EVLİYÂ ÇELEBİ  
(b. 1611; d. > 1683)  

LIFE  
E.Ç. was born on 10 Muḥarram 1020/25 March 1611 in Unqapanı (İstanbul) as the son of the imperial goldsmith (quyumcubaşı) Derviş Mehmed Zilli Ağâ (d. 1058/1648). He traces his paternal genealogy through Aḥmed Yesevî (d. 562/1166) all the way back to the imams of early Islamic history, a pedigree reflecting the folk stories of gâzîs and dervishes preserved in Ottoman popular memory. At several points in his work E.Ç. claims that his ancestor Ece Ya’qûb (13 c.?) originated from the Transoxanian region Mahan and came to Anatolia with Ertuğrul Gâzi (d. 687/1288), trying to unite in his person the two main legitimating strands of the Ottoman dynasty, namely the Turkish and Islamic heritage. Even though his claim that his father was a warrior of faith under Süleymân I (926-74/1520-66) is anachronistic, his statement that he contributed as a court jeweler to pious works of art during the reign of Aḥmed I (1012-26/1603-17) is more reliable.  

Born an Abkhaz and brought up as a slave-girl in the palace of Aḥmed I (d. 1026/1617), E.Ç.’s mother had family relations with leading statesmen and provincial governors of the time (e.g., Melek Aḥmed Paşa (d. 1073/1662) was her cousin), a fact which was to play a decisive role in his future life. As various references to relatives and real estate (e.g., a çiftlik in Sandıklı) found in his travelogue clearly indicate, E.Ç. had relatives in Istanbul as well as in several places like Demirci (Demirci), Kutahiye (Kütahya), Brusa (Bursa) in Anatolia.  

E.Ç. learned the essentials of a religious education at the undistinguished medrese of Ḥamîd Efendi in Zeyrek (İstanbul). He then graduated from a school for Koran recitation, and attended public lectures in mosques as well as private lessons in the palace led by figures such as Keçi Mehmed Efendi (d. 1054/1644), a teacher of Kâtib Çelebi (d. 1067/1657). There are hints that E.Ç. frequented intellectual circles and made the acquaintance of well-known figures of the time such as Zekeriyâzâde Yaḥyâ Efendi (d. 1055/1644).  

In 1046/1636 E.Ç. was introduced to Murâd IV (1032-49/1623-40) and began his studies in a wide variety of arts and sciences at the Palace School (enderûn). By the time he left the Palace as a cavalryman (sipâhî) (1048/1638), his extraordinary abilities as a witty and well-informed entertainer had been fully developed. E.Ç. was especially talented in music, Koran recital, and story telling and described himself as a bachelor (mücerred), mystical seeker (dervîş), humble (faqîr), and as someone who has many friends and interests (hezâr-âşînâ). Being deeply religious, he appears to have been affiliated with the Gülşenî branch of the Ḫalveti brotherhood. However, he seems to have had strong sympathies for the Bektâşîyye and Mevleviyye as well.
E.Ç.’s family background, his urban education as a perfect gentleman, and his astonishingly complete knowledge of the Ottoman lands make him one of the most paradigmatic representatives of well-educated Ottoman individuals of his period. Even though the date of his death cannot be determined with certainty, his records concerning the unsuccessful second siege of Vienna (1094/1683) led most researchers to the conclusion that he passed away after this date. There is general consensus that he died in Egypt where he had been living for some time.

Practically all evidence of E.Ç.’s life is based on his own account. Since he was not a state official his name does not appear in official documents and registers. The only document known to mention him is a list of Ottoman embassy members to Vienna in 1665 in the Austrian archives. Although his pecuniary circumstances were satisfying, he made his living as a member of the mobile households of Ottoman grandees, many of them his kinsmen. A closer look at his itineraries reveals that he was in most cases on “official journey.” His position can be generally described as a combination of entertainer (muşāhib, nedîm), muezzin and courier. His religious functions included the recitation of the first ezān after victories.

In many cases he overtook a variety of other responsibilities such as ransoming Ottoman prisoners, collecting arrear taxes, war materials, and funds for different objectives. In Hungary he acted as a distributor (qassām) of booty (1073/1663). Military engagements were part of his life. He took part in a strife against the Ma‘noglı in Lebanon, intervened during the Celâlî revolts in Anatolia (1057/1647), witnessed the siege of Zerinvar (Yeňiqal‘e) at the border to Croatia and participated at the Battle of St. Gotthard, leaving an extremely detailed report. After the completion of the conquest of Crete (Girîd) (1080/1670) he composed a fetnamê. He participated in the embassy of Qara Meḥmed Paşa (d. 1095/1684) to the court of Vienna (1075/1665) in the capacity of muezzin and was sent twice to Tabrîz (Tebrîz) to conduct negotiations with the Safavid governor (1057/1647 and 1065/1655).

