This article investigates the ways in which the Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi perceived and represented the various political powers and cultural heritages in the Mediterranean, through a reading of his seventeenth-century travelogue, Seyahatname. I argue that Evliya’s text reveals the palimpsest of political power and cultural hegemony extant in the Mediterranean of his time and attempts to legitimise Ottoman rule, employing several tropes and narrative threads. For Evliya, the Mediterranean is primarily a battlefield that has witnessed the victories and defeats of the Ottomans throughout their history. Evliya’s Seyahatname, in that sense, is within the tradition of travel writing in the service of imperial meaning-making and meaning-sustaining processes. I call the narrative structure under which Evliya’s observations are gathered the Ottoman Chronotope: a chronotope that highlights the project of sustaining a commonwealth, through ties of commerce and faith. In Evliya’s text the islands become a geography where the Ottomans’ sense of mission and empire is bolstered by ‘old books’ and oral narratives that he claims were popular particularly among the Mediterranean Greek population.

**Key words:** travel writing, palimpsest, Evliya Çelebi, Ottoman Empire, chronotope, Knights of Malta, Mediterranean

In his introduction to *The Intimate life of an Ottoman Statesman* (1991), historian Rhoads Murphey has described Evliya Çelebi’s collection of travel writing as a ‘vade mecum for Ottoman administrators’ (1991: 21). Evliya, as is the case with other holdings of the empire, makes an inventory of the Mediterranean islands in his ten-volume travelogue. Having started his ‘travels’ in the neighbourhoods of Istanbul and travelled extensively in Anatolia, in the 1640s he set out on his overseas journeys, visiting several ports in the Mediterranean including Bodrum, Malta, Crete and Rhodes. These were visits that mainly involved courtly missions, and as an ‘embedded’ chronicler, Evliya Çelebi’s account, I argue, reflects an Ottoman worldview and sense of history. After the initial circulation of a handful of manuscripts, Evliya’s text was first published in the nineteenth century and has, since then, come out in several different editions, with publishers going back to the original manuscripts to correct errors and to look out for sections omitted in previous publications of the Seyahatname. In order to better understand how a text can contribute to a particular, Ottoman understanding of the world, its legitimisation and sustenance, this article tries to tease out the relationship between chronotope, the mechanics of how time and space are connected in the narrative, and the genre of travel writing. Examining this nexus requires a discussion both of the Ottoman chronotope, and of the ways in which Evliya’s Seyahatname, literally, his ‘travelogue’, obeys the rules of the genre, if such rules may, after all, exist.

The genre of ‘travel writing’ is, Michele Longino argues, ‘recently formulated and capacious, […] [it] defies the rigor of classification. The criteria are fluid and accommodating.
Travel journals are, by their nature, unruly’ (2015: 11). In her book on French travellers to the
Ottoman Empire, Longino reminds us that travel notes defy categorisation, and that these notes
are transformed into travel writing in different ways, some prioritising accuracy, some style.
There are, however, certain general characteristics that transform the ‘notes’ to the category of
‘travel writing’ and these characteristics define the genre in which Evliya Çelebi is writing:

Gone are the repetition, the tedious detail, the monotony and the chaos, and all of a sudden we are in
an ordered world, where only the noteworthy is reported, in which observations have a point and are
subordinated to a narrative structure where events lived are shaped into adventures and anecdote
worthy of recounting. […] However, in order to produce this readable and enjoyable text, one which
will possibly attain even the status of ‘literature’, the traveller will have strayed far from reporting the
exact and complete truth of his travel experience, supressing much detail, establishing order over
random events (11).

This ‘establishing order’ over random events sounds very much like a technology of the Empire-
making/sustaining project itself. When we think of the task of the travel writer and the imperial
administrator through these terms, we see that their methods coalesce, and one can see traces of
this in Evliya Çelebi’s text. All the characteristics that Longino lists as the elements that travel
notes shed in order to become ‘travel writing’ are, as we shall see, still very much in evidence in
Evliya’s Seyahatname which retains an unruly structure. As the Ottoman Empire tries to set its
coastline, islands and ports in order in what seems to be an impossibly stretched sphere of
Ottoman influence, so does Evliya try to rein in the wilder aspects of his narrative strands. There
are many fantastical stories throughout the ten volumes: candles that never cease burning, cats
freezing in flight as they jump from one roof to another because of extreme cold, an underwater
passage that connects Acre to the island of Cyprus: in the sections I will be looking at we come
across such things as the body of Saint John that still bleeds on certain days. Despite all these
fantastical embellishments, Evliya Çelebi’s account still provides us with a certain panorama of
the Ottoman empire in the seventeenth century, at the height of its powers.

Travel writing and the Chronotope

Travel writing as a genre can be said to be the natural home of the chronotope, as the reader
witnesses the narrator moving through space over a period of time. One can perhaps even suggest
that travel writing has, as one of the earlier genres of writing, inspired the very idea of the
chronotope — the space-time relationship and how it is expressed on the page—as an element
of narrative that should be paid special attention in literary analysis. ‘There exists a special group
of genres,’ Mihail Bakhtin argues (1981: 321), ‘that play an especially significant role in
structuring novels […] Examples of such genres would be confession, the diary, travel notes,
biography …’ thus placing travel notes firmly in the genealogy of the novel. According to him,
the chronotope is that which fuses ‘the spatial and temporal […] into one carefully thought-out,
concrete whole’ (84). Bakhtin encourages us to observe how, through the chronotope, ‘[t]ime
[…] thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and
responsive to the movements of time, plot and history’ (84).

