

ON THE ‘NOBILITY’ OF PROVINCIAL NOTABLES

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The claim to be a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad (*teseyyid*) was a widespread phenomenon that afflicted the Ottoman Empire from the sixteenth century onwards. Historians of the Arab lands were the first to observe the unnatural increase in the number of *sadat/ashraf*,¹ particularly in the eighteenth century. They also observed a high degree of correlation between wealth, notability and Muhammadan pedigree. It has been noted, for example, that in eighteenth-century Damascus, the average wealth of the *ashraf* was three times that of the commoners, and most of them “were members of otherwise prominent families”. In Aleppo, they constituted the elite of the civilian population with 58% of the notable families counted among their ranks according to one study. By the end of the eighteenth century, these families held more than 30% of the lifetime tax-farms.² Although there is reason to expect elective

1. **Note on transliteration:** I use Ottoman Turkish transliteration for words of Arabic origin, and switch to Arabic where regional distinctions are pertinent. Hence *sharif* and *ashraf* as opposed to *şerif* and *esraf*, and *seyyid* as opposed to *sayyid*. In general the title *sayyid* referred to descendants of the Prophet’s grandson Husayn and *sharif* to those of Hasan. But regional usage varied significantly throughout Islamic history. In Anatolia and the Balkans, the descendants of the Prophet came to associate themselves with Husayn and used the title *seyyid*. Although the title *sayyid* was used in Arabic-speaking territories too, I prefer the Turkish form, *seyyid*, for the sake of simplicity. For *sharif* I retain the Arabic form, as it was not used outside the Arab lands after the sixteenth century. For details of Ottoman usage, see H. Canbakal, ‘Status Usurpation in the Ottoman Empire, 1500-1700’, (forthcoming).
2. B. Masters, ‘Power and Society in Aleppo in the 18th and 19th Centuries’, *RMMM*, 62 (1991), 151-58; H. L. Bodman, *Political Factions in Aleppo, 1760-1826* (Chapel Hill 1963), 63-65, on involvement of *ashraf* in prestigious trades. M. L. Meriwether, ‘The Notable Families of Aleppo, 1770-1830: Networks and Social Structure’, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1981, 85. Also see M. Rozen, ‘The Naqib al-ashraf Rebellion in Jerusalem and its Repercussions on the City’s Dhimmis’, *Asian and African Studies*, 18 (1984), 252; M. Winter, ‘The Ashraf and Niqabat al-ashraf in Egypt in Ottoman and Modern Times’, *Asian and African Studies*, 19 (1985), 25-27; D. Rizk Khoury, *State and Provincial Society in the Ottoman Empire: Mosul, 1540-1834* (Cambridge 1997), 154-55; H. Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton 1982), 9-12, 153-57; J.-P. Thieck, ‘Décentralisation ottomane et affirmation urbaine à Alep à la fin du XVIII^e siècle’, in M. Zakaria *et alii* (eds), *Mouvements communautaires et*

affinity between notability and Muhammadan charisma as will be seen below, we do not know for sure whether the notables had always been over-represented among the descendants of the Prophet. Likewise, although we know that *sadat/ashraf* had always been venerated for their pedigree, we do not know much about when and where the prestige they enjoyed translated into economic and political power. Nevertheless, that it did translate into economic and political power in at least some parts of the Ottoman Empire in the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries is evident. Winter's observations about the Egyptian *ashraf*, Parveva's observations about Rumelian towns point to an improvement in the "status, solidarity and economic conditions" of the *sadat/ashraf* starting in the seventeenth century.³ These observations lead me to the first premise of this paper, namely, the idea that there may be a link between the over-representation of the notables among the *sadat/ashraf* and the *sadat/ashraf*'s social and political ascendancy. There is, however, one more factor to be brought into the picture: the state.

A variety of social groups and individuals claimed descent from the Prophet's family at various conjunctures in Islamic history. Some of these were state-builders, some were magnates bidding for local or regional power, and others, as in the case of much of Ottoman *sadat/ashraf*, were prompted to forgery by the expansion of state power. In fact, usurpation of the noble title, or false ennoblement in the Ottoman Empire from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century embodied all three dynamics in varying combinations and intensity.

False claims to prophetic pedigree began to trouble the Ottoman government as a widespread phenomenon in the second half of the sixteenth century, if not before. They continued throughout the seventeenth century despite government efforts to control the process. Then, they reached a new height in the eighteenth century, when *ashraf* of all classes became an important factor in regional politics, available studies tell us, especially in Greater Syria and Egypt.⁴ No doubt the phenomenon had distinct dynamics in different regions and periods but the following probably applies to all.⁵ False ennoblement was a defensive response to the consolidation

espaces urbains au Machreq (Beirut 1985), 129. For examples from medieval Islamdom, *EI*², s.v. 'Sharif', IX: 337.

