose was to feed a range of people deemed deserving of a meal, and their clients included the employees of the mosque-complexes where the kitchens were often located, teachers, students and Sufis in the *medrese*s and *tekke*s that might be attached to such complexes or found nearby, Ottoman officials on-the-job who arrived in a particular place, a variety of travellers, sometimes associated with a caravanserai or hostel, local people assigned a permanent 'food pension', and some unfixed number of local indigents.

From the sources available to us, it is possible to learn a great deal about individual imarets: their location, shape, the identity of the founder, and the original conditions of the kitchen as envisaged by the founder (including the

[11] For a basic discussion of imarets, together with an example of one particular institution, see Amy Singer, *Constructing Ottoman Beneficence: An Imperial Soup Kitchen in Jerusalem* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

regular daily menu, special menus, the identity of clients, the quantity of food to be distributed, the kitchen personnel, their salaries and other privileges). From a variety of Ottoman documents we can ascertain the annual accounting of income and expenditures (often over a period of many years), problems that interrupted regular operations, periods when an imaret became inactive, and changes in the management, funding, clientele or menu. Particularly in the case of imarets, the observations of imaret clients, Ottoman or foreign, add another layer of nuance to the story we can tell. Finally, on the material side, the buildings themselves remain standing for study in many cases. Artefacts such as kitchen equipment and other serving vessels remain, although not necessarily from imarets but from other contemporary institutions. They offer a good idea of the appearance of kitchens or dining settings.[12]

The above discussion about the nature of data available on imarets emphasizes its quantity and diversity. Quantity and diversity of sources are a shared feature of many topics in Ottoman history, and they are one of the key challenges to many Ottoman research projects. For this reason, the imarets research may be seen as a pilot project, whose model and method might be profitably adapted for and adopted by other comparative projects, including that of comparing the Balkans and the Middle East. The challenge is how to handle so many sources effectively so as to interrogate the data in meaningful ways, as well as to preserve and retrieve material for ongoing study.

A large comparative project such as this one cannot be carried out effectively by a single scholar, not even one with several research assistants. The volume of source material is simply too large and the scope of research literature too broad. However, bringing together a team of scholars is not simply a matter of luring people to the topic or finding funding and a venue for a meeting. What is needed is a means by which the continually acquired data of many people can be recorded and preserved in a unified style and space so that it can be accessed and interrogated in an integrated manner by those who generate the data as well as by other scholars. Only by taking advantage of new research technologies, obtaining national and trans-national funding and international support, and by agreeing on protocols for fair access to and use of data is such work possible.

Technologies available in the early twenty-first century offer new possibilities for the organization and management of sources, although they cannot replace or indeed reduce the number of hours required to read and analyze documentary material. The impact of these technologies is not negligible, though we rarely consider their implications at any length, viewing them only as passive instruments

[12] See Nina Ergin, Christoph K. Neumann and Amy Singer, eds., *Feeding People, Feeding Power: Imarets in the Ottoman Empire* (Istanbul: Eren Yayınları, 2007) for a collection of studies on different aspects of imarets. Together, they illustrate the variety of sources available for study and demonstrate the possible directions of research enabled by these sources and by a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches.

for our benefit.

Reproductions in the form of Xeroxes and photographs have for quite a long time made it possible to work outside the confines of the archives and libraries and away from actual sites of buildings, artefacts or original images. This ability to take home 'original' sources frees people of the limitations of place and time (although it does demand a recognition of the limitations of working from copies). I start with this because it is not a foregone conclusion that making reproductions of primary materials is possible. There once existed a host of limitations on obtaining copies of documents or manuscripts, or on photographing sites; there still do in some places.[13] Scanning has reduced the costs and increased the speed and volume of copying, and resolved problems of transporting materials and storing them. In one sense, these copying processes only excel at 'transferring our ignorance from one place to another' (to quote the scholar Michel Legall).[14] However, this transfer ultimately makes it easier for more people to participate in the project of Ottoman history, people who for one reason or another are unable to move easily from place to place or to spend long periods of time living away from home. It also enhances our ability to train graduate students and employ research assistants, providing them with more primary materials on which to practice and conduct preliminary research. Moreover, the ability to move archival materials is a basic step in the democratization of historical study because it removes an element of regular expense previously required of any Ottoman historian. Copying technologies, however, do not organize, retrieve or process the data found in the documents.

Different electronic technologies can facilitate the work of Ottoman historians. Electronic versions of texts and images can be enlarged or enhanced in ways that may contribute to resolving palaeographic and other issues connected to interpretation. Although a machine that can read Ottoman documents and turn the handwriting into (even imperfect) printed text does not yet exist, that day will probably come, too. Database and data management programs have become increasingly flexible and capable of handling large quantities of information (for example, data for an entire empire), affected too by the expansion of computer speed and memory, improvements in optical readers etc. Databases can organize information of various kinds as it is retrieved from documents and then make it possible to manipulate the data in different ways to reveal patterns or relationships in the data. These patterns and relationships, however, are not necessarily the goals of historical research. All of these technologies can be used to improve our abilities to ask and answer specific questions, and may suggest new kinds of

[13] The present discussion does not take up the methodologies and critiques that go along with each source type, but these are not to be ignored nor discounted in the project described here. For an introduction to sources, methodologies, their advantages and limitations, see Faroqhi, *Approaching Ottoman History*.