Taking its cue from Bakhtin for the discussion of Evliya Çelebi’s travelogue, this study
similarly asks ‘What is it that fuses space and time into one concrete whole in the Ottoman
Mediterranean, or indeed, the entire Ottoman imperial project in Evliya Çelebi’s account?’ How
space becomes, or is made responsive to history, or indeed, how history itself becomes responsive to space is particularly pertinent to Evliya Çelebi’s writing. Evliya Çelebi’s narrative places the Mediterranean at the centre of the Ottoman empire-building project financially, geopolitically and even from a point of view of self-image and legitimacy. Evliya’s travelogue casts its narrative net far and wide, beyond the Mediterranean and indeed even in lands where the Ottomans don’t rule, and his approach to the lands in and around the Mediterranean is in keeping with the stories that Ottomans liked to tell about themselves. An understanding of the Ottoman destiny of becoming a world empire after the Roman model, rather than a conventional sense of getting acquainted with new places and cultures as a traveller, is what kneads Evliya’s ten-volume travelogue into a unified whole.

**Evliya Çelebi and his Seyahatname**

Evliya Çelebi was born in Istanbul in 1611 to a wealthy family that had close ties with the palace. This allowed him a good education, and afforded him enough leisure to begin his travels. His excursions began with the exploration of Istanbul, and then he went on expeditions to all corners of the Ottoman Empire. Dilaver Cebeci describes the seventeenth-century Ottoman society that Evliya Çelebi lived in as the ‘Turkish-Islamic culture and civilization’ milieu (2009: 39). Evliya became a *nedim/muhasip* (advisor) to Sultan Murad IV at the age of 24 (İnalçık, 2011: 331). His position enabled him to develop many connections with men of state, and his travels often happened within his capacity as *muhasip*. Halil İnalçık concurs that Evliya’s descriptions of the many cities are part and parcel of his job as a *nedim* (332), but that we should not think of him merely as a state official. In any case, Evliya would have his readers believe that the state had very little to do with his travels: it all happened because the Prophet appeared to him in a dream. He refers to this dream a couple of times in the *Seyahatname* and instead of pleading ‘Şefaat ya Rasulallah’ (‘Grant me your intercession, prophet of God’), Evliya’s tongue slipped and he pleaded ‘Seyahat ya Rasulallah’ (‘Grant me travel, prophet of God’) (Tezcan 2011: 54-57). This story of myth-making about his authorial self is in keeping with the kind of knowledge and experience Evliya Çelebi keeps himself open to and recounts throughout his *Seyahatname*, and is also indicative of the witty and often tongue-in-cheek voice he assumes in places.

Evliya started his travels in 1640 (İnalçık, 2011: 335) and continued travelling up until the 1680’s—historians agree that he compiled his ten-volume *Seyahatname* after he had visited all the places he writes about. In his article ‘The Seyahatname in World Travel Writing’ (2012), Sooyong Kim points to the uniqueness of Evliya Çelebi’s venture and comments on the lack of in-depth scholarly interest in it as a travel narrative, with researchers very often mining the text for more information on specific regions and lifestyles. He maintains that there probably is no other travel narrative that is so long and exhaustive (2012: 362). This lack of interest in the text as ‘travel writing’ stems, he argues, from the genre problems I have also tried to outline above. There is, in Evliya’s text, no attempt to make the account a flowing narrative, no interest in making it work as a conventional travel story. However, there is growing interest in Evliya Çelebi’s work, as it is one of the more readily available accounts of the Mediterranean in the seventeenth century written from the point of view of an Ottoman, Muslim narrator. Robert Dankoff, who contributed greatly to Evliya Çelebi scholarship and helped popularise his writing in international academic circles by translating him into English, observes that Evliya’s narrative straddles the personal, historical and informative and that ‘just as it is hard to separate the
imperial and the personal aspects in Evliya’s motivation so it is hard to distinguish the act of
travel from the reporting of it’ (2004: 151).4 In her study of Seyahatname as an inter-generic
work, Mine Mengi observes that it is a narrative that makes use of several genres including
history, city monographies, biography, autobiography, menakibnâme and letaifnâme (2009:
282).

One of the passages that Dankoff highlights in his study of Evliya Çelebi’s mentality, under
the section titled ‘Precedence’, is about the Mediterranean captains’ guild complaining that the
imperial decree has put them after the butchers’ guild at an imperial parade held by Sultan Murad
IV, whom Evliya served. Indeed, Evliya seems to have observed the parade at first hand. The
Mediterranean captains’ guild’s complaint articulates the very premise of this paper, the
importance and centrality of the Mediterranean in the imperial project: ‘We service your Cairo,
which is the gate of the Holy Cities. We make Istanbul plentiful and cheap with the goods of
Egypt. We transport 70,000 pilgrims annually back and forth. Why is our service valued so little
that the butchers should take precedence over us?’ (Dankoff, 2004: 86-87) upon which the Sultan
appreciates the Mediterranean captains’ services repeating their very words and then adding
‘Also they are a band of ghazis and jihad warriors who engage in sea-battles with the Hell-slated
infidels’, (87) and puts them before the butchers.