3. M. Winter, *Egyptian Society Under Ottoman Rule, 1517-1798* (London and New York 1992), 186, 191; S. Parveva, 'Representatives of the Muslim-Religious Institutions in the Town in Bulgarian Lands During the 17th Century' (in Bulgarian), in R. Gradeva and S. Ivanova (eds), *Myusyulmanskata kultura po bālgarskitezemi. Izsledvaniya* [Muslim Culture in Bulgarian Lands. Studies] (Sofia 1998), 167. I am grateful to Dr Rossitsa Gradeva for translating this text into English for me.
4. False ennoblement was equally common in some parts of Anatolia and the Balkans, but there are no studies on the politics of the *sadat* in these locations. The only area for which there is already evidence of *sadat* politics is the province of Maraş, which can be seen as an extension of the Syrian pattern. See H. Canbakal, 'Ayntab at the End of the Seventeenth Century: A Study of Notables and Urban Politics', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1999.
5. For an attempt at tracing the phenomenon in different regions and a discussion of regional factors, see Canbakal, 'Status Usurpation'.

of the Ottoman state and became a means for various subject groups to uphold their autonomy and/or to bid for local or regional power. This included ordinary subjects' urge to arm themselves against government exactions as well as notables' self-assertion up against and into the state apparatus.

As for the Ottoman state-builders, although they did not claim Muhammadan pedigree themselves, unlike their arch-enemy, the Safavids, or their lesser rivals in North Africa, they did promote the cult of Muhammadan nobility as part of their self-image. My findings suggest that at the same time, the Ottoman centre may have selectively accommodated false claims of Muhammadan pedigree as dictated by its scheme of status/title management as well as by its ideological programme, exigencies of territorial expansion and diplomatic claims. Consequently, it is quite possible that the phenomenon of *təseyyid* was also one of *tesyid*: ennoblement by the Ottoman centre. At least, one could maintain, the improvement of the status of the *sadat/ashraf* had something to do with state policies, and I propose that the over-representation of the notables among the descendants of the Prophet was also linked with state policies and the relationship between the notables and the state.

To make such broad statements on a topic as little studied as this involves obvious methodological risks. Therefore, this paper should be read as an interpretative essay aspiring to no more than showing the legitimacy of these propositions rather than proving them. To this end, it examines the relationship between notables and Muhammadan nobility in two regards. First, it discusses the question of control over the distribution of the noble title, and then, proceeds with a discussion of the official significance of becoming a *seyyid/sharif*.

Policies of Surveillance and their Limits

Judging by the Registers of the Imperial *Nakibiüleşraf*, the Ottoman policy towards the *sadat* went through 3 phases: roughly 1500-1650, 1650-1700 and 1700 onwards. The first phase was marked by the beginning of the government's systematic surveillance policy. The imperial *nakibiüleşraf* kept track of their number and identity through copies of title deeds and summary registers organised alphabetically. Probably sometime in the second half of the sixteenth century, the government detected the phenomenon of false ennoblement, but it took no major action until the second half of the following century. Only then, more specifically, between 1659 and 1695, did it switch to a policy of militant surveillance that was reflected in a series of inspections meant to 'purge the noble lineage'. At the same time, the number of *seyyid*ship claims authenticated in Istanbul dropped sharply. All these matched the centralist-restorative spirit of the Köprülü era, and they reflected the government's urge to restore the Ottoman socio-political order that had been upset by the two-way mobility between the *askeri* and *reaya*. In a parallel fashion, these inspections reflected the need to identify the resources of the realm at a time of mounting fiscal hardship. Consequently, a great many *sadat/ashraf* were demoted to *reaya* status and lost their green turbans.⁶

6. For example, of the 3,835 claimants inspected in Anatolia in 1659, 1,171 were deemed

Government vigilance against usurpation of titles came to an abrupt end in 1699, or slightly earlier, more or less simultaneously with the end of the Ottoman-Habsburg War. Inspections came to a halt, and even more significantly, regular registration of the rightful claimants also stopped, leaving us with no more than a handful of records dating from the eighteenth century. This is noteworthy because even though government policies towards the *sadat/ashraf* had always been partly motivated by ideological concerns and geared to the dynamics of the Safavid challenge, this new turn in the policy of control was effected two decades before the end of Safavid rule. Certainly, the imperial *nakibüleşraf* continued to dispatch warnings to the provinces instructing the local *nakibüleşrafs* to prevent usurpations. But the centre itself was no longer involved in the process of proof and certification, delegating this, evidently, to the local authorities. This switch conformed to the general pattern of the eighteenth-century administrative practices, but in fact, it may not have meant as radical a break as it may seem at first sight.

