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Semester II
CC4- Module 2.2 (Turks)

Administration of the Ottoman Empire

The notions of Ottoman state and sultanate were derived mainly from ancient Near Eastern, Islamic and Central Asian models, although some Ottoman rulers regarded the Ottoman state as the continuation of the Roman Empire. In the Ottoman Empire, the state was regarded as the main agency of justice. Justice was the guiding principle of the statecraft, along with the incentive of wealth and military strength both of which were indispensable pillars of the state and administration.

As an element of a Sunni Islamic empire, the Ottoman legal system, on the one hand, was based on Islamic law or *Shariat*. On the other hand, the institution of the Sultanate was based mainly on Turco-Mongol political traditions, which considered the absolute rule of a monarch a sign of God's approval. In this context, Sultans had legitimate authority to formulate legal rules (*Kanun*). Thus, the Ottoman legal system consisted of two sets of laws, the *Shariat* and the *Kanun*.

The Imperial Council (*Divan-i-Humayun*) was both the main organ of central administration and the supreme court of justice, where any Ottoman subject had the right to appeal. The Imperial Council, which used to meet at the palace, acted as the supreme organ of government and in wartime, served as a high command. Until Mehmed II, the sultans personally presided at the *Divan's* meetings.

In accordance with his policy of royal seclusion, Mehmed II is said to have stopped personally attending meetings of the Divan around 1475. In the absence of the sultan, the Grand Vizier presided over the Council. According to Mehmed II's Law Code, "Grand Vizier is the head of the viziers and commanders. He is greater than all men; he is in all matters the Sultan's absolute deputy".

The members of the *Divan* represented the three major groups of the Ottoman ruling class or *askeri*: the men of sword or the military, the men of the religious sciences known as the *Ulema* and the men of the pen or the bureaucrats. Each member of the Divan was responsible for the distinct branch of government: politics and military, judiciary and the Empire's finances. However, the grand vizier, in his capacity, had authority over the various office holders and in all important decisions the heads of the departments needed the consent of their colleagues. The Grand Vizier even could not act independently of the other members of the Council. These checks and balances and the necessity of consultation functioned to prevent the chief executives from monopolizing the power.

The bureaucracy was represented by the treasurers or finance ministers (***defterdars***) in the *Divan*. The number of *defterdars* also grew over time. They were responsible for the royal revenues of Rumel;ia, Anatolia, Istanbul, and the Northwestern coast of the Black Sea. The rising number of the *defterdars* meant the growing significance of the treasury in the Empire that faced repeated financial crisis since the end of the 16th century. *Nisanci* was responsible for authenticating all imperial documents by affixing the Sultan's monogram or *Tugra*, thus ensuring that all orders and letters issued from the *Divan* conformed to the Ottoman laws. The *Nisanci* also supervised *Divan's* archives which housed all revenue surveys and tax

registers classified in alphabetical order by the provinces. The clerks of the *Divan* worked under the supervision of the *Reisulkuttab* (Chief of the clerks), whose importance grew over time. In theory, the Ottoman sultans ruled with absolute power. In reality, however, sultan's power varied greatly in different periods.

In Ottoman administrative set-up, provincial administration became significant with the passage of time. As the early Ottomans came to develop a more settled agricultural lifestyle, creation of larger and smaller administrative units became a necessity. The largest entity was the province- ***vilayet or beylerbeylik*** which was divided into subprovinces or districts called ***sancaks***. *Sancaks* were made up of even smaller units called ***nahiyes***. Ottoman district governors were called ***sancakbeyi***. The first ***sancakbeyi*** was perhaps appointed during Orhan or during Murad I. The post ***beylerbeyi*** was created to supervise the duties of *sancakbeyi*. The ***beylerbeyi*** ruled over the large province *Vilayet*. In the 1520s there were 6-8 *vilayets* and approximately 90 *sancaks*. By around 1570, the number increased to 24 *vilayets* and more than 250 *sancaks*. The provincial ruling class in the Ottoman Empire were identified as *Umra* and included both ***beylerbeyis and sancakbeyis***. In addition to these provincial posts another important figure in Ottoman provincial administration was ***Qadi/kadi*** who generally was educated in a religious school and served at different levels depending on their income. The general translation of this term is a judge, but they had more complex responsibilities. They authenticated and supervised documents concerning state revenues. They were also responsible for recruiting craftsmen for the army, for municipal maintenance, for urban services, for settlement of market prices and for repairing roads.. *Kadis* enjoyed high respect in the Ottoman Turkish society.

The rapid expansion of the Ottoman Empire in Central Europe, the Arab lands and Iran was enabled by a military-agricultural complex called *timar* system. State-owned cereal producing lands in Anatolia and the Balkan were divided into the *Timars*, which were cultivated by the land-bound peasantry. Each *timar* was administered by a cavalryman or *sipahi* who had authority to collect taxes. In wartime *sipahis* were expected to join the army as fully equipped mounted cavalry. This *timar* system ensured both the constant maintenance of a sizeable cavalry force and the centralisation of the administration in the core areas of the Ottoman Empire.

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