Evlia’s travelogue inhabits that liminal space between an inventory of Ottoman
possessions, and the travel notes of a witty author. In each place he visits he lists municipal
buildings, the number of houses, the produce of the region and sometimes the characteristics of
the inhabitants. Suraiya Faroqui argues that Evliya Çelebi ‘views the Ottoman territories as an
accumulation of cities, linked to one another by a network of roads’ (1992: 224). Some of these
roads may, in true Evliya style, even be fantastical. In his account of Gaza under the heading ‘a
strange and bizarre tale’—a construction he often uses to introduce elements of the fantastical
—he says:

According to historians, 882 years before the birth of the Prophet, during the time of Alexander the
Great, in the coastal town of Askalon near Gaza, there was a wide road in the sea that led all the way
to the province of Cyprus. All land and sea merchants used to go to the island of Cyprus on this road
[...] In the time of Alexander a Jew from Hama, bringing the Nile of Egypt with him to Hama through
some magic, hurled the bottle with Nile water to the ground and thus the lake of Tene formed, leaving
half of the road to Cyprus in water (Kahraman, 2005: 176).5

The Early Modern Mediterranean

Much has been written about mobilities, networks and connections across the early modern
Mediterranean. Indeed, the early modern Mediterranean was a geography of multicultural and
composite states of the Habsburg, Ottoman and Venetian empires,5 and Evliya’s text bears ample
witness to this. ‘The Turkish Mediterranean lived and breathed with the same rhythms as the
Christian, that the whole sea shared a common destiny, a heavy one indeed, with identical
problems and general trends if not identical consequences’ says Fernand Braudel in his seminal
There is, however, ‘a danger’ as Eric Dursteler warns us, ‘that the “black legend” of
Mediterranean battlefields will be replaced with an equally imbalanced depiction of
Mediterranean bazaars, that ignores the sea’s long history of antagonism, division,
miscomprehension, exploitation, and violence’ (2011: 474). He adds that ‘the connected
Mediterranean need not be seen as an attempt to supplant the conflictual Mediterranean, rather it complicates it by undercutting the notion of a sea of clear-cut boundaries, and highlighting instead a sea of ‘shared patterns’ (475). Highlighting the question of violence, Longino argues:

The Mediterranean World was in the 1650’s the very real world of the Ottomans – of pirates, corsairs, kidnappings and shipwrecks, and slavery, and fearsome ‘Others’. These ‘Others’ interfered with the business of commerce and of piety. They interfered with the desire to tread in the footsteps of the ancient civilizations of Greece, of Troy, of Rome. They got in the way of smooth passage to knowledge, to pleasure, to profit. It was a treacherous world of high adventure, rife with anecdote (16).

It is interesting that Longino posits the Ottomans here as forming part of the ‘others’ who interfered with trade and secular ‘pilgrimages’ of knowledge. As will be shown here, the Ottomans justified their presence and further advance into the Mediterranean on almost exactly the same grounds: to keep their own routes of trade and pilgrimage safe from the ‘other’, the meddling Frank (shorthand, in the seventeenth century, for ‘European’), particularly the Venetians and the Knights of Malta.

It is also interesting to note that these ‘ancient civilisations’ that Western Europeans claimed as their heritage presented a more immediate model to the Ottomans than many historians may care to admit. Although Evliya never makes explicit references, it is clear that an imperial project in the Mediterranean, by nature, will hark back to its Greek and Roman predecessors. The Mediterranean has its own relationship between chronos and topos, its own chronotope, that calls to mind the glories of the Greek and Roman civilisations; glories which the Ottoman Empire aspired to and the Ottoman chronotope, as is evidenced in Evliya’s text, tried to embody. There is an inherent understanding that the Mediterranean, the islands, and the ports on the mainland(s) ought to belong to one commonwealth; that an empire cannot call itself an empire if connections between these ports are not maintained in an orderly manner. This is how Evliya emphasises the importance of the port of Jaffa in the eastern Mediterranean:

Jaffa has a very good port. Many hundreds of ships come to Jaffa port from the island of Cyprus, Tripoli, Saida, Beirut, Acre, Alexandria, and the ports of the castles of Rashd, Dimyat and Tayma, and bring to Gaza, Ramla, the village of Lot, and Holy Jerusalem grain, goods, traders and visitors. (Kahraman, 2005: viii, 164)

The idea of empire was, however, very much complicated on the ground, or indeed at sea, where borders seemed very porous. Palmira Brummet argues that ‘[T]hey were places that, often enough, were forced to pay allegiance (and taxes) to two masters. The borders of empire were thus not so clearly defined as they might seem in official correspondence or maps’ (2015: 35). All the same, Evliya’s text, though shifting spheres of influence can easily be gleaned between the lines of his narrative, pushes for a more unified understanding of the Empire’s holdings, particularly in the eastern Mediterranean.

The Ottoman Chronotope in the Mediterranean

Evliya’s accounts of his Mediterranean travels are distributed through several volumes in the Seyahatname: in one section he travels along the Anatolian coast, in another he visits the islands in the Mediterranean, in yet another he visits the Levantine coastline. The Mediterranean sections
of Seyahatname cover the years between 1640-1680, coinciding with the period that Murphey calls ‘the Ottoman resurgence’ in his article on the powers in the Mediterranean (1993: 186). After an investigation of the effects of the Ottoman and Venetian rivalry—which, Murphey argues, had profound effects on Ottoman society and economy, and was a manifestation of both sides’ nostalgia for glories of the fifteenth century—he concludes that the most important benefit that the Ottoman state reaped was a ‘refamiliarization with its Mediterranean environment after a long period of preoccupation with the affairs of eastern provinces’ (199-200). Part of this refamiliarisation will come, as we shall see, through the narratives that Evliya encounters in the Mediterranean, which help him connect a sense of history and place in his own narrative structure in the Seyahatname.