Irrespective of the changes in policies of surveillance, central control over the distribution of the noble title was limited in scope and effect, and where and when the Ottoman government had limited or no say in establishing the verity of the claims to noble pedigree, it was the local notables who were most likely to control the distribution of the title. Istanbul's control over the process of the certification of the *sadat* had always been limited in at least two ways. First, geographically. As far as the Arab lands were concerned, the capital limited itself to sending *nakibüleşrafs* to a few important cities, such as Cairo and Damascus. But after the sixteenth century, the office came to be monopolised by local notable families. Furthermore, the presence of a *nakibüleşraf* sent from the capital did not necessarily mean Istanbul was involved in the process of certification. For example in Cairo, even in the early decades of Ottoman rule, when Istanbul's direct appointees were in charge, the *ashraf* of the region were controlled locally. The *nakibüleşrafs* kept track of the genealogical tables and lists of allowances assigned for the *ashraf*, and authenticated or thwarted claims of Muhammadan pedigree using these lists. Evidently, they were not expected to send certificates of proof to Istanbul for final ratification.⁷ Ze'evi's description of the process of certification in seventeenth-century Jerusalem also points to the autonomy of the local *nakibüleşraf*, and probably applies to most places in the zone of indirect imperial control.⁸ The consequence of this for the

to be usurpers. Likewise, the two inspections held in the Province of Sivas in the 1680s revealed 1,089 usurpers from among 3,633 claimants. *Nakibüleşraf Defteri* (ND) ## 30, 27, 28.

7. Winter, *Egyptian Society*, 186, 193-96.
8. Seyyidship claims were proved by witnesses in the presence of the local *nakibüleşraf*. Then, the claimant went to the court with a communication signed by the *nakibüleşraf* and asked for it to be registered, probably also asking for a copy: D. Ze'evi, *An Ottoman Century: The District of Jerusalem in the 1600s* (Albany, N.Y. 1996), 73-74. For Aleppo and Nablus, see M. Salati, *Ascesa e Caduta di una Famiglia di Ašraf Sciiti di Aleppo: I Zuhrāwī o Zuhrā-zāda (1600-1700)* (Rome 1992), 27; also Bodman, *Political Factions in Aleppo*, 99.

modern historian is a sad one: the Registers of the Imperial *Nakibüleşraf* provide no information on Arab *sadat/ashraf*.⁹ Naturally, management of the *sadat/ashraf* had a longer history in Arab lands than other parts of the Ottoman Empire. Thus, in view of the tradition of local self-management and the presence of historical/symbolic loci of authority over the *sadat/ashraf* (Mecca, Najaf, Karbala, and, later, the Safavid capitals), the exclusion of the Arab lands from imperial purview does not seem problematic. Nevertheless, eastern Anatolia and the western and north-western part of the Balkans too remained outside direct government supervision. In other words, it was neither history nor ethnic divisions that determined the contours of central control, at least, not they alone.

Istanbul’s control over the process of certification was limited also within the zone of direct control, more specifically, the area between the Euphrates in the east and eastern Rumelia in the west. This was where *sadat* were certified by the imperial *nakibüleşraf* more or less consistently. Here too, the process of proving descent and getting it certified was never as smooth and orderly as Istanbul would have probably liked to see. The standard procedure of certification involved two elements: presentation of a title deed issued earlier and presentation of witnesses. It is likely that in conjunction with bureaucratisation, the use of documents for proof of descent increased over time, as in other kinds of judicial and notarial procedures. Be that as it may, there were many ways to get hold of a valid certificate. One could buy the title deed of a deceased *seyyid* or steal one.¹⁰ Title deeds could also be forged like any other document, and officials could be bribed.¹¹ Private individuals, scribes, even judges could be behind such forgery. Naturally, notables were in a better position than everyone else to bribe, manipulate or even coerce local and imperial officials in order to acquire impeccable genealogies or title deeds, or simply buy the services of the ablest document forgers. As the local *nakibüleşraf* himself was often from a notable family, his ‘co-operation’ within an actual or prospective network of clientage or factional alliance was highly likely.

