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Original article

Knolles' *The Generall Historie of the Turkes* in Early Modern English Literature

Öz Öktem *

Department of English Language and Literature, Istanbul Aydin University, İstanbul, Türkiye

Abstract

Richard Knolles' The Generall Historie of the Turkes is one of the earliest and most comprehensive histories written about the Ottoman Empire in English. The book has been used as a historical reference book by many scholars and inspired many English literary works that dealt with the Turks or the Ottoman history. In this paper I discuss the significance of this work with respect to the generation of the English outlook on the Ottoman Empire in a period when the commercial and diplomatic ties between the two countries were first initiated. At the same time by referring to certain English dramatic works which used Knolles' narrative as a source for their plots and characters, I want to underline the book's role in the construction of the image of the Turk in the public imagination of early modern England.

Keywords: Knolles, *The Generall Historie of the Turkes*, Anglo-Ottoman relations, *Othello, Tamburlaine*.

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* **Corresponding author:**

Öz Öktem currently works as a faculty member in the Department of English Language and Literature of Istanbul Aydin University, Türkiye.
Email: ozoktem@aydin.edu.tr

INTRODUCTION

Richard Knolles' *The Generall Historie of the Turkes* was first published in 1603 and it is one of the earliest and most comprehensive histories written about the Ottoman Empire in English. The book, which is longer than a thousand folio pages, has remained to date as an unrivalled and a unique monument of English history writing, which was used as a reference book by many scholars, while inspiring many literary works that dealt with the Turks or the Ottoman history. In this paper I want to discuss the significance of this work with respect to the generation of the English outlook on the Ottoman Empire at a time when the commercial and diplomatic ties between the two countries were first initiated. At the same time by referring to certain English dramatic works which used Knolles' narrative as a source for their plots and characters, I want to underline the book's role in the construction of the image of the Turk in the public imagination of early modern England.

The original title of Knolles' book is quite a long one: *The Generall Historie of the Turkes, from the first beginning of that Nation to the rising of the Othoman familie: with all notable expeditions of the Christian princes against them. Together with the Lives and Conquests of the Othoman Kings and Emperours. Faithfully collected out of the best Histories, both auncient and moderne, and digested into one continual Historie until this present yeare 1603.* As it can be understood from the title, the book is basically a collection of a series of narratives on the campaigns and battles of the Ottomans, as well as the physical descriptions of the Ottoman sultans alongside commentaries on their personalities and interests. Like most European historians of his day, Knolles drew most of the information contained in his book from earlier European works. Despite his lifelong residence in Sandwich, a small provincial town in Kent, thanks to his patron Sir Peter Manwood, who was a member of Parliament, Knolles accessed to many rare sources that he needed to complete his work (Parry, 2003). Today it is generally agreed that the main reference book that Knolles used was *Vitae et icons sultanorum* (1596) by Jean Jacques Boissard. The twenty-eight engravings depicting various Turkish sultans and their consorts, alongside some European monarchs included in the Knolles' book are taken from this source. V.J. Parry (2003), whose study on Knolles' *Historie* was published posthumously, suggests that Knolles also consulted *Historia Rerum in Oriente Gestarum*, a Byzantine chronicle published in 1587. Knolles accessed *Commentaries* of Paulus Giovius and *Annales Sultanorum Othomanidarum* (1588) and *Historiae Musulmanae Turcorum* (1591) of Johannes Leunclavius, which contained rich material drawn from authentic Turkish chronicles (Parry, 2003). Other than these sources in Latin, Knolles seems to have obtained guidance from some contemporary English works, such as Thomas Newton's *The Notable Historie of the Saracens* (1575) and R. Carr's *Mahumetan or Turkish Historie* (1600) (Chew, 1974).

