

**A. CLOT, *Suleiman the Magnificent*, London, 2012, Saqi Books, 399 pages,  
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The 16<sup>th</sup> century was an era of great monarch's. In Austria, the Habsburg Emperor Charles V. managed to claim Iberia for the imperial crown. In Russia, Ivan the terrible was busy subjugating the former Tatar khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan, and in England, Henry the VIII began building up Britain's naval power. These figures have received sufficient scholarly attention from western historians. Disappointingly, few western scholars have written biographies of Suleiman the Magnificent. This seems odd, given Suleiman was arguably the most accomplished leader of the Early Modern Age. Andre Clot's 'Suleiman the Magnificent' seeks to correct this injustice. His work is split into two. The first half deals chronologically with the major events in the sultan's life, from his early campaign against Belgrade to his failed attempt on Vienna. The author also covers the sultans later disagreements with his son, Mustafa, and ends with Suleiman's death on campaign in the Balkans. The second half of the book deals with thematic issues, painting a picture of life in 16<sup>th</sup> century Turkey, as well as outlining the fragilities in the Early Modern Ottoman economy.

One of the great strength's of Clot's work is his ability to show the magnificence of the Ottoman court. Utilizing accounts from Habsburg ambassador's, Clot is able to show how ceremonies were carried out under canopy's "dazzling with gold" with "the finest cloth of Greece and Venetian velvet, silver plates full of gold pieces, Russian fur's and Arab mares" (A. Clot, *Suleiman the Magnificent*, 2012, 77). Perhaps even more importantly, Clot is not afraid to tackle some of the more controversial issues of Ottoman rule. Most historians have criticized the Ottoman devşirme system as cruel, barbaric and unjustifiable (the devşirme involved the Ottoman's taking young Christian males away from their families, converting them to Islam, and training them to become loyal slaves of the sultan). Clot provides another interpretation, arguing the devşirme gave peasant boys a chance to rise through the ranks of the Ottoman hierarchy. "Most accepted willingly the opportunity it gave their sons, poor little peasant boys, of attaining, perhaps, the fabulous position of Grand Vizier" (Ibid, 214). Clot was one of the first to highlight the positive aspects of the devşirme, and for his originality, he should be commended. But see also the *The Janissaries* (E. Goodwin, 1994, 1977, Saqi books) who makes the same point p. 37.

Historians of Ottoman history have also argued the decline in western scholars ottoman power can be traced back to Suleiman's reign. It was Suleiman, they argue, who failed to curb inflation, depopulated the countryside, and who spent too much money on unnecessary foreign wars. Clot is right in arguing this is too rigid an approach to take. He correctly points out that inflation was crippling all the major European economies of the time, and if the state had began to weaken during the latter years of Suleiman's reign, the empire still managed to last another

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three centuries, defeating Russia at the battle of Pruth (1711) and attempting another attack on Vienna. Whilst Clot's work does tackle some myth's about Suleiman's reign, he is also guilty of perpetuating others. For example, Clot believes that if Mustafa had taken over the Caliphate after his father "*many things would have been different*" (Ibid, 310). (Suleiman killed Mustafa, accusing his son of treason). What Clot fails to realize is opponents of Suleiman's policies deliberately talked up the 'warrior like' traits of Mustafa to make Suleiman's actions seem all the worse. Moreover, subjective 'what-if' history is never a useful tool when analyzing the past.

Clot also has a tendency to overstate the Sultan's role on the battlefield. The author argues that during the battle of Mohacs, "*the Sultan himself fought with great courage. Arrows and lances hit him, only to bounce off his breastplate*" (A. Clot, *Suleiman the Magnificent*, 58). Exaggerating the role of the sovereign on the battlefield is not new, and Clot is in good company. Russian historian Kamenskii argues the only reason Russia triumphed over Sweden at the battle of Poltava was because Peter I was present, (A. Kamenskii, *The Russian Empire in the Eighteenth Century: Tradition and Modernization*, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1997, 101) whilst Fairfax Downey argued "*The star of victory seldom shone on Suleiman's enterprises unless the sultan himself was there to command*" (F. Downey, *The Grand Turke: Suleiman the Magnificent: Sultan of the Ottomans*, Willowick: Minton, 1929, 34). Moreover, the author fails to footnote where he procured this evidence from, meaning it is impossible for historians to validate his claims.

Which leads us into the greatest criticism of Clot's work; his unwilling to footnote his account the evidence. Footnoting remains an important tool in any historiographical work, for it allows researchers to check the evidence employed by the author unwillingness. By failing to provide footnotes, Clot does not allow us to do this. This is a great shame, for the author undoubtedly uses a wide range of sources. A cursory glance at the bibliography (377-85) is testament to this although no primary sources are cited. Nonetheless, the authors failure to provide sufficient footnoting is disappointing to the interested and attentive reader.

In sum, this book does have several flaws. The author has a tendency to perpetuate historical myths, and is sometimes guilty of engaging in 'subjective' history. Despite these shortcomings, Clot should be commended for his attempts to tackle controversial issues. Moreover, the writer does cover all the major moments in Suleiman's life, from the domestic to the military, which makes this book invaluable for any one who wishes to learn more about Suleiman the Magnificent. For too long western historians have focused on rulers such as Henry VIII, Francis I, and Charles V. By writing about Suleiman, Clot gives the western reader access to one of the most important characters of 16<sup>th</sup> century European history, and for this, he should be applauded.