Further, there are numerous sixteenth and seventeenth-century *hüccets* that make no reference to use of documents during the process of proof.¹² One of Ebüssuûd Efendi’s *fetvas*, too, tells us that testimony by reliable witnesses consti-

9. For information on the Registers of the Imperial *Nakibüleşraf*, see Canbakal, ‘Status Usurpation’, Appendix I.
10. R. Kılıç, ‘Osmanlı Devleti’nde Seyyidler ve Şerifler (XIV-XVI. Yüzyıllar)’, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Hacettepe University – Ankara, 2000, 63.
11. S. A. Kahraman and Y. Dağlı (eds), *Evlîya Çelebi Seyahatnamesi* (Istanbul 1999), 3: 178-79; A.-K. Rafeq, ‘Changes in the Relation between the Ottoman Central Administration and the Syrian Provinces from the 16th Century to the 18th Century’, in T. Naff and R. Owen (eds), *Studies in Eighteenth Century Islamic History* (Carbondale and Edwardsville – London and Amsterdam 1977), 65-66.
12. In one particular register among the Registers of the Imperial *Nakibüleşraf*, ND # 14, there is not a single reference to use of documents during the process of proof. Notably, this register belongs to Allâme Efendi (1630-34), one of the most active *nakibüleşrafs* in authenticating *seyyidship* claims.

tuted sufficient proof of Muhammadan pedigree.¹³ Likewise, Bottini observes that in Ottoman Homş for example, some families maintained their title on the basis of consensus or hearsay (*tawatur*) alone, and they could thus obtain even the post of the *nakib*.¹⁴ I suggest that it was this process of proving descent by recourse to social recognition that contributed to the proliferation of the *sadat* among the notables in particular. Oral testimony was a standard procedure used in all situations that required establishing a ‘fact’ in the sharia court. In cases of proving Muhammadan pedigree, testimony took a number of forms. The witness could testify on the basis of his personal knowledge, specifying the relatives whose genealogy had been proved earlier, or confirming kinship ties with such persons. Alternatively, the witness could testify to others’ statements to the same effect referring to specific persons, hearsay, or the claimant’s reputation in his/her community. In brief, testimony brought into the procedure of proof the opinion and will of the community: in this instance, the opinion of the community as to who could and should be a *seyyid*. Evidently, the *nakibüleşraf* could also forego individual witnesses altogether. According to a memo in one of the *Nakibüleşraf* Registers from the 1580s, the local *nakibüleşraf* could also determine the identity of a claimant by directly asking the community after the Friday prayer whether he was a *seyyid* or not. If the community said he was not, the *nakibüleşraf* was to remove the ‘Green sign (of *seyyidhood*)’.¹⁵

Obviously, this practice was open to much abuse. That is why one of the imperial *nakibüleşrafs* of the early seventeenth century, Emir Ali Efendi, tried to institute a new rule requiring the presentation of 40 witnesses in order to prove descent, but this rule was soon disregarded.¹⁶ As noted earlier, the decades which followed actually saw the high point of government surveillance over the descendants of the Prophet. However, the liberalism we observe in surveillance policies in the eighteenth century may have its roots in this period.

Two texts from the inspection registers of the 1680s reveal a rather elaborate system of classification concerning claims of descent from the Prophet. The system is interesting in two regards. First, reputation, i.e., social recognition as *seyyid*, seems to have played a central role; second, even those claimants whose pedigree could not be proved with certainty were not automatically classified as impostors. Instead, they were placed on a scale of verity. ‘*El-ma’ruf bi’s-seyyade*’ (reputed as *seyyid*), ‘*el-kadimu’s-seyyade*’ (*seyyid* for a long period), ‘*el-kadimu’l-alâme ve ’l-mechulu’s-seyyade*’ (bearing [the noble] sign for a long period and of uncertain

13. M. E. Düzdağ, *Şeyhülislam Ebussuûd Efendi Fetvaları* (İstanbul 1983), 82. Ebussuûd’s *fetva* may be based on Hanafi jurists’ view concerning the admissibility of reputation as evidence for one’s identity; B. Haykel, ‘Dissembling Descent, or How the Barber Lost his Turban in Eighteenth-Century Zaydi Yemen’, *Islamic Law and Society*, 9 (2002), 194-225.
14. L. Bottini, ‘Les descendants du Prophète à Homş: notes en marge’, *Oriente Moderno* n.s., 18/2 (1999), 351-73.
15. ND # 5, 45b, cited in Kılıç, ‘Osmanlı Devleti’nde Seyyidler ve Şerifler’, 141.
16. M. Sarıcık, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nda Nakîbü'l-eşràflık Mütessesi* (Ankara 2003), 138-40; Kılıç, ‘Osmanlı Devleti’nde Seyyidler ve Şerifler’, 65.

descent) were some of the grades of *seyyid*hood recognised by the investigators.¹⁷ Only those whose reputation was too recent were prohibited from claiming *seyyid*ship. Obviously, we cannot assume on the basis of these texts alone that such a system of classification was in common use. Still, it is significant because such elaborate emphasis on social recognition was novel (judging by the *Nakibüleşraf* Registers) and can be taken to herald the withdrawal of the capital from the process of certification.