Knolles spent twelve years to complete the 1603 edition of his work, and the book was reprinted in 1610, with a continuation of the events that Knolles described from the date where the first edition ends. Until the turn of the eighteenth century the book went through new editions five more times,

including a revised and enlarged edition in 1700 and an abridged version in 1701. Considering the fact that in the seventeenth century a book could be printed for at most 1500 copies in each edition, Knolles' *Historie* was certainly a success. In fact, the literary influence of the book endured even after it became antiquated. In later ages scholars like Samuel Johnson and Samuel Taylor Coleridge acclaimed the book as a masterpiece of Elizabethan prose. Lord Byron said that the book "had much influence" on his future wishes to visit the Levant and "gave perhaps the oriental colouring" that is perceived in his poems. (Chew, 1974, p. 112). In *The Crescent and The Rose* Samuel Chew (1974) declared Knolles' history as "the greatest of English works of the Renaissance period dealing with Turkey," and described the book as a display of "a fine narrative gift" (p. 113).

Anglo-Ottoman Relations

Yet, the success and popularity of Knolles' book was definitely no coincidence. Alongside the author's acknowledged narrative talent, the period's historical significance with respect to the Anglo-Ottoman relations was a major factor for the renown of this book. The Ottoman Empire remained as a prominent political power throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It dominated almost one thirds of the known world, and, both politically and economically, it was far stronger than most of the European nations. The Empire ruled over the entire North Africa, half of the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe, expanding its control over many of the eastern trade routes alongside the Christian holy lands. Against this formidable Islamic enemy, Europeans were not able to form unity or provide an organized response. On the contrary, Christian potentates often found it more beneficial to have the Ottomans as their military and commercial ally. While the aggressive Turkish expansion in Europe caused uneasiness among the English people, following the footsteps of many of her contemporaries, Queen Elizabeth I took the initiative to forge diplomatic ties with the Ottomans.

Despite the critical habit of understanding England in the early modern age as a dominant colonial power that aspired to conquer peoples around the world, it would be wrong to label England as an imperialist country before the actual emergence of British imperialism. Because of its late arrival to European mercantilism, its military insufficiency, and its national and religious insecurity, England in this period was far from being the colonizing and conquering power it became in the following ages. The country was dependent more on the Mediterranean trade than the traffic in the Atlantic. Moreover, the longstanding religious and political enmity between England and Spain had intensified and it had become almost compulsory for Elizabeth I to ensure the support of a strong ally in this part of the world. Though their religion was traditionally considered the enemy of Christendom, the Islamic empire of the Ottomans appeared as the most suitable option. As a matter of fact, anti-idolatry was common to Protestantism and Islam as an important religious doctrine, and this could be used as an ideological justification for England's rapprochement with Turkey against Catholic Spain (Burton, 2005). By initiating extensive economic and diplomatic interaction with the Ottoman Empire, the Queen could not

only provide new markets for English merchants, but also safeguard military support in case of a possible confrontation with Spain. Following the first capitulations they obtained in 1580, the English founded the Levant Company a year later and secured the safe passage of English traders and privateers to the Ottoman territories. In the years that followed more and more vessels from England started to visit the ports of Asia Minor, including Constantinople and Smyrna, as well as the North African harbours such as Tunis, and Zante. In fact, the Mediterranean trade was so profitable that even James I, who ascended to the English throne after Elizabeth and whose hostility against Turks was well-known, could not dare to intervene. The charter of the Levant Company was renewed in 1605 with significantly extended privileges. Thus, while James tried to reverse his predecessor's policy of affiliation with the Ottomans, he was astute enough to ensure that the commercial relations with the Islamic empire continued, even prospered. In fact, the Levant Company remained as England's most successful overseas venture throughout this period (Burton, 2005).

It is not surprising then that the Ottoman Empire and the intensified English contact with the Turks was among the most heated political topics that the Englishmen debated in the early modern period. As a matter of fact, the number of publications that focused on the Islamic empire of the Turks in this era was unprecedented. According to Nabil Matar (1997) English readers could access to more than 1600 books about the Ottomans between the years 1500 and 1640. Obviously, the Grand Turk in Constantinople was a very intriguing theme for Renaissance playwrights as well. As Louis Wann (1915) reports in this period there were 47 plays which featured Islamic settings, characters, or themes and 31 of plays involved only Turks and the Turkish history.