The other major player, after Venice, that shaped the Ottoman chronotope in the Mediterranean were the Knights of Malta who get several mentions in the Seyahatname. In Evliya’s narrative, Malta does not get its own entry: it could be that it was not recognised as a political entity at the time. It is the fleet of the Knights of Malta and that of Venice, forming a kind of mobile enemy archipelago in themselves, that we encounter throughout the travelogue rather than their places of origin. The Knights of Malta are recognised as being the historical custodians of Saint John’s corpse and are portrayed as a group of men who have been chased since Acre, through Bodrum and Rhodes. In the following section from the ninth volume which details Evliya’s trip to the Holy Cities of Mecca, Madina and Jerusalem, he goes into their story at length:

The tribe of Rum used to come to (Sebastiya) and visit Yahya’s (St John’s) body and give many gifts and sacrifices to the priests. Then the Malta kafir who were in Acre came here as pilgrims and being jealous of the wealth of the shrine, stole the body of Yahya, brought it to Acre, put it in a bejewelled casket and made a shrine there […] Then king Tahir expels them from Acre and so they arrive in Tartus and start residing in a castle there […] Then all the Turkish beys of Zulkadir, Germiyan, Selçuklu, Aydn, Saruhan, Teke and Menteşe lay siege to the castle upon which the Malta Kafir take Yahya’s body and the bones of Jesus’s donkey with them in a train of six galleons and go to the island of Rhodes. They live there for 200 years […] and then Sultan Suleyman conquers Rhodes with the might of his hand. However, the body of Yahya had already been sent to Malta (Kahraman, 2005: v. ix, 484)

As we shall see, Evliya collects several other stories like this and urban legends as he travels the length and breadth of the Mediterranean, adding to an archive of narratives that provide a fitting backdrop to Ottoman conquests when the time comes. Thus, each island and port in the Mediterranean becomes a narrative node that crystallises the chronos, the time periods that the stories belong to, and harnesses the latter through the topos, the very islands and ports, in the narrative structure that I call the Ottoman chronotope and that Evliya helps build in his travelogue.

Evliya explains that Malta becomes the Knights’ last port of call and their headquarters. In his narrative, the spatial and the temporal are fused in the figures of the Knights of Malta for the Ottomans, as their predecessors, the Turkish beys, and then themselves, have been trailing them through time, in the expanse of the eastern Mediterranean. In this teleological relationship, the last island to which the Ottomans chase the Knights becomes their final home and also a kind of western border for Ottoman hegemony in the Mediterranean. So, in a way, the Knights play an important role in the determining of the Ottoman chronotope. As shown in the quote above, the Ottomans and preceding Turkish fiefdoms encounter the Knights of Malta in different ports and
islands of the Mediterranean, at different periods. This is a thickening and accumulation of the Ottoman history of conflict and conquest in the Mediterranean. More often than not Evliya’s texts depicts the Knights of Malta as being in cahoots with the Venetians and strangely enough, in Seyahatname we get to learn more about the Knights than we do about the state actor that Venice is supposed to represent.

Although he has many close brushes with the Venetians and the Knights of Malta, in all of his travels Evliya never gets to go to either Venice or Malta. Nevertheless, true to Murphey’s epithet of the ‘vade mecum’, in one of the later volumes Evliya lists all the countries and islands of the Mediterranean in short encyclopaedic entries, and he has the following entry for Venice:

The Venetian State, The Great Curse
They call their kings Pencpirim. […] All their cities border our cities. Whenever there is anything against peace, they come like the Frankish mangy, go around for 20-25 years and then accept peace reluctantly. They are a cautious and accused people like the plague. (v. ii, 85)

The wording of the entry reveals the straightforwardness of Evliya’s narrative when it comes to his own political discourse, which one would be inclined to think was coincidental with that of the Ottoman state, as his patrons were state officials. The entry makes it clear that the Ottomans were often at war with the Venetians in the period 1650-1670.

While Çelebi’s main modus operandi was mostly that of accompanying government officials on their tax collecting missions, his travels in the Mediterranean did take him right into the thick of battle with the Venetians, which goes some way to explaining his ire against them. In 1646 Evliya joined the Ottoman campaign to capture the Hanya Castle in Crete, a Venetian holding at the time, right after he got back to Istanbul from his travels in the Black Sea, and which he continues after this lengthy ‘interlude’. Evliya reports on the meeting the Sultan held with his viziers and clerics on the ‘Maltese campaign’ (2, 9). The interlude has its own subheading ‘In which we go on the Maltese campaign’ (2, 9). The narrative moves diachronically, and Evliya’s Ottoman chronotope, the centrality of Ottoman fortunes in the Mediterranean, allows the narrative to shift and travel through time and space—from the Black Sea to Mediterranean, from an earlier loss of galleons to the Maltese, to the conquest of Crete. The Cretan section is also a good example of how Evliya’s travelogue, particularly for the Mediterranean islands, does not highlight a sense of discovery, as you would conventionally expect from travel writing. Rather, the Mediterranean and the islands are a stage upon which the Ottomans’ sense of purpose and destiny are being played out.

In line with his stories of other islands of the Mediterranean, Evliya starts his Cretan story with the backstory of legitimisation of the campaign. As I shall show here, the gradual narrative legitimisation occurs through the following emplotment: it starts with an account of Turkish ships being captured by the Knights of Malta, and continues with the Maltese depositing their wealth in Venetian-ruled Crete, the Greek inhabitants recognising this as ‘treachery’ against Turks, the Greeks foretelling the capture of the island by the Turks to get their possessions back, Evliya returning victorious to Istanbul, and finally Evliya hearing a story from his father that explains the religious reasons why Crete had to be conquered. The narrative structure that allows this kind of chronology is the very Ottoman chronotope this paper aims to delineate.