Notables had something to gain from both. In fact, more instrumental in their usurpation of Muhammadan nobility was probably their social position and the popular perception of their identity. If we were to believe the testimony of d'Ohsson, a keen observer of the eighteenth-century Ottoman society, *sadat* living in destitution were regarded with suspicion, because the Prophet's blessing was supposed to have fallen upon his true descendants forever and protect them from all misfortune. In other words, the credibility of an impostor as a descendant of the Prophet was higher if he had a good social standing and was well off than would have been the case otherwise. Further, where prestige and credibility did not work, sheer power would have: it is unlikely that ordinary witnesses would have had the courage to challenge the claim of a notable family.¹⁸ At any rate, witnesses as well as those who supervised imperial inspections tended to be *sadat* of high standing.¹⁹

Finally, notables who wanted to marry into a family of *sadat* in order to secure 'nobility' for their descendants at least, again, stood a better chance than ordinary people. Judging by the Registers of the Imperial *Nakibüleşraf*, *sadat* exogamy was allowed in Anatolia and the Balkans. However, rules of compatible marriage, *kafaa*, required that even if the would-be spouse was not a *seyyid*, his distinction in other regards should make up for this deficiency.²⁰ Thus, naturally, notables had an edge in the pursuit of the hand of a *seyyide/sharifa*.

In brief, notables were more likely to become *sadat* because not only did they have at their disposal better means to elicit official recognition but also they bore the signs of high breeding and enjoyed social power.

Changes in the Status of the Nakibüleşrafs

In seeming contrast to the abeyance of central control over the provincial *sadat/ashraf* in the eighteenth century, the importance of the imperial *nakibüleşraf* in the Ottoman administrative hierarchy increased and his role in imperial ceremonies of legitimacy was enhanced. He became the primary figure in initiation ceremonies,

17. ND # 27, 2a; # 28, 10b.

18. We find a parallel to this situation in seventeenth-century France, where royal inspectors were having a hard time in finding witnesses who would testify against powerful families who claimed to be nobles (S. Clark, *State and Status: The Rise of the State and Aristocratic Power in Western Europe* [Montreal and Buffalo 1995], 179).

19. ND # 30, 34a; ND # 22, 5a.

20. *EI*, s.v. 'Sharif', IX: 335; J. E. Tucker, *In the House of the Law: Gender and Islamic Law in Ottoman Syria and Palestine* (Berkeley 1998), 141-42.

only to be followed by the *şeyhülislam* in importance. He also assumed a crucial role both in old and newly instituted rituals associated with religious holidays.²¹ Significantly, one of these novel rituals instituted a graphic bond between Istanbul and the provinces: the *nakibüleşraf* would dip an edge of the mantle of the Prophet in water and send out the blessed water to dignitaries in the provinces. In return he received stately presents.²² The *nakibüleşrafs* also came to hold special privileges that were not accorded to any other dignitary within the bureaucracy. Starting from the last decades of the seventeenth century, they were appointed from among the highest ranking *ulema*, and in the eighteenth century, most of them also served as *şeyhiislams*.²³ In brief, although the House of the Prophet, and as the representative and overseer of its members, the *nakibüleşrafs*, had always been held in high esteem, it would appear that the cult of the Prophet and his House had never been so closely associated with the self-image of the Ottoman dynasty.

We find a parallel in the provinces to these changes taking place in the capital. The position of the *nakibüleşrafs* in the local political hierarchy was also enhanced in the course of the seventeenth century, which was later crowned by the increase in their authority over the local *sadat*.²⁴ According to Winter, as the office of the marshal was considered insignificant under the Mamluks in Egypt, appointments made by the new Ottoman regime did not evoke any local resistance in the sixteenth century. However, in the period which followed, he was transformed from a modest religious functionary to an important political figure. As he started attending the governor's *divan* like other notables, the local *ashraf* began to refuse the

