

SUMMARY*

Ahmed Yazıcıoğlu is a fifteenth-century Turkish writer about whom not much more is known than that he belonged to the Bayramiyye order of dervishes, and lived and worked in Gelibolu. His sobriquet, "Ahmed the Lifeless" (Bicân), was a reference to the ascetic lifestyle of this dervish and scholar. The authorship of various religious and encyclopaedic works is ascribed to him; these were so successful that they have been copied and printed right up to our own day. Yazıcıoğlu, who advocated the use of the Turkish language, was widely known as a translator of works written in Arabic, and a compiler of light reading matter. His two most famous books are *Envârü 'l-Âşıkîn*, "The Lights of the Lovers of God", and *Dürr-i meknûn*, "The Hidden Pearl". His *Dürr-i meknûn*, an undated cosmographical work which has been called the first Ottoman encyclopaedia, may well have initiated a new tradition of Turkish storytelling. During the centuries that followed, the book served as a model for imitation and elaboration, and in the eighteenth century parts of it were even translated into French. Moreover, during my research for this thesis, I discovered that a well-known tract on *Eşrât-ı sâ'at*, "The Signs of the End of Time", was in fact a copied version of Chapter 17 of *Dürr-i meknûn*.

Envârü 'l-Âşıkîn is the more famous of the two works; it appeared in print and five hundred years later, in 1973, there was even a modern Turkish version. The work is of a mystical nature, containing guidelines for an ascetic and thus righteous way of life, illustrated by lives of the prophets and other stories.

Although he is a well-known and highly regarded author, we have no serious study devoted to his life and work. Surprisingly, the scant attention given to Ahmed has centred on the eschatological images in his work. This tendency is illustrated by the work of Stéphane Yerasimos, who characterizes Ahmed Bicân as an apocalyptic: in his view, Ahmed's treatment of the Signs of the End Time is in reality a description of the social decline which he witnessed around him.

The aim of the present study was to re-examine the use which Ahmed Bicân made of eschatological materials in his work, whereby three considerations played a role. The first was a practical one. Virtually nothing is known about Ahmed's life, his writings or his motivation and, moreover, there are no scholarly editions of his works. The second consideration is methodological. In the fields of Islamic studies and Turkology, it is still customary to interpret historical personalities, great events, and dates given in round figures from the period 1400-1600 in apocalyptic terms. This approach has long since been abandoned, or at least modified, by modern mediaevists and theologians. Thirdly, there was the issue of the extent to which eschatological themes found in the texts were meant to be apocalyptic. This can only be established after one has defined the relationship between the textual images and their traditional background.

Chapter 1 is an inventory of the relevant primary and secondary sources. Chapter 2, which is based on this inventory, sketches Ahmed's life and works, largely on the basis of *Envârü 'l-Âşıkîn* and *Dürr-i meknûn*. Despite the nature of the two works

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— the former is a guidebook for those aspiring to piety and the latter a cosmography — on closer analysis they appear to contain a number of interesting statements about Aḥmed's personal circumstances and feelings. For example, we read that he perceives the town of Gelibolu, where he lives, as a coastal stronghold in the holy war, and that he rejects the adoration of wells, deer and trees in "the land of Rum". In addition, new light is shed on Aḥmed's personal view of salvation and ascetic practice. And, finally, on the basis of Aḥmed's references, it is now possible to reconstruct the works with which he might have been familiar. Here, not surprisingly, one is struck by the author's strong bond with the world of mysticism. It also appears that he knew his "classics", as many of the volumes on the shelves of his 'imaginary library' were used in early Ottoman medreses. Aḥmed also displayed an interest in the Lives of the Prophets, and geographical and encyclopaedic works. Understandably, he consulted far fewer works on *uṣūl al-fikh*, *kalām* and *'akā'id*.

Because it is important to establish the date of *Dürr-i meknün* — before or after 1453? — when discussing Aḥmed's vision of the Last Judgement and his reaction to the fall of Constantinople, considerable attention is given to this problem in Chapter 3.1. I examined a number of leads in attempting to establish a possible date, and although I have yet to find unequivocal evidence on this point, it is likely that the work was written in 1455-56. With respect to the historical events pertaining to Constantinople, I came to the conclusion that they do not play any role in Aḥmed's work.