The idea of Turk articulated in the English texts written in this period was mainly twofold. For many authors, the Ottoman Turks were the traditional rival of Christendom, whose aggressive hostility in Europe was God's punishment on sinful Christians who were divided in themselves. They urged that the potentates in Europe should put aside their religious discord and immediately join in a new crusade against the Islamic enemy. However, many other Englishmen were not altogether negative about this Islamic power. They considered the Ottoman Empire as a powerful political ally and advocated strengthening the diplomatic ties and commercial relations with the Turks (Brotton, 2010). Some of these commentators identified the Catholic Spain as a more dangerous enemy than the Islamic Turkish Empire. Since the Ottoman military aggressiveness in central Europe diverted the martial strength and economic resources of the Catholic Habsburg powers, they considered the Turks as the "allies of Reformation" (Vaughan, 1954).

The Image of the Turk in Knolles' Book

Richard Knolles' *The Generall Historie of the Turkes* was produced in the midst of such political and public debate about the Turks and rapidly became one of the most popular historical books written in its field, circulating among the early modern Englishmen. Despite the positive observations about the

Turks found in many English texts, Knolles' attitude towards the Turks mostly aligns with that of the first group of authors who, motivated by traditional anti-Islamic prejudices, portrayed the Ottomans as the greatest and the most terrifying foe of Christendom. For Knolles (1603) the Ottoman Empire is "the present terror of the world," "a greedy lion," "lurking in his den," "ready to devour the rest of the world" (p. sig A5r). In the introductory section he expresses grief for the "declining state of the Christian commonweale" and the countless numbers of Christians who lost their lives because of the Turkish scourge. He blames the Turks as the primary reason for the sufferings and miseries of the Christian nations and fears that the Ottoman Empire:

> drunk with the pleasant Wine and perpetual felicity, holdeth all the rest of the World in Scorn, thundering out nothing still but Blood and War, with a full persuasion in time to Rule over all, prefixing unto it self no other limits than the uttermost bounds of the Earth, from the rising of the Sun unto going down of the same. (Knolles, 1603, p. sig. A5r)

Knolles dedicated his book to King James I, praising the monarch's 1595 poem on the Battle of Lepanto, which describes the Christians' long-awaited victory against the Ottomans in 1571 as a heroic battle fought "Betwixt the baptiz'd race, / An circumsised Turband Turkes."[*] With a similar attitude, Knolles places the religious opposition between Christianity and Islam on the backbone of his text. He emphasizes the Turk's Otherness, embodying it particularly in the Islamic religion, which he considers as the "most gross and blasphemous Doctrine", "born in an unhappy hour, to the great destruction of Mankind" and the "unspeakable ruin" to the church and state of the Christians (Knolles, 1603, p. sig A5r).

However, for Knolles, rather than the menace of Islam, the Christian failure to unite seems to be the main cause of the rise of the Ottoman peril. He compares the dissention among the Christians with the "rare unitie" of the Turks in both political and religious matters. Like many of his contemporaries, he believes that God sent the Turkish menace as "scourge" on Christian potentates who were unsuccessful in realizing the Christian commonwealth ideal. Though the Turks were "an obscure and base people, before scarce known to the world," "taking benefit of the discord of the Christian Princes of the East, and the carelessness of the Christians in general, from a small beginning they become the greatest terror of the World" (Knolles, 1603, p. sig A5r). He argues that the Turkish menace reveals "the secret judgment of the Almighty, who in justice delivered into the hands of these merciless miscreants, nation after nation to be punished for their sins" (Knolles, 1603, p. sig A5r).

For Knolles, the decline of Byzantium is the main reason that enabled the Turks to penetrate into Asia Minor and consequently allowed for the rise of the Ottoman Empire. He dwells at length on the internal quarrels of the Byzantine emperors that caused their decay and outlines the course of the

[*] Quotation from *Lepanto* is from James Craigie, ed. *The Poems of James VI of Scotland*, (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons for the Scottish Text Society, 1955), 202.