21. He was the first to kiss the sultan's hand, only to be followed by the *şeyhülislam*. In the eighteenth century, he was given a leading role in girding the sultan with the Prophet's sword in Eyüp. He was also the primary guardian of the relics of the Prophet, and most importantly, the Holy Banner, which he took out for display on occasions of civil disorder, or to lead military campaigns. *Tarih-i Raşid*, II: 160 cited by C. Kafadar, 'Eyüp'te Kılıç Kuşanma Törenleri', in T. Artan (ed.), *Eyüp: Dün/Bugün* (İstanbul 1994), 58-59; Bodman, *Political Factions*, 94-95, based on European reports; İ. H. Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Devletinin İlmiye Teşkilatı* (Ankara 1988), 168-70.
22. I. Mouradgea d'Ohsson, *Tableau général de l'empire othoman* (Paris 1791), 4/2: 264-65; Bodman, *Political Factions*, 95. Also, G. Necipoğlu-Kafadar, *Architecture, Ceremonial and Power: The Topkapı Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, Mass. 1991), 151. Necipoğlu suggests that this may well be a pre-Ottoman practice although the earliest Ottoman reference is from the early seventeenth century.
23. Uzunçarşılı, *İlmiye Teşkilatı*, 166-67. Once appointed, *nakibüleşraf*s could simultaneously hold other offices and follow the regular promotion track, unless they became *şeyhiislams*. Their revenue grant was never withdrawn (d'Ohsson, *Tableau général*, 4/2: 563-64).
24. A. M. Bakhit, *The Ottoman Province of Damascus in the Sixteenth Century* (Beirut 1982), 186; Rafeq, 'Changes', 66; Winter, *Egyptian Society*, 189, 191-95; Rozen, 'The Naqib al-ashraf Rebellion', 252. I would also like to thank Butrus Abu-Manneh for his comments on an earlier version of this paper concerning the power of the *nakibüleşraf*s in Damascus and Aleppo.

nakibüleşrafs sent by the government and drove them out, and the control of the post became gradually hereditary in Cairo and elsewhere.²⁵

Mundane realities of politics, such as the presence of a large number of notables among the *sadat/ashraf*, in addition to the fact that the *sadat/ashraf* as a whole constituted a sizeable social group, more importantly, one that could stage co-ordinated action in some places may account for their rise within the local community and local politics. But parallel policy changes effected in the imperial centre call for an account encompassing the relation and interaction between the capital and the provinces. Undoubtedly, such an account would have to have a cultural component. If we can indeed speak of a revival of interest in the cult of the Prophet and his House, it cannot be explained in instrumentalist terms attributing political designs to agents on either side: the centre or the provinces. In view of the debates about Akhbari reformism in seventeenth-century Iran and its possible connection with the social promotion of the *sadat*, and the more general phenomenon of fundamentalist reformism that affected the Ottoman lands, too, research into the cultural underpinnings of the fortunes of the *sadat/ashraf* appears a highly promising venue.²⁶ That, however, falls outside the scope of this paper. Thus, I shall continue with a narrowly defined political account.

Official Recognition of No(ta)bility

While *sayyid/sharif* status promised prestige and privilege throughout Islamic history, it was not very often that the drive to acquire Muhammadan nobility reached the proportions it did in Ottoman lands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Like its precursors, the Ottoman state offered the *sadat* stipends and grants in considerable amounts, which no doubt constituted a positive incentive for usurpers.²⁷ Yet, such grants, administered directly or through religious foundations, targeted mainly the *sadat* of the Holy Lands and selected Arab cities of symbolic and political significance. As for the judicial privileges commonly associated with *sayyid/sharif* status, it seems highly likely that they emerged rather late, possibly in the eighteenth century, when the local *nakibüleşrafs* were given full control over the *sadat*.²⁸ In

- 25. Winter, *Egyptian Society*, 189, 191-95; H.A.R. Gibb and H. Bowen, *Islamic Society and the West* (London and New York 1957), I/2: 101. For Ayntab, Ayntab Court Registers #106/271, Rebiyülevvel 1162/1749 in C. C. Güzelbey and H. Yetkin (eds), *Gaziantep Şer'i Mahkeme Sicillerinden Örnekler* (Gaziantep 1970), 4: 55; BOA, HAT 26846 (1235/1819-20).
- 26. A. Newman, 'The Role of the Sâdât in Safavid Iran: Confrontation or Accommodation?', *Oriente Moderno* n.s., 18/2 (1999), 577-95.
- 27. A. Temimi, 'Rôle des Sadat/Ašraf dans l'empire ottoman: quelques considérations', *Oriente Moderno* n.s., 18/2 (1999), 640, 646.
- 28. The earliest evidence for the *nakibüleşraf*'s judicial powers that I have been able to locate is from the 1730s: D. Cantemir, *The History of the Growth and Decay of the Othman Empire* (London 1734-35), 1: 94 n. 50, 2: 346. For a discussion, see Canbakal, 'Status Usurpation'.

other words, judicial privileges may have been a consequence, rather than a cause, of the phenomenon of false ennoblement.