Without giving a specific date for the backstory, Evliya tells us that an Ottoman fleet had been going to Egypt, with a lot of precious cargo—human and otherwise—when it was attacked
and captured by the ‘Malta kuffar’ (Kahraman and Dağlı, 2013: v ii: 94). The ‘kuffar’, plural for
‘kafir’, in this account of battle has very little religious connotation and is used to refer to the
‘enemy’. Greeks are rarely referred to as kuffar in Evliya’s travelogue. The word barely has any
theological connotation here and is almost always used for those non-Muslims who take up arms
against the Ottomans, as we shall soon see. Like the ‘cursed’ Venetians, the knights of Malta are
referred to in the most derogatory terms reserved for enemies. This is how Evliya relates the
incident:

The kuffar […] came to the (Turkish) galleon with six of their own and surrounded it on all four sides,
and then poured their kefere soldiers into the galleon and fought there for three hours. In the end the
kuffar, may their faces hit the ground, won the day and enslaved all the Muslims on board, including
Esiri Mehmed Efendi (95).

The Malta kuffar take the Ottoman spoils to the island of Crete where, Evliya tells us, the
Venetians are ruling ‘400 thousand Greeks’ (95). Istanbul sends emissaries to the ‘balios and the
konjalos’ (95)—terms used for Venetian administrators in Evliya’s text—and warns them to
keep their side of the peace contract under which they have been operating in the Mediterranean,
and not to give the Knights of Malta safe harbour. Venetians reply by saying that they are only
obeying conventions by opening their ports to the ships of the Knights.

While the Venetian politicos try to justify their policy by the loopholes in their agreement
with the Ottoman, the Rum7 priests on Crete, belonging to a culture that is more familiar and
legible to the Ottomans, are represented in the text as having a better understanding of what this
alliance with the Knights will cost the Venetians—Crete itself. According to Evliya, ‘the priests
looked into their books and saw that this event had been foretold and that the Turks would come
back to get their possessions’ (95). And so, Evliya and the campaign he is accompanying will
fulfil this Greek prophecy in 1646. This looking into books and/or stars is a recurring theme in
Evliya’s travelogue. All the places that the Ottomans invade and take over are somehow destined
to fall under Ottoman rule, as recognised by the learned men of the people they are conquering.

The reference to the books of the Rum, and not kuffar priests, is one of the instances in the
travelogue that helps us understand the usage of the word kuffar for the Venetians and the
Knights, and not for Greeks and other non-Muslims Ottomans are not at war with.

The legitimacy of the campaign on Hanya Castle in Crete seems very important for Evliya,
and his effort to explain it tells us what kind of text it is that we are reading. He quotes from the
fatwa that enabled the Sultan to declare war on the Knights of Malta: it has been religiously
decreed that they present a danger to the free trade and pilgrimage of Muslims (86). The first
thing that Istanbul does in preparation for the campaign is to send gold to the provinces of Cezair,
Tunus and Trabuls for gunpowder. At the start of the campaign the Ottoman fleet pretends to
make for Malta to recover the pilgrims and their possessions but attack Crete instead—one will
remember that in Othello, written some sixty years before the event, the Turks first pretend to
head for Rhodes but then attack Cyprus. Evliya also harks back to the Cyprus war of 1570:

The accursed, religionless kafir had not been at war since the Cyprus war against the sons of Osman,
and so their soldiers were vigorous, their arms cheerful, other provisions plenty and their soldiers
numerous, and so for seven days and seven nights, without rest, they pounded forty thousand cannons,
many hundreds of thousands of an assortment of rifles and many cauldrons of grenades and lit up their
castle with the lights they hung in the dark (99).
However, the time for the prophecy has come. Evliya tells the story of how a member of the kafir comes to the Ottoman ranks to tell about the discord within the enemy camp. It turns out that the Greek natives of the island, no doubt due to what they have read in their books as mentioned earlier, want to surrender while the Venetians say they should defend and wait for support from Venice. As with all the islands and castles in the Mediterranean, there is a palimpsest of ownership and sovereignty in Crete as is revealed by the narrative provided by Evliya. The Ottomans take the informant’s advice and throw leaflets inside the castle, ‘in Rum language’ saying that the Ottomans will not touch them if they agree to be a ‘community that gives haraj’—tax for non-Muslims. Moreover, ten Rum families come and convert to Islam ‘and took on names such as ‘Ringlet Sinan’ (100). The Venetians ask for ten days to leave the island but the Ottomans give them only till the morning: ‘and they got on their boats and made for their hell of a homeland passing all the islands on the way’ (100). Six days later a Venetian fleet along with six Maltese, six Ducal and six Papal ships, a hundred ‘kefere and fecere’ come to retake the castle ‘like a seven headed dragon’ (101), but they realise they cannot take it back and go back.