In Chapter 3.2, the current "Year-One-Thousand approach" is subjected to a critical examination. One is tempted to provide texts that deplore the decline of the social fabric with a *historische Anlaß*, but over the years the controversies about identification and methodology in this question have led to a more critical and cautious approach to these texts. Theologians and mediaevists have also raised the fundamental question of whether we have perhaps consistently filled in the wrong circumstances behind such texts. No such reconstructions have yet been undertaken in the field of Ottoman studies or Islamic studies in general. Not only methodological objections, but also the primary sources related to Aḥmed's day also present serious problems. Information from the early Ottoman period is extremely scarce, and what material there is makes little or no mention of apocalyptic expectations. The main danger which invariably presents itself when a particular view anticipates the study of textual witnesses is that one's image of the period is not based on data from the source, but rather that the source is interpreted according to a preconceived notion about the period. To illustrate this pitfall, I subjected a number of traditional propositions in this field to a critical examination, and ultimately rejected them. This does not, however, mean that no apocalyptic expectations played a role in the Ottoman Empire between 1400 and 1600. But when it comes to establishing the *Zeitgeist*, I do call into question the representative nature of works by individual authors who may well have been inspired by the apocalypse. In the case of the texts under discussion here, I have attempted to demonstrate that it is impossible to draw from them the kind of conclusion that was drawn in the past and is still the customary approach today. If one assumes that both statements of an apocalyptic nature and traditional images contain a message related to the

contemporary situation, then one must also clarify the anti-imperial and apocalyptic motives of, say, at-Ṭabarī, al-Mas'ūdī, Muslim and Yāqūt. On the basis of the even distribution of eschatological material over the countless works which have come down to us, one could easily construct a useless model consisting of one long apocalyptic expectation which existed in the Islamic world between 770 and 1970. The dreadful era of adversity to which these works are ascribed was anything but exceptional; indeed, it would be difficult to find a single year in the history of the Ottoman Empire between 1300 and 1700 in which there was not a similar accumulation of misery.

Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate how, in my opinion, texts containing eschatological and possibly apocalyptic material should be approached. In Chapter 4, the structure and the images used by Aḥmed in his treatment of the End Time in *Dürr-i meknün* are analyzed, in order to establish how this text is related to traditional eschatological images in Islam. Working from a standardized paradigm for such a treatise, but taking into account that authors are free to concentrate to a greater or lesser degree on certain stages or to alter the sequence in which they occur, I was able to establish that Aḥmed Bīcān, confined himself almost completely to a discussion of worldly events. Less than twenty percent of his text deals with the downfall of the world proper and the supernatural aftermath. The other eighty percent is devoted to the final awesome events taking place on earth, including the great signs which will precede the destruction of the world. This section is in turn divided into three subsections: 1. *The Time of Decline* (34%); *The Great 'Canonical' Signs*, such as the *Mahdī* (57%); and 3. *The Malḥama* (9%).

An exploration of sections 1 and 3 demonstrates how faithfully Aḥmed reproduced the time-honoured expectations about the End Time which appear in the various main sources, albeit in his own words or by means of stylistic techniques such as 'Koran mirroring'. There are no references to persons or events of his own day. Thus the eschatological materials have not been re-interpreted in a contemporary, topical sense. In other words, Aḥmed did not employ his images as one might expect an apocalyptic to do.

From Section 2, the great signs, I chose the Deccāl or "Anti-Christ", a protagonist in Islamic eschatology who has received surprisingly little attention from Orientalists. I first divided the story of the Deccāl into 48 parts, in order to trace the manner in which the various topoi and motifs are related to the classical sources, associations and semantic fields in Islam. It appears that the appearance, deeds and vicissitudes of the Deccāl are strongly influenced by Judeo-Christian and possibly ancient Iranian traditions. I am referring here not only to a superficial exchange, but also to the phenomenon whereby the basic ideas represented in the underlying images influence and even motivate the behaviour of the Deccāl. This is in fact the explanation for his physiognomy, his gigantic size, the fact that in some stories his description includes elements of another giant ('Ūḡ ibn 'Anāk or Og), his role as deceiver, and the manner in which he meets his end. Chapter 5 examines the role of his mount, the donkey: in view of the role of the donkey as an accomplice of God's adversaries, there is more here than a simple reference to the Messiah. I found evidence to support my theory that there are suggestions of the figure of Dahak, the

apocalyptic Iranian "snake tyrant". There is also an initial attempt to analyze the complicated story of the witness/martyr who is ultimately murdered by the Deccāl.