What potentially affected everyone claiming to be a descendant of the Prophet was the tax privileges accorded to the title. Particularly after the regularisation of the household tax (*avarız*) in the seventeenth century, acquisition of tax exemptions by entering one of the politico-fiscal categories of *muaf* or *askerî* became especially important. Posing as a descendant of the Prophet was just one of the defensive tactics developed by the tax-paying population, and available evidence suggests that wherever there was a large body of *sadat*, the overall *askerî* population was also large. In some instances, the rates were fantastically high, a fact which deserves a separate inquiry on its own account. For example, in 1752, 31% of the households in the town of Alakenise in Niğbolu were *sadat*, and in the same town, the *askerî* as a whole constituted 77% of the population. The relevant figures for the town of Eski Cuma, also in Niğbolu, were 11% for the *sadat* and 75% for the *askerî*.²⁹ At the other end of the Turkish-speaking territories, Ayntab had a usurpation pattern closer to Damascus, with its *sadat* constituting about 12.5% of the population in 1697, and *askerî* 36%.³⁰

Nevertheless, while the desire to acquire exemptions cut across all segments of society, not every tactic used for that purpose was equally accessible or appealing to different social groups. Judging by the distribution of the *seyyid/sharif* title within the urban populace, it was the tactic favoured and controlled by the notables – which is not to suggest that only notables tried to forge their pedigree. Furthermore, Ze’evi’s work on seventeenth-century Jerusalem indicates that no matter how one acquired Muhammadan nobility, socially and economically better-positioned *sadat* could successfully defend their privileges when challenged, while lesser members of the estate failed to do so. In other words, the claim to Muhammadan pedigree was a reasonable defence strategy against fiscal demands, but it promised greater and safer returns to those who were already closer to the upper echelons of society.

Further, while tax evasion may have been a source of temptation for the notables, too, like everyone else, the marginal value of the financial gain that exemptions provided was probably much more limited for them than for the lesser folk.³¹ On the other hand, the symbolic value of the move was likely to have been as important as tangible privileges associated with the title. Firstly, it added to the esteem and power the notables already enjoyed in various milieus in which they lived and func-

29. A. Şimşirgil, ‘The Kazas (Townships) of Alakilise, Rahova, İvraca, İzladi and Eski Cuma – Subdivisions of the Sancak of Niğbolu in XVIII. Century’, *Turkish Review of Balkan Studies*, 7 (2002), 239, 249, 252.

30. See Canbakal, ‘Ayntab’, 141-44.

31. There is very little research on the impact that changes in the taxation system had on different social groups. Therefore, any general statement on the matter is bound to be speculative. See B. McGowan, *Economic Life in Ottoman Europe: Taxation, Trade and the Struggle for Land 1600-1800* (Cambridge and Paris 1981); L. T. Darling, *Revenue-Raising and Legitimacy: Tax Collection and Finance Administration in the Ottoman Empire, 1560-1660* (Leiden 1996).

tioned: local, regional or imperial. And Meriwether’s argument that acquiring *sharif* status in eighteenth-century Aleppo was not so much a means for social mobility as a means to set the seal on already existing power is probably generally valid.³² It can be surmised that particularly in places where unstable power balances within urban oligarchies and between such oligarchies and the central state bred factional politics, Muhammadan pedigree was an invaluable asset to capitalise on, all the more so if the prospect of gaining state backing in local struggles for supremacy was pretty high. And state backing it did provide, even if indirectly.

The Muhammadan title turned notability into nobility in a dual sense: nobility as hereditary distinction and nobility as legally recognised status, which naturally had a bearing on their relationship with the state. Irrespective of the process by which one’s claim to the Muhammadan title was recognised, the title itself embodied a power independent of the state; therefore, it was a potential weapon that could be used against it. Ironically, the *sadat/ashraf* also constituted the only blood nobility apart from the ruling dynasty that the Ottoman state recognised, and this recognition was reinforced in a fundamental way when the *sadat/ashraf* were promoted from the category of *muaf* to *askerî* in the seventeenth century.³³ At this time, the *askerî* were a nobility, partly produced, partly impaired by the growing state as well as the divisive impact of market relations. It was comparable to the service nobility that all expanding states in history have tried to create and promote in spite of or over the old nobilities. The success of the early modern age in this regard was distinguished from all earlier cycles of centralisation by its long-term irreversibility, and the relative importance of the non-military element.