They saw that the port of the castle is occupied by the Ottoman fleet and all the lords of the seas and the Algerians are standing to. All the walls of the castle are decorated with the banner of the Prophet and all battlements and sides are filled with Muslim warriors, their belfries have become minarets, and each minaret decorated with the Muslim banner. When they saw all this they sighed ‘Farewell Hanya’ and left bereaved, with the Algerians taunting them from behind. (102)

This is a typical ‘changing of the guard’ moment that Evliya depicts, a Mediterranean island being severed from one (Christian) commonwealth and annexed to another, with all the symbols of this change displayed and given ample narrative space. Evliya goes on to embellish this point of how the island ends up in the hands of the Ottomans as the rightful owner:

Then the general sent, to 9 provinces, the castles, and a remote people in the İsfakiye mountains in the middle of the island of Crete, honourable men who had no greed or ill intent with assuring documents that ‘they naturally come and be givers of haraj and thus continue in their own homes with their own families and pray for the continuation of the sovereignty of the Sultan. Those who do not keep this covenant will have their possessions looted, their children enslaved and they themselves put to the sword’ (103)

Evliya recounts how Ottomans get many spoils from the conquest in any case and leave a presence of 77000 troops, including 3000 ‘Egyptian soldiers’ (103). Evliya also mentions that ‘some officials who liked the island and remained’, marking the start of a Muslim community in the island of Crete, whose own stories of expulsion from the island will be just as dramatic when it happens several centuries later with the end of Ottoman rule.

Evliya takes this moment to place the conquest of Hanya Castle and the process of Ottoman legitimation in historical context. Ottoman legitimacy and righteousness of Ottoman action in the Mediterranean are revealed to constitute a crucial dynamic within the Ottoman chronotope that Evliya is building in his text, a dynamic that becomes patently visible as he moves from one island, one castle to the next, physically, discursively and diachronically. The Ottoman chronotope, and its attendant teleology of an Ottoman Mediterranean, manages to hold, and weave the different periods of Cretan history into the more general geography and political project of the Ottoman Empire. When Evliya returns to Istanbul from Crete, the incorporation of
the island into the Ottoman chronotope continues when his father tells the story of how, the year
that Evliya was born, the Sultan Ahmet Mosque was built (105). The Ottoman chronotope proves
the pivot around which the Evliya’s narrative finds the agility to navigate back and forwards
through time. Evliya relates how after introduces a subheading entitled ‘My dear father’s strange
and bizarre tale’:

‘My dear son!’ he said, ‘listen well to this story as there are mysteries that are hidden within the holy
mystery itself. Here is why the conquest of the island of Crete was first attempted during the time of
Sultan Ahmed, and also listen how all scholars and good people prayed for the health of the Sultan.

During the time of Sultan Ahmed, the year of your birth, they pulled down seven houses of viziers and
notables on the hippodrome and started to build the foundations of a new mosque. (105)

Evliya’s father tells him about how when Sultan Ahmet cleared the ground to have the mosque
built in the district that would later be called after him and the mosque he builds. The Sultan’s
advisers, including the sheikhs, told him that in order for the construction to continue, he must
have a waqf for the mosque, that is, land and taxes that will go to the funding of the mosque
complex. The precedent for the project, the sheikhs argue, is the Süleymaniye Mosque, built in
1558 and the construction of which was made possible by the taking of Rhodes, Kos (İstanköy),
Chalkis (Hereke), Telos (İlyaki) and Simi (Sönbeki) from the ‘Malta kafir’. It is worth noting
here that elsewhere in Seyahatname Evliya speaks of the Rhodes conquest as having provided
Sultan Süleyman also with the funds to rebuild Jerusalem’s walls as we know them today.

Some of Ahmed’s advisors tell him: ‘If you should take Crete from the Venetian kuffar in
the Mediterranean you will have cleared the passageway of the traders between Istanbul and
Egypt and of the Muslim pilgrims’ but others warn that he cannot attack the Venetians as they
have a peace treaty with them (106). Possibly as a preamble to hostilities, the Venetian Pencpirim
is contacted and told to hand the castle over. The Venetians write a very flowery letter accepting
the request on condition that: ‘you [the Ottomans] give us Acre, Saida (Sidon), Beirut and
Jerusalem where our holy relics are. It is not acceptable to ask for people’s lawful inheritance;
this is like asking a man to give away his pregnant wife.’ (106). Evliya himself concedes that the
pregnant wife metaphor is an apt one as Crete is a rich land providing tax and precious metals
such as gold and silver. The mention of Acre and Saida make it clear that ports and cities in the
Mediterranean are very much like chips on the betting and battling waters of the Mediterranean,
and underline, as in the example of Jaffa, how these nodes of commerce and faith cannot be
thought independently of one another, and that a political power, in order to claim a
commonwealth, must rule over all.

Ottoman Chronotope: Trees, Prison Walls, Knights

While the second volume of Evliya’s travelogue thus gives us an account of the Crete campaign
and embeds the Rhodes story in it, in the ninth volume, Evliya takes a tour of the Anatolian
Mediterranean coast, and gives us a narrative that reveals that not all Turkish ports are on friendly
terms with the government in Istanbul. On this trip, Evliya visits Bodrum, ‘taken from the
Maltese kafir in 928 (1522)’ (233). Bodrum is described as part of the ‘Cezayir eyaleti’—
cezayir, meaning ‘the islands’, and eyalet, meaning province. There are two provinces that go
by the name of ‘cezayir’ in the Ottoman Empire: ‘Cezayiri garb’ (the western islands), denoting
Algiers itself, which became an Ottoman port in 1525, providing a base for attacks on European
ships, and ‘Cezayiri bahri sefid’ (the white sea islands), which are the islands in the Aegean. In any case, Kos, for instance, is mentioned as being part of the Cezayir eyalet, and as falling under the Rhodes sanjak. In this section of the travelogue, the history of Bodrum, Kos and Rhodes are treated together, not least because of their connection to the Knights of Malta.