Crusades, stressing that the fall of Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade was an event of much advantage to the Turks, "their proud and stately empire that now braveth all the rest of the world, being raised out of the ruines of that Christian commonveale" (Knolles, 1603, p. 76) For Knolles, there is only one remedy to overcome the Turkish menace: Throughout his text he constantly repeats, like King James did before him, that the Christian countries should consolidate their powers under one mutual Christendom in order to win an ultimate triumph against the Ottomans.

Alongside the origins and the rise of the Ottomans, Knolles also relates Turkish rulers' past accomplishments in a detailed manner, dwelling on their appearances and characters. In these descriptions an Ottoman sultan is typically portrayed as a crude barbarian, a merciless scourge, whose only purpose is to annihilate Christians and their religion. For example, for Sultan Bayezid he says, although bold and skilful in martial affairs, he was a choleric, harsh, and cruel monarch, who chose to be feared rather than to be loved by his subjects (Knolles, 1603). Similarly, he writes of Sultan Selim that "his inhumane crueltie did blot and obscure all his other princely virtues," "he seemed to the beholders, to have nothing in him but mischief and crueltie" (Knolles, 1603, p. 515). The Turkish sultans in Knolles' text are depicted as ranting autocrats who slaughter their siblings once they ascend to the throne and live in the indulgent decadence of the seraglio. In a striking passage on the fratricide of Mehmed III's (1595 – 1603) nineteen brothers who were strangled following the sultan's accession, Knolles writes "the brother to become the bloudie executioner of his own brethren", "[a] common matter among the Ottoman Emperours. All which most execrable and inhumane murthers they cover with the pretended safety of their state" (Knolles, 1603, p. 333).

However, it would be unfair to say that Knolles was completely partial in his narrative and wrote in a mood of mere denigration. Despite long and elaborate passages pointing to the barbarity, cruelty, and treachery of the Ottomans, Knolles does not hide his fascination with this Islamic empire:

> So that at this present if you consider the beginning, progress, and perpetual felicity of this the Othoman Empire, there is in this world nothing more admirable and strange; if the greatness and lustre thereof, nothing more magnificent and glorious; if the Power and Strength thereof, nothing more Dreadful and Dangerous. (Knolles, 1603, p. A5r)

For Knolles, the Ottomans are "not inferior in greatnesse and strength unto the greatest monarchies that ever yet were upon the face of the earth." He praises the Turks as paragons of orderliness, discipline and tenacity and appreciates them as pious and strong people. With generous terms he writes of the qualities which he thinks that had enabled the Turks to have those great achievements:

> [...] to come nearer unto causes of the Turks greatness, and more proper unto themselves, as not depending of the improvident carelessnesse, weaknesse, discord, or imperfections of others: first in them it is to be noted an ardent and infinit desire of

> soveraignetie, wherewith they have long since promised unto themselves the monarchie of the whole world, a quicke motive unto their so haughtie designes: Then, such a rare unitie and agreement amongst them, as well in the manner of their religion (if it be so to be called) as in matters concerning their state... joyne unto this their courage, conceived by the wonderfull successe of their perpetuall fortune, their notable vigilance in taking the advantage of every occasion for the enlarging of their Monarchie, their frugalitie and temperatnesse in their diet and other manner of living, their straight observing of their auntient militarie discipline, their cheerefull and almost incredible obedience unto their princes and Sultans. (Knolles, 1603, p. A5r)

Though his general attitude towards the Turkish sultans is reproachful, when he finds the possibility Knolles does not hesitate to praise them and exalt their good characteristics. For Murad II, he says that "whilest he lived, mightily enlarged the Turkish kingdome, and with greater wisdome and pollicie than his predecessours, established the same" (Knolles, 1603, p. 332). For Sulaiman the Great he gives the highest esteem and describes him as a prince "of nature and ambitions and bountifull, more faithfull of his word and promise than were for most part the Mahomaten kings his progenitors; wanting nothing worthie of so great an empire, but that wherein all happinesse is contained, faith in Christ Iesus" (Knolles, 1603, p. 823).