There are, however, several significant important sections in his itinerary which were not commissioned by any officials. Some of these are simple deviations of the well-beaten track. Remarkable are his privately organized journeys outside the Ottoman realm. Among these are his trip to Russia in the retinue of the Crimean Khan Meḥmed IV. Girây (d. 1075/1666) and his journey to the Südân, which had the character of full-fledged, adventurous exploration.

His ambition to get a survey of the entire Ottoman world is particularly visible in the ninth volume of his Seyâhatnâme, where he visits a number of Aegean Islands far away from the pilgrimage route. Nevertheless the astonishing completeness of E.Ç.’s work was mostly the result of numerous official and semi-official journeys. Towards the end of his active period of more than forty years of traveling E.Ç. had seen nearly all judgeships (qaţâ) of the Empire. Guided by his maxim “travel, trade, and pilgrimage” (seyâhat, ticâret, ziyâret), E.Ç. also made pilgrimages to shrines. In Anatolia alone he visited more than 200 holy places. He also paid homage to shrines in ʿIrāq.
and finally performed the hajj to Mecca in 1082/1672. Maghreb and Cyprus are the only important omissions in the Seyahatname.

WORK

1 Seyahatname

E.Ç.’s great travelogue Seyahatname is a first person narrative in ten volumes, which combines the autobiography of its author with the most extensive geographical description of the Ottoman world. The Seyahatname serves as a source for linguistic investigations in that it includes information about various foreign languages and for the development of Ottoman prose. Although most authors have exploited the Seyahatname in one way or another, the fact remains that “the fundamental unit of the Seyahatname is the entire work … It has a unified plan and style.” Its quasi-symmetrical structure using the descriptions of Istanbul (vol. 1) and Cairo (vol. 10) as “frame-books” as well as frequent cross-references within the work indicate that the Seyahatname was composed with the help of a diary or other provisional notes.

The descriptions of towns (evesf) follow a standard scheme and includes in most cases information concerning the town’s history (including the legendary pre-Islamic past and the date of Muslim conquest), fortifications, mosques and other Islamic foundations with special attention to commercial buildings and bath-houses, as well as its inhabitants, their manners, speech and clothing, excursion spots, etc. Though the figures E.Ç. gives in his account are mostly limited to Muslim population, he also makes references to Christian and Jewish institutions, particularly to conspicuous monasteries and churches beyond the Ottoman core lands (e.g., in Echmiadzin [Uç Kilise], Košice [Kaşa], and Vienna [Beç]).

There are blank spaces throughout the work, including paragraphs lacking names, numbers as well as headings. Other chapters describe only a small number of Friday mosques, skip the other buildings and special features altogether, but concentrate on “talismans” (mutasalamât) and sacred and holy places (ziyâretgâh). A striking aspect is E.Ç.’s predilection for statistical surveys which combine in many cases realistic numbers for inhabitants, buildings, etc. However, he sometimes also includes noisome exaggerations contradicting his own descriptions.”

E.Ç. was concerned not only with the physical and monumental surface of the Ottoman world but also with a fuller understanding of the “Ottomaness” of the well-protected domains. He clearly discriminates the Ottoman Rûm elite from the other subjects of the Sultan, a feature which is particularly noticeable in the tenth volume of the Seyahatname focusing on Egypt.

During his stay in hundreds of towns and cities and thousands of villages E.Ç. seems to have been in contact with almost the complete leading class of his era, including sultans, grand viziers, provincial governors, military leaders, and an immense number of local notables. Important personalities among these are Ottoman sultans such as Murâd IV (1032-49/1623-40), Ibrâhîm (1049-58/1640-48) and Mehemed IV.
(1058-99/1648-87) and rulers like Meşhmed Girây Hân and Abdâl Hân of Bidlis (d. 1065/1665?). Paşas such as Ketenci Ömer (d. > 1035/1625-26), Defterdarzâde Mehmed (d. 1066/1656), Silahdar Murtaç (d. ?), Qara Mehmed (d. 1095/1684), Özdemir Osman (d. ?), Şpirsiy Mufaf (d. 1065/1665), Köpekli Mehmed Paşa (d. 1072/1661) and Ketçudur İbrahim (d. ?) played a major role as his protectors. E.Ç. spent 12 years in the service of Melek Ahmed Paşa and followed this kinsman during his governorships at Sofia (Şofya), Diyârbeikr (Diyarbakır), Van, Osijek (Özi) and Bosnia (Bosna).