According to Evliya, the castle in Kos was built by the Venetians and deteriorated when it fell into hands of the Knights of Malta. The Turkish conquest of Kos by the Ottomans in 1523 is also mentioned in the narrative, as another eventuality written in the stars and/or books. After acknowledging that at present most of Kos’s inhabitants are non-Muslim, Evliya tells the story of the plane tree in the ‘guild square’, (238) explaining why it is as huge as it is. Before he takes the opportunity to provide a story of legitimation Evliya engages in some conventional ‘travel writing’, and explains the atmosphere in the square with the symbolic and physical tree claiming the centre of the town square:

Under this great plane tree there are three platforms for coffeehouses with open roofs. All the travellers and nice people spend the time of day there. Under this tree is also an ablution space with twelve corners. The water from the fountain in the middle flows day and night and those who obey the divine call take ablutions. There are also taps you can drink from in all corners, and it is as sweet as the elixir of life. The whole town drinks from it. […] The many thousand branches of this tree have intertwined in an inseparable manner. In short, it is strange and wondrous, a work of the Creator to be much marvelled at. (239)

In Turkish culture, the plane tree continues to symbolize the Ottoman Empire to this day. These are trees the live long and reach a great size as depicted in the passage, accumulating time in their very trunk and branches. The intertwined branches here, in a way, also symbolize the interconnectedness of Ottoman lands. The tree marks the spot, or the *topos*, it marks the passing of time as the villagers themselves pass the time, *chronos*, under it- and it emerges as another marker that adds to Evliya’s construction of the Ottoman chronotope.

The story that Evliya Çelebi tells of the tree makes references to the inevitable destiny of the Empire. The story of the tree is connected to the *hajj*, the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca and Madina, a right and a service that is cited as the primary reason why the Mediterranean must be secured for Muslims, just as in the argumentation of the sheikhs, referred to earlier on, who encourage Sultan Süleyman to take Rhodes. In this story, an Egyptian ship returning from the *hajj* is seized, the pilgrims are brought to Kos and tied to a plane tree. The pilgrims have *zamzan* with them and to prevent this holy water from falling into the hands of the kuffar, they pour it at the foot of the tree (110), and it grows to a great height. Here, Evliya goes on a riff about all the comparable big trees he has seen, particularly in the Caucasus. Again, as proof of how the islands are connected, Evliya talks about how after the conquest of Rhodes in 1522, the inhabitants of Pili Castle in Kos overthrew their Maltese overlords themselves and submitted to the Ottomans.

As Evliya travels from Kos to Rhodes his ship finds itself in the midst of eight kafir kalyons (galleons) and at this point in the narration Evliya himself and the readers get to see ‘Ottoman history in the making’. The crew take refuge near the island of Simi and see a battle unfold, with the *kafir*, the word again denoting ‘enemy’ ships ‘sounding their trumpets and bells’ (254). When they realise that the *kafir* are attacking ships carrying Egyptian soldiers, Evliya’s crew join the melee, shouting ‘Avanta!’ It is one of these moments where the ‘common tongue’ of the Mediterranean can be glimpsed in Evliya’s text: a tongue made up of Turkish, Arabic, Greek and
Italian, and in this point in the narrative Evliya does not feel the need to stop and explain what this word means as he does elsewhere to explain dialects. Evliya does not tell us whether these kafir are Venetian or Maltese but does mention that when they capture the kafir ships, among their booty are ‘hundreds of weapons, 26 sweet Frank boys, 75 slaves and many antiques’ (255). After regrouping and distributing the booty the crew head towards their destination, Rhodes. In his narrative of Rhodes castle Evliya once again provides a justification for the capture of the island in 1522. The island is described as a port for the Knights of Malta, where they store their wealth and captives:

More than twelve thousand Muslims were held captive here and they wrote on the walls of the dungeon:

- ‘I was in chains here for 40 years and still prayed’
- ‘I was captured three times’
- ‘I was captured along with 2 galleons-full of goods, was kept for 30 years and was caned 3 thousand times’
- ‘They balled my eye out, pulled out all my teeth and hanged me from my arms for three nights’
- ‘I was the Hanefi kadısker of the Egyptian Sultan Inal and was kadı to all the captives’ (260)

The Ottoman presence and history have literally been inscribed on the walls of the castle. Apart from the stories of people stranded and incarcerated on the island, there is, true to Evliya’s agenda, a prophecy, made by a sheikh called Yakoub Dede now buried in Marmaris on mainland Anatolia, that the island would be captured by the Turks (111). Thus Evliya’s Ottoman chronotope in the travelogue is revealed to be a function or accumulation of the various narratives that are already extant in the Mediterranean where history, in the words of Bakhtin, ‘thickens’ on the very walls. The layers, or even the palimpsest of narratives left by Ottoman captives on the prison wall merge with the prophetic narrative of Yakup Dede to contribute to Evliya’s Ottoman Chronotope. The narrative of travel, then, becomes an account of an arrangement of collected narratives as much as it is an arrangement of time and space, to which he subordinates his observations.

It is in at the Lindos Castle in Rhodes that he looks at the Mediterranean and says it looks like a ‘lake’—calling to mind a metaphor often used by Ottoman historians, of the Mediterranean being an ‘Ottoman lake’. That the Mediterranean is central to Ottoman state’s conception of itself and of the world is also made apparent through the way in which Evliya tries to add up the miles he has travelled in the Mediterranean and comparing his distances with those of Ptolemy, as well as the way he tries to calculate the circumference of the earth (152). It is also at this point of the narrative that Evliya gives a comprehensive list of the islands in the Mediterranean, the form once again switching from travel/battle account to encyclopaedia (153).