The Generall Historie of the Turkes in English Literature

Alongside being a very popular historical reference book about the Turks, Knolles' work is a significant cultural product also because like Raphael Holinshed's *The Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande* (1577), which was the principal source for many Renaissance plays dealing with English history, it was a very useful source for the stories and characters depicted in the Turk plays which had become quite popular in this period. As mentioned earlier, early modern England's interest in the Turks was reflected in the explosion of stage productions that dealt with the Turks in the popular theatre. Many English dramatists were fascinated with the Ottoman culture and history. By using exotic costumes, stage props, and make-up they changed the English stage into an excellent platform to enact fantasies about the Turkish people, mapping the Mediterranean and Islamic lands for London audiences who would never be able to see these territories. In these plays the dramatists set characters from opposing religions against one another in war scenes, aboard pirate ships, in prison cells, and in intimate eroticized places, and the plots of these plays most often draw on the sensational stories found in Knolles' narratives.

Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* can be considered a striking example in this respect. The similarities between the protagonist of Marlowe's play and Timur Beg of Knolles' accounts are significant. *Tamburlaine,* written in 1587-90, chronologically precedes Knolles' history. However, it has been

claimed that there was an acquaintance between the two authors and that Marlowe had an access to these pages which were amongst the earliest that Knolles wrote[*].

The war between Bayezid and Timur, which ended with the disastrous Ottoman defeat at the Battle of Ankara in 1402 was already a subject of popular interest in England and Knolles included in his accounts the life of Timur Beg at some length. Marlowe seems to have felt free to adapt elements of plot and character from Knolles' narrative, such as the origins and the rise of Tamburlaine, the dramatic death of Bajazeth, and the rhetorical battle between the two kings. In both texts Timur is depicted as a shepherd of poor and insignificant birth, who amazingly rises above his low status in life and becomes a great conqueror. Knolles says Timur "contrarie to the course of things both naturall and civile … taking his beginning of nothing, grew upon the suddaine to be burthen and terror unto the world" (Knolles, 1603, p. 212). Likewise, in Marlowe's play Cosroe describes Tamburlaine as a wondrous man for whom "Nature doth strive with Fortune and his stars/To make him famous in accomplished worth" (Marlowe, 1590/1974, 2.1.33-34). There are resemblances in the tone of language as well. For example, in Marlowe's play, despite his captivity, Bajazeth boldly answers the abuses of Tamburlaine: "Ambitious pride shall make thee fall as low/For threading on the back of Bajazeth/That should be horsed on four mighty kings" (Marlowe, 1590/1974, 4.1.75-78). In Knolles' version displaying a similar pride he says: "Were I at liberty, thou shouldst well see, how that I want neither courage nor means to revenge all my Wrongs and to make those disobedient and forgetful to know their Duties better" (Knolles, 1603, p. 154).

The book's influence, of course, was not limited to Marlowe. Scholars consider the book among the sources that Shakespeare referred to before writing *Othello*. The play's main action is set in Cyprus, an island for which the Venetians and the Ottomans historically battled for colonial control. The opening scenes depict a unique moment when the allied Christian forces of the Holy League won a significant naval victory over the Ottomans near the Gulf of Lepanto in 1571. Knolles provides a detailed account of the events leading up to the battle of Lepanto, including Selimus' decision to take Cyprus and the debate of the Venetian Senate as to whether their reports of Turkish intentions were reliable and whether they should prepare for war. He then vividly describes the battle itself and the ensuing siege at Famagusta, concluding that the fall of the citadel "was the fatal ruine of Cyprus, one of the most fruitfull and beautifull islands of the Mediterranean" (Knolles, 1603, p. 867). Shakespeare must have read this portion of Knolles' chronicles, for as Geoffrey Bullough notes, he drew on Knolles for the description

