

Yılmaz, Mehmet Şakir. 2022. “*Koca Nişancı*” of *Kanuni: Celālzāde Mustafa Çelebi, Bureaucracy, and “Kanun” In the Reign of Suleyman the Magnificent (1520–1566)*. Istanbul: Akademik Kitaplar. 295 pages. ISBN: 9786057147172.

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“*Koca Nişancı*” of *Kanuni: Celālzāde Mustafa Çelebi, Bureaucracy, and “Kanun” in the Reign of Suleyman (1520–1566)* represents a significant scholarly contribution to the study of Ottoman history. Based on Yılmaz’s dissertation (Bilkent University, 2006), the book offers an in-depth examination of bureaucratic culture and administrative developments during the reign of Sultan Süleymān the Magnificent (d. 974/1566), focusing particularly on the career of Celālzāde Mustafa Çelebi (d. 975/1567), a central figure in the legal and bureaucratic apparatus of the empire.

Yılmaz sets himself apart from other works by shifting the scholarly focus away from the traditional emphasis on military and political narratives and instead foregrounding the administrative backbone that maintained the empire’s longevity and centralization. The book shows how Celālzāde, as *Koca Nişancı* (Chancellor), played a central role in the development of Ottoman bureaucracy, law and governance. His career was central to the codification of the *Kanun* (law) under the rule of Sultan Süleymān (r.1520–1566), which according to Yılmaz was crucial to the success of the empire. Yılmaz draws attention to Celālzāde’s contributions, which have been overshadowed by more famous figures or simplified by previous scholarship. This makes the book a fresh and nuanced addition to the field of Ottoman studies.

The book comprises 295 pages, including the bibliography and the table of contents, and is divided into an introductory section, three main chapters and a concluding section. This is followed by two appendices. The appendices contain a comprehensive list of Celālzāde’s works and their respective copies, as well as a *berāt* (imperial edict) written by Celālzāde for Grand Vizier Pargalı Damat İbrahim Pasha (d. 942/1536). This introductory chapter provides an overview of the central administration and bureaucracy of the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century, with a particular focus on the reign of Sultan Süleymān. During this period, the empire’s bureaucratic apparatus was consolidated and expanded. The introduction explains the role of influential bureaucrats such as Celālzāde in shaping the legal and political system of the Ottoman Empire. Celālzāde made a remarkable contribution to the development of the chancellery and the legal framework, thereby strengthening the established classical structure of Ottoman administration.

Chapter I provides an analysis of Celālzāde’s family background, his academic qualifications and his rise within the imperial bureaucracy. His career began with his

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appointment as *Reisü'l-Küttâb* (head of the secretaries) under Grand Vizier İbrahim Pasha, a post he held from 1525 to 1534. He held the role of *Nişancı* from 1534 to 1556 and again briefly from 1566 to 1567. The second chapter examines the development of *insha*, the official administrative language of the Ottoman state. This chapter traces the development of *insha* from its beginnings before 1500 to its refinement in the 16th century, highlighting Celâlzâde's expertise in the genre. His contributions significantly influenced Ottoman prose and formal communication practices within the empire's bureaucracy. Chapter III analyzes the concept of '*kanun*' (law) during the reign of Sultan Süleymân, with a particular focus on the central role Celâlzâde played in its codification and organization. The term '*kanun*' originally referred to tax registers, but later became a broader legal framework. Celâlzâde's work in compiling the imperial edicts and legal texts was central to the structuring of the Ottoman government.

In the conclusion, the lasting influence of Celâlzâde on the political and legal landscape of the Ottoman state in the 16th century is emphasized. Yılmaz identifies the synthesis of Islamic legal principles and the pragmatism required for imperial expansion as the most important features of his legacy. Celâlzâde is credited with codifying legal and administrative structures that contributed to the legitimacy and stability of the Ottoman state. His career is set as an example of the significant influence of bureaucrats on the administration and political thinking on the legitimacy of the Ottoman Empire under the rule of Sultan Süleymân.