Accordingly, it is known that the real sensitivity of the Ottoman state was about military claims of the old nobilities in conquered lands, and even those encounters did not preclude concession and compromise. On a different front, in recognising status claims based on knowledge and religious charisma, the Ottoman state was more liberal within its ideological parameters, i.e., as the self-appointed leader of Sunnite Islam and Hanafism. Its patronage of the *sadat* parallel to the consolidation of Sunnite orthodoxy in the sixteenth century should be seen in this light. And once it managed to impose its terms as the sole dispenser of status and titles, i.e., once it made central certification the sole legitimate basis for claiming rights and privileges, usurpation of titles was a natural and common response provoked by its intrusions and increasing demands. In fact, Ottoman treatise writers of the seventeenth century, mourning the lost purity of the *askerî*, would have found kindred hearts in contemporary Europe, where statesmen had to spend much time in order to purge

32. Meriwether, ‘The Notable Families of Aleppo’, 86. Also Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 153; M. el-Aziz Ben Achour, ‘Les Šarifs à Tunis au temps des Deys et des Beys (XVII^e-XIX^e siècle)’, *Oriente Moderno* n.s., 18/2 (1999), 346.

33. *Ferman/kanunname*, dated 1013/1605, in Ö. L. Barkan, ‘Edirne Askeri Kassamîna Ait Tereke Defterleri, 1545-1659’, *Belgeler*, 3 (1966), 4-5; order dated Cemaziyelevvel 1038/1628, in Uzunçarşılı, *İlmîye Teşkilâtı*, 125-26. Note also the explicit listing of all *sadat* among the *askerî* in a survey held in order to “differentiate (*tefrik*) [the *askerî*] from the *reaya*” (Ayntab Court Registers # 48A/167-61, Zilkade 1108/1697).

the nobility of usurpers, which points to the parallel dynamics of state-building in this era.³⁴

Certainly, both the *askerî* and the *sadat* were internally much differentiated in economic terms, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but this alone does not disqualify them as a nobility. Wealth most often accompanied status in pre-modern societies as well, but they were not identical, and were even less so during this period. Ottoman nobilities were not immune to the post-Black Death upswing, political and economic, that swept across Eurasia.

What we observe in Ottoman lands during this period can be characterised as a contention between economic stratification and status stratification, the former rising to challenge the primacy of the latter. While the classic system of stratification was designed in a way to allow upward mobility through military might and command of (sacred) knowledge alone, economic and fiscal transformations of the post-classical era opened the way for mobility on the basis of wealth, thus bringing economic status and politically defined status closer to one another. It appears that once the *askerî-reaya* grid was stretched, the principle of descent (*neseb*), as opposed to merit, too, assumed a new and more celebrated function in the Ottoman socio-political constitution.³⁵ The way the *askerî* was originally defined did not mean descent ceased to function as a customary principle of status allocation. Amidst the transformations of the post-classical period, it surfaced back into the heart of the Ottoman official hierarchy, and combined with economic power, it helped burst open the *askerî-reaya* divide, or redefine it.

Several studies written in recent years have demonstrated that provincial notables were tied to the imperial centre within a framework of common interests through posts, entitlements to waqf stipends, tax-farms. The rapprochement that these studies reveal has allowed us to see decentralisation and state-making in a different light. I suggest that the spread of *seyyidship* in the eighteenth century be considered along the same lines, which would shed further light both on the phenomenon of rapprochement and title usurpation itself. This paper has pointed out the temporal overlap between a number of developments: the liberal attitude regarding title conferrals, the promotion of the *nakibüleşraf* and the cult of Muhammadan nobility in the capital, rise of the local *nakibüleşrafs*, and presence of a large body of *sadat/ashraf* among the notables, all at a time when the notables were in general on the rise. There is not enough evidence to postulate causality between them but there is enough evidence to justify further investigation.

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34. Clark, *State and Status*, 172-76.

35. A specific parallel to this can be observed in the increased importance of descent in the *ulema* hierarchy from the seventeenth century onwards: M. C. Zilfi, *The Politics of Piety: The Ottoman Ulema in the Postclassical Age (1600-1800)* (Minneapolis 1988), 212-14. Compare Ben Achour, ‘Les Šarifs à Tunis’, 346, where the author associates title usurpation with periods of stability rather than periods of reconstitution of the elites.