During the research for this part of my thesis, I also discovered more about AḤmed's technique as a storyteller. As regards his use of eschatological materials, the conclusion is the same as in the previous section, namely that it can be demonstrated that AḤmed made no attempt to relate traditional images to the events occurring around him. At the same time, however, we can well imagine the pleasure experienced by readers of his books throughout the ages. In the light of the nature of AḤmed's oeuvre, however, it would not do to overrate his editorial originality; we may assume that he made extensive use of passages from existing Arabic textbooks, or from compilations of such passages. Nonetheless, the portions he selected from this material and the manner in which he adapted them are evidence of an original, perspicacious and even witty mind. This is illustrated by his account of the Deccāl which, however compact, is complete and well-rounded. AḤmed made the story so concise by winding its narrative thread around just one slender time line. Each event follows immediately upon the preceding one, and there is no broad time band in which parallel actions take place. He also avoided the temptation to include a great many anecdotes, which would have diluted the well-wrought and concentrated nature of his treatise. He used only those stories which serve to illustrate the essence of what he is trying to say, and he had the gift of being able to distinguish between main issues and side issues. The indirect references to the Deccāl as a giant or a talking baby, and his role as a seducer are worth mentioning here.

At the end of this thesis, we return to the question of the extent to which AḤmed Bīcān's era is reflected in the eschatological part of his work, and what conclusions we can draw about the depth of his *Naherwartung*. On the basis of the texts which I have studied, I must conclude that AḤmed was not an apocalyptic, and that the eschatological materials that he made use of are so general, interchangeable and timeless that they cannot be seen as the image of an existing society, the decay of which might have been witnessed around 1450 by an anxious AḤmed Bīcān. On the other hand, it has proved possible to gain a better insight into AḤmed's personal eschatology and his vision of future salvation, notably through his *Envārü 'l-Āşīkîn*. The central theme here is the battle of the individual against sin and spiritual laxity, as well as the inexorable march of time towards a final reckoning for all mankind. AḤmed Bīcān is forever conscious of this Day of Reckoning, and he is tortured by the thought that in their daily lives most people are not aware of the Last Judgement, at which each of us will be judged individually! It is of vital importance to liberate oneself from the deadly embrace of this world, so that one does not ruin one's chances of gaining the World to Come. A knowledge of God's ordinances is crucial: knowledge saves mankind, because one acts according to the knowledge one possesses, and good works bring salvation. Many generations of pious believers and great scholars have studied this question, and in their writings they allow their readers to share their insights and experiences. This knowledge from the past for the benefit of salvation in the future is formulated in Turkish, the language of AḤmed's own people, because he wants to instruct them in a life dedicated to Islam, the *dīn al-wasat* (religion of the "middle way"), the indispensable link between this world,

ad-dunyā, and the life in the hereafter, *al-āhira*.

Part II of this dissertation consists of six appendices, which provide an overview of the known manuscripts of *Dürr-i meknûn* and the titles of the eighteen chapters in the book. There is also a translation of Chapter 17, "About the Signs of the Hour", accompanied by a facsimile of the same chapter from the Leiden manuscript, together with a brief commentary. For purposes of comparison, this is followed by a Dutch translation of a passage dealing with the Time of the Last Judgement from *Envârü 'l-Âşikîn*. The final appendix consists of an impression of what Ahmed Bîcân's library might have looked like.

And finally, in view of the often widely differing textual variants which came to light in the course of this limited 'preliminary study for an edition' (Part II), the first and foremost task now to be undertaken is the realization of critical editions of Ahmed's works, a task which I have already taken upon myself with respect to *Dürr-i meknûn*. I am confident that further research into the works of Ahmed Bîcân Yazıcıoğlu, as well as those of his brother Mehmed and father Şâlih, will substantially enrich our knowledge of many aspects of the early Ottoman period.