The book effectively functions as a biography, detailing Celâlzâde's life, career and contributions in the context of Ottoman bureaucratic and political history. It outlines his family background, his education and his rise through various bureaucratic functions. By placing Celâlzâde's work within the broader development of Ottoman administrative systems and legal codes, the biography shows how his contributions helped to shape key aspects of Ottoman government. Through a detailed examination of Celâlzâde's career, Yılmaz offers insights into his role in the codification of laws and the development of bureaucratic structures at the height of the Ottoman Empire.

Yılmaz sheds new light on Celâlzâde's legacy by offering a corrective to previous scholarship that has either oversimplified or neglected his contributions. Unlike other studies that either exaggerate or demonize historical figures, Yılmaz presents a balanced account. Celâlzâde is neither glorified as a hero nor vilified as a villain. Instead, he is portrayed as a pragmatic and influential bureaucrat whose work was essential to the administration and political thinking about the legitimacy of Ottoman rule. The book emphasizes how Celâlzâde's contributions to the codification of laws and the development of the bureaucracy helped to legitimize and stabilize the empire by bringing together Islamic legal principles with the practical realities of imperial rule.²

One of the book's greatest strengths is its detailed analysis of the bureaucratic processes that supported Ottoman rule. Through the career of Celâlzâde, Yılmaz provides

2 For a more detailed analysis of this book, see the interview with Mehmet Şakir Yılmaz, Ottoman Bureaucratic Culture and Political Thought. URL: <https://www.jhiblog.org/2024/07/17/ottoman-bureaucratic-culture-and-political-thought-an-interview-with-mehmet-sakir-yilmaz/> (accessed 5 March 2025).

a nuanced understanding of how the Ottoman state functioned across vast geographic regions and maintained its centralized authority over diverse populations. This focus on bureaucratic culture offers valuable insights into the administrative foundations that underpinned the empire's success during the reign of Sultan Süleymân.

Despite its strengths, the book is not without its weaknesses. One notable problem is the organization of the narrative. At times, Yılmaz digresses into tangential discussions that, while interesting, distract from the main theme. A tighter structure would have improved the coherence and readability of the text. In addition, the extensive use of Ottoman Turkish archival sources without accompanying translations may be challenging for readers unfamiliar with the language, limiting the book's accessibility to a wider audience. The inconsistent spelling of key terms – such as Nişancı (variously written as Nishanci, Nishancı), Rüstem (also as Rustem), Vizier (also as vizir) and Süleymân (also Suleiman, Suleyman) – further complicates reading.

In terms of theoretical engagement, Yılmaz's book presents a comprehensive and detailed account of Celâlzâde's contributions to the field of bureaucracy and the law. While this concentrated approach offers valuable insight into Celâlzâde's role within the Ottoman imperial framework, integrating additional theoretical perspectives on bureaucracy and legal history could potentially enhance its appeal for a wider academic audience. In this regard, the book is comparable to Kaya Şahin's *Empire and Power in the Reign of Süleymân* (Cambridge University Press, 2013). In contrast to Yılmaz's detailed account of Celâlzâde's legal and bureaucratic contributions, Şahin's work employs a broader interdisciplinary lens, situating Celâlzâde within the political, cultural, and diplomatic dimensions of the period. Both approaches contribute significantly to our understanding of Celâlzâde's influence in Ottoman history, with each approach offering unique insights.

This book is intended for scholars of Ottoman history, with a particular focus on those engaged in the study of bureaucratic and legal developments within the Ottoman Empire, as well as political historians interested in the dynamics of power within the early modern Islamic world. By engaging with primary sources and providing a focused study of Celâlzâde's career and writings, Yılmaz offers valuable insights to academics. His comprehensive historical analysis and utilization of novel archival sources indicate that he has effectively engaged with the scholarly community.

Ultimately, Yılmaz's work is a valuable contribution to Ottoman studies, especially for those interested in the administrative and legal reforms of the 16th century. Although the book's dense narrative and specialized focus may limit its accessibility, it offers essential insights into the workings of the Ottoman bureaucracy and the role of key figures such as Celâlzâde in maintaining the administrative and legal structures of the empire. Yılmaz's examination of the development of the Ottoman bureaucracy during the reign of Sultan Süleymân offers a critical perspective on the mechanisms of imperial governance during a crucial era in the empire's history. By placing Celâlzâde's career in the context of broader Ottoman reforms, the book offers a balanced view that emphasizes his pragmatic and influential role in shaping Ottoman governance.