[14] Personal communication during graduate school, sometime in the mid-1980s.

questions that can now be addressed.

As a simple example, a database of imarets shows the distribution of imaret founding over time. It can easily display a quantitative breakdown of how many imarets were founded in a defined period of time, or by a particular person or in a specific place. Depending on the information included, the database can help to compare the length of time imarets functioned or analyze the size of the local population against the number of imarets. In theory, one may calculate how many meals were served by imarets in a single place or even in the whole empire at a given moment. It is important to note, too, that the data included for retrieval is not only numerical or verbal. Images can be collected such that they constitute a permanent part of the record for any given place. The chief limitation on the progress of research at the outset is the pace at which data is collected and digitized.

Now, because the data under consideration are often tied to specific places, the resulting databases can be investigated using Geographical Information Systems. GIS attach all data to locations in space, locations defined precisely by geographical coordinates such as longitude and latitude. Data can be attached to something as precise as a point, but also to a line or a polygon of any shape. What this means is that when querying data, its location in space becomes an additional variable of analysis. The data can also be displayed graphically, in maps or other visualizations, which themselves reveal patterns, differences and changes that might not be visible easily or at all in looking only at lists of numbers, terms or other features. In concrete terms, this means, for example, that questions about imarets can address the relationship between the physical location, local population density and climate, for example, against qualities such as size and proximity to physical features such as roads, rivers, mountains or coasts. Moreover, the query can generate an analysis of these same variables for a large group of imarets so that they can be compared. Why would this matter? Because any pattern that emerges out of such questions helps refine further research and may even suggest reasons for why imarets were built or maintained in certain places.

The use of GIS for historical research is only about a decade old. Some collaborative GIS-based historical research projects have been running for several years already, including the Great Britain Historical GIS, the China GIS, the Pleiades project in ancient history and the Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative.[15] As a result, there is a fair amount of collective experience to draw on in setting up a large historical GIS project. However, any such project requires a team of researchers comprising at least one full partner whose particular expertise is GIS and not necessarily Ottoman history. Collaborative GIS projects often have a home base in a particular university, while scholars working on the project contribute data from their more traditional research as dictated by the nature of

[15] http://www.gbhgis.org/; http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~chgis/; http://pleiades.stoa.org/; and http://www.ecai.org/, all accessed on 23 August 2011.

their sources. Cooperation is required to integrate the research results and upload them to an online platform, in a form easily accessible and usable from any computer connected to the internet. The support of the GIS expert is necessary to help design the databases and to solve problems connected to the digitizing of historical information. That person, or someone else, should be available as a resource to all participants, in order to help them learn how to query the collected data within the framework of a particular research project.

Returning to the specific example of the imarets, it is possible to examine closely some of the results of working with various technologies. First, all imarets of whose existence there is some reasonable record were located as precisely as possible, with latitude/longitude coordinates. Their locations reveal certain patterns: imaret building was much more common in Anatolia and the Balkans than in the Arab provinces. It was more focused on inland cities and towns, rare in rural, coastal, less-settled or -travelled regions. Within cities, imarets tended to be spread across the urban landscape and not clustered in one place, as were markets or manufacturers. Like other social or cultural institutions, they were scattered to serve a variety of neighbourhoods or population clusters.

Yet imarets may have been only one of the institutions from which people claimed the right to a meal, with the others including any or all of the following: Sufi *zaviye*s, caravanserais, food merchants in the markets, military barracks, imperial palaces and the residences of wealthy and powerful people. Using GIS, it is possible (with sufficient data) to ask questions about the proximity of these different buildings and institutions in an urban space as one variable that would also include population density, commercial activity and the capacities of the different institutions. These interrogations can be carried out over a vast space, making GIS an integral part of any comparative endeavour wherein the things being compared have a physical location, and can be identified with identical or similar types of data.

Imaret-founding can be understood as part of the conquest policies of the Ottomans, at least in the early period, and (based on the initial map of imarets) quite visibly in western Anatolia and the Balkans. Heath Lowry, in his work on early Ottoman Iznik, Bursa, Thrace and Macedonia, has described the many imarets built in these regions following their conquest by the Ottomans. Addressing an earlier assumption that imarets fed Muslims, Lowry pointed out that the local population in each town would still have been overwhelmingly Christian at the time it was conquered. He thus suggests that imaret-building was not necessarily an act of beneficence directed towards Muslims, but part of a propaganda effort to convince local Christians to regard Ottoman rule more favourably than they might have.[16] It does seem plausible that the promise of meals to a broad spectrum

[16] Heath W. Lowry, *The Shaping of the Ottoman Balkans, 1350–1500: The Conquest, Settlement and Infrastructural Development of Northern Greece* (Istanbul: Bahçeşehir University Publications, 2008);

of the population, possibly to men and women alike, would have made Ottoman rule that much more palatable, both in the short term and for what it signalled of Ottoman intentions generally.