[*] H. G. Dick traces the possibilities of a connection between Knolles and Marlowe through Knolles' patron, Sir Roger Manwood (1525-92), who was also known to Marlowe. Marlowe was born in Canterbury and his family house was close to the manor of Manwoods. Sir Roger Manwood also owned houses in Knolles' hometown Sandwich, which was twelve miles from Canterbury. In addition, during the years when Marlowe was studying at Corpus Christi College in Cambridge, one of his fellow students was in the service of Sir Roger Manwood. Therefore, Dick concludes that the playwright was acquainted either with Knolles himself or with the Manwoods and might have acquired a draft form of Knolles' manuscript. (H. G. Dick, "Tamburlaine's Sources Once More," *Studies in Philology* XLVI (1949): 154-166).

of Famagusta "the glad news of the 'segregation of the Turkish fleet'" (II.i.10) and the festivities proclaimed by the Herald in II.ii (1973, p. 214).

Alongside the Ottomans' military confrontations, the private lives of the Turkish sultans seem to have drawn the attention of the English playwrights, who once again turned to Knolles' chronicles for their dramatic plots. For example, the tale of the Greek woman Irene and the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II in Knolles' narrative shows similarities with the Eumorphe and Amurath story depicted in Thomas Goffe's *The Courageous Turk, or Amurath the First* (1632).[*] In both versions the sultan is conquered by the superior attributes of a fair captive Christian maid, who is depicted as a paragon of womanhood with her beauty and chastity. The sultan's infatuation with this concubine causes him to forget his duties as a sultan, triggering discontent among his janissaries and nobility. However, brought back to his former self by one of his pashas, the sultan cuts the head of his beloved in front of his soldiers to show that he has not lost his manly prowess and is aware that his responsibilities are far more significant than his love life. Actually, Goffe seems to have used two sections from Knolles' text. The remaining part of the play (Act III-V) involves the Battle of Kosovo (1389) and Amurath's death taken almost minutely from the part entitled "The Life of Amurath, the First of that name, and the Great Augmenter of their Kingdom."

Another legendary love affair between a sultan and a Christian concubine, the story of Süleyman the Magnificent and Roxelana which Knolles included in his narrative, seems to be the inspiration for Thomas Kyd's *The Tragedy of Solyman and Perseda* (1588). While both texts depict Süleyman's devotion to a Christian concubine in the harem, the fact that Roxelana became Süleyman's beloved wife Hürrem and mothered five of his sons is not referred to in Kyd's play. In Kyd's version Solyman is stereotyped as a tyrannous Turkish sultan, who, out of his lust for his Christian captive Perseda, does not hesitate to kill her lover Erastus. In order to take Erastus' revenge, Perseda disguises as a man and joins the Christian forces fighting against the Turks. She challenges Solyman during the battle and is accidentally killed by the sultan, who fails to see through her disguise.

CONCLUSION

Knolles' *The Generall Historie of the Turkes* proves that the curiosity about the Ottoman Empire and the Islamic culture was firmly rooted in the English public imagination as early as the mid sixteenth century. Though the Ottomans still seemed distant and exotic to many, by the time Knolles wrote his book, England had a well-established trade with the Ottomans. The popularity of both Knolles' book and other historical and cultural representations of the Turk points out to the fact that "information about the Ottomans was not only needed by those directly involved in relations with the Ottomans, but also demanded by ordinary people" (MacLean, 2007, p.56). The image of the Turk that emerges from

[*] Knolles seems to have taken this story from William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure* (London, 1575).

Knolles' text sustains the negative stereotypes about Islam and the Ottomans. The fact that many playwrights and historians used the book as their authority contributed much to the English outlook on the Ottomans as infidel and barbarian, and as Christianity's eternal foe. Despite the apparent demonization however, Knolles' text avoids any claim of Christian superiority against this Islamic power. On the contrary, it expresses amazement in the achievements of the Turks both in military and civil affairs and speaks of the English imperial envy towards the Ottoman state, complicating the prevailing presumptions with respect to Orientalism and the emergence of British imperialism.

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