Evliya’s travels in the Bodrum-Kos-Rhodes triangle also allow him to expand upon the historical forces that the Ottoman Empire has to contend with in the Mediterranean. It appears that Evliya has a certain degree of respect for the Knights of Malta, kuffar (enemy) though they are, due to their position of being the guardians of a holy relic. He observes that the Knights are difficult to beat because they have in their possession and guardianship the body of Saint John (Kahraman, 2005: v. ix, 283). He speaks of the Knights elsewhere in the travelogue as well but it is in the Rhodes section that Evliya relates the most extended version of the Knights’ story when he describes the Sencovan Mosque on the island—Sencovan being the Turkish transliteration of Saint John:
From the time of second Adam, prophet Noah, the sacred corpse of St. John was buried there as written in Tevarîhi Kibî (Egyptian/Coptic Histories) and Tevarîhi Yunaniyân (Greek Histories) These books write about all the things about jinn and beings before Hz. Adam descended to the earth, all Turkish and Arabic history books use it as a source and it is a true history. [...] The Malta kafir used to live in Alexandria and they were a shrewd tribe of Behice and Hannadi. During the time of King Filbat they fled Egypt (Kibî) and came to the castle of Acre. The castle was built by the Spanish and for 200 years they lived under their protection. They prospered and took it from the Spanish. During this time Damascus, Jerusalem, Bagdad and Urfa [...] were under the control of the Rum. All [...] including Iran paid taxes to Greek Alexander. In order to make their city a pilgrimage site they took the bones of St John from Beyt Sabastiye. They also carried the bones of Jesus’s donkey to Remle. [...] the Malta Kafir say his neck still bleeds- John was murdered was because he did not sanction an Israeliite king’s wish to marry his daughter. (v. ix, 269)

Thus, the Ottoman chronotope is placed within a much larger, fraught, almost cosmological history, when one considers the theological aspect of the connections. The histories that Evliya consults are Coptic and Greek, reinforcing the idea that the Ottomans recognised the various religious and cultural heritages of the Mediterranean in their understanding of the region. Evliya’s travel in the Mediterranean enables him to visit the locations that have acquired importance in the region’s palimpsest of civilizations and religions, including places that carry traces of the atemporal in the shape of holy relics. These Mediterranean loci become very special lieux de memoire and help construct a narrative in which Ottomans are added to the crucial genealogy of Mediterranean cultures.

Ultimately, the elements that guide the narrative in the Mediterranean sections of the travelogue are not so much the encounters with the inhabitants of the islands—except when the Greeks intervene, to some extent, to help the Ottoman cause—but the ships of the Knights of Malta and those of the Venetians. Against this background the travelogue takes on the mission of recounting the battles of the Ottomans which will lead to the Mediterranean becoming an ‘Ottoman lake’ in the Ottoman world view. Thus Evliya’s Seyahatname both anticipates and organizes empire in its form, and becomes, by virtue of its narrative itinerary, a study in imperial cartography. Informed by the imperial project, Evliya surveys the Mediterranean as the Ottoman prevalence reaches its zenith, and goes back to Istanbul to add to the expanding archive of stories about the basin. Added to that is the authority afforded to the mysterious Greek texts which foretell the coming of the Ottomans, and which bookend the authority of Evliya’s own narrative, working towards the legitimation of Ottoman conquests. Evliya’s unruly travelogue both adds to and catalogues narratives that the imperial project appropriates for legitimization of its acts of expansion. Thus, the places and stories of the Mediterranean become critically legible through this prism and come together in the narrative to produce a particular, Ottoman connection between time and space, the Ottoman chronotope.

Notes


4. The following passage from Evliya’s text is also enlightening as to the reasons why Evliya wrote the book. ‘In the years of my journeyings I saw thousands of strange places and experienced thousands of wondrous events. Because we humans are creatures of forgetfulness, lest their traces be effaced and their names be concealed, I began to make a record of noteworthy items—both man-made and God-made (i.e., naturally occurring)—and to write them down in order to provide memory-clues, using well-worn expressions and a middling style, in accordance with the dictum, Talk to people according to the measure of their intellects.’ Robert Dankoff and Sooyong Kim (eds). 2010. An Ottoman Traveller: Selections from the Book of Travels of Evliya Çelebi, London: Eland, 295.

5. A word on the Seyahatname texts that I am using. I have used the 2005 edition prepared for publication by Seyit Ali Kahraman, along with the 2013 edition that Kahraman co-edited with Yücel Dağlı. The translations from these texts are mine. ‘v’ stands for the specific volume. For more information on the manuscripts and various editions of the Seyahatname see Robert Dankoff and Semih Tezcan’s ‘An Evliya Çelebi Bibliography’ at http://docplayer.biz.tr/168295-An-evliya-celebi-bibliography-robert-dankoff-and-semih-tezcan.html

6. Evliya Çelebi’s account of the Balkans and the Mediterranean meet in Cemal Kafadar’s study (see Kafadar 2012).

7. In the text the word Rum is used for the Greek-speaking peoples of the islands. This term is also ongoingly used for Greek-speaking peoples in Anatolia today. I use ‘Greek’ and ‘Rum’ interchangeably in my article.

8. The eyalet and the sanjak are administrative units in the Ottoman Empire, with the eyalet being the larger of the two.

References