The imaret datasets support Lowry's assertion by showing that far more imarets were constructed in the first three Ottoman centuries, roughly covering the most intensive conquest period of Ottoman history. Eastern Anatolia shows a more sparse distribution of imarets, perhaps reflecting the more sparse settlement and rugged terrain of that region. In the Arab provinces, imarets were even rarer, found (with few exceptions, so far) only in Damascus, Jerusalem, Mecca and Medina.[17] There is no evidence at this point for a more intense distribution of imarets, founded by sultans and grand viziers in the Arab provinces, such as that seen in the Balkans and western Anatolia.

Why should this be? If the imarets served as part of the machinery of conquest, why were they not founded more thickly on the ground in the Arab provinces? The most obvious difference is that the early Ottoman conquests in north-west Anatolia and the Balkans were not taking over Muslim populations. Lowry's suggestion that imarets were part of conquest propaganda makes sense in a comparative context, when we remember that there was perhaps little reason to convince Muslims (Arabs) to accept Muslim (Ottoman) rule. Moreover, the Ottoman state of the fourteenth and the first half of the fifteenth centuries was not the far-flung empire of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth. By the time the Ottomans conquered the Arab provinces, there was less need to prove their strength or staying power than there had been one hundred to two hundred years earlier. The Ottomans imposed their authority by redirecting the flow of cash taxes and payments in kind in the form of grain from Cairo to Istanbul. They did have to contend with opposition to their conquest, but they did not have to win over the populace to the idea of a Muslim sovereign. André Raymond has demonstrated quite cogently how the Ottomans invested in the great Arab towns, developing and encouraging commercial and civilian facilities. Yet there was less need to establish classical Muslim institutions among these new projects, since in many cases they already existed. The Ottomans reinforced the *medrese*s and *tekke*s by leaving their endowments undisturbed and even by directing additional funds to them for upkeep and expenses. They also incorporated the judges and *medrese*s into the official hierarchies of adjudication and learning, so that the appointments to them came from the imperial pool of trained jurists and scholars. Perhaps the underlying message in the Arab provinces focused on emphasizing that Ottomans were 'good Muslims', in contrast to the one broadcast in the Balkans, where they

Heath W. Lowry, 'Random Musings on the Origins of Ottoman Charity: From Mekece to Bursa, Iznik and Beyond', in *Feeding People, Feeding Power: Imarets in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Nina Ergin, Christoph K. Neumann and Amy Singer (Istanbul: Eren Yayınları, 2007), 69–79.

[17] There are also a few scattered along the route south from Damascus towards the holy cities and towards Jerusalem, but these may have been exceptional efforts of one man and his wife.

needed to persuade their new Christian subjects that Muslims were 'good'.

On the other hand, the Ottomans did feel the need to put a physical Ottoman stamp on the holy cities of Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem, and those with symbolic significance in Muslim history such as Damascus, Baghdad and Cairo. Damascus and Baghdad, Muslim capitals, respectively, of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties, each benefited from the Ottoman construction of imarets, along with other institutions.[18] Patterns of imaret founding, therefore, highlight the contrast in conquest dynamics between the Balkans and the Arab provinces.

The preceding discussion suggests that the comparative study of imarets in the Balkans and the Arab provinces (and Anatolia) might produce interesting insights into the nature of Ottoman conquest and rule. GIS will be invaluable for part of this research. It will make it possible to consider whether a variety of institutions might have fulfilled the functions of imarets, and at the same time point the way to understanding the differences among them by sorting out population types and densities, local revenue wealth, kitchen capacity and other factors.

Imarets are only one common axis along which to compare the Ottoman experiences in the Balkans and the Arab provinces. Because such comparisons are so blatantly missing from the Ottoman historiographic endeavour, the broader implications of whatever conclusions are drawn from these comparisons will be even more important when they are integrated into an all-empire framework of research. GIS can be a tool for creating such a framework because it can hold a seemingly infinite amount of data without losing the capacity to query those data in ways that reveal their patterns and the shifts in them over time and space. The form of data entry will constitute a unified language allowing people to share data, queries and results.

* This research was supported by the Israel Science Foundation, Grant #657/07.

[18] Evliya Çelebi diligently notes the Ottoman buildings he found in the places he visits, and tries to give a hearsay account of places he did not reach. His complete chronicle in ten volumes has now been published by Yapı Kredi Yayınları in transcription from Ottoman Turkish, edited by Seyit Ali Kahraman, Yücel Dağlı and Robert Dankoff (1996-2007). See also the relevant discussions for buildings in Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem, Damascus and Cairo that were part of the oeuvre of the Ottoman architect Sinan (d. 1588) and his workshop, in Gülru Necipoğlu, *The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire*, photographs and drawings by Arben N. Arapi and Reha Günay (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), and the article by Astrid Meier, 'For the Sake of God Alone? Food Distribution Policies, *Takiyya*s and Imarets in Early Ottoman Damascus', in *Feeding People, Feeding Power: Imarets in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Nina Ergin, Christoph K. Neumann and Amy Singer (Istanbul: Eren Yayınları, 2007), 121–149.

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