Seyâhatnâme is a valuable source for many aspects of Ottoman politics, society, and culture. Even though E.Ç. compares his work with that of “other historians” and is classified by Bursâli Mehmed Tâhir and Franz Babinger among others as a historian, nonetheless, the Seyâhatnâme cannot be regarded as a ‘history.’ Yet, the quality of the work as a first-rate ‘historical source’ is beyond question. According to Murphey and Dankoff E.Ç.’s “partisan remarks enrich rather than distort our understanding of Ottoman realities. Moreover, precisely by recording controversial and deeply felt contemporary opinion Evliya’s account achieves its unique standing and value as a source for the study of seventeenth-century Ottoman society and politics.” E.Ç. does not hesitate to decry Ottoman corruption, oppression and injustice both implicitly (by comparing the conditions during his time with those in previous decades, for example, with the age of Sîleyman) and explicitly.

Despite his general superior attitude toward non-Muslims, E.Ç. concedes that the Europeans are better skilled in building fortifications and complains about the decay of Islamic pious foundations in comparison with flourishing Christian institutions such as a monastery at Chios.

Seyâhatnâme is not exclusively based on its author’s personal experience, who had a superficial knowledge of the contemporary canon of historical literature. In addition to oral traditions, E.Ç. used and, to a lesser degree, cited universal histories (Tabari), Ottoman (Ahmedi, İbrahim Peçevi, Mustafa Ali, Şolaqzade, Sa‘düdün) and Arab chronicles (Maqrizi), and referred rather vaguely to müverrihân or müverrirhin. Indefinable are indeed various Persian, Hebrew and Turkish histories (Farisi, Isra’ili and Türkî tevârihleri). E.Ç.’s standard reference for pre-Islamic history in general and for Greek history in particular is the Ta’rîh-i Yevvân, an Arabic version of the Testimonium Flavianum, a history of the world from its beginnings until 941-42 A.D. E.Ç.’s knowledge about this work seems to be limited to its title. He moreover mentions maps and atlases among his sources, such as an Atlas Minor, a “Geography” (Çografa) and a “World Map” (Papamont), but it seems, they, too, were not actually used by him.

E.Ç. used bio-biographical compilations (‘ulema tezkireleri) up to 5Aṭā’î extensively and referred to nearly contemporary sources such as Mehemed 5Aṣiq’s Menâ-zirû’il-avâlim. He had also access to lists of buildings constructed by Mi’mar Sinân. The first volume of the Seyâhatnâme contains a list of fiefs (tmâr) according to a qâ-
nünnâme (supposedly from the reign of Süleyman I, but more probably from a redaction by Ayn-ı Ali Efendi under Ahmed I), which E.Ç. completed using relatively current data after the conquests of Mehemet IV in Hungary. Extremely valuable are the documents containing catalogues of craftsmen in Istanbul and Cairo. Beyond this variety of sources E.Ç. consulted, or claimed to have consulted, court records, foundation deeds and other official records. E.Ç. copied many building inscriptions on the spot, but also simply used the chronograms from various manuscripts without comparing them with the originals in situ.

Research History

The ‘discovery’ of the manuscript by Josef von Hammer, his first efforts to translate some chapters from the first volume of the Seyâhatnâme, and the articles he published in the Fundgruben des Orients had initially no deep impact on research. The Müntehabat-ı Evliya Çelebi were small selections from the first volume, which appeared four times between 1259/1843 and 1279/1862 in Istanbul and Bülâq. These selections confirmed the general view, which considered the Seyâhatnâme an entertaining fairy tale. Nevertheless some leading intellectuals of the period such as Ahmed Vefiq Paşa (d. 1308/1891) had an idea of the importance of this ‘authoritative traveler’ (seyyâh-i muhaqqiq).

The first volume of the Seyâhatnâme appeared as an edition for İqdâm under the responsibility of Ahmed Cevdet and Necib ʿAşim [Yazıksız]. The editors proudly announced what they considered “a glorious national monument for the Turkish and Ottoman World,” while Necib ʿAşim praised E.Ç.’s empirical acquisition of knowledge through traveling. No other text edition during the Hamidian period was so closely connected with the notion of ‘progress.’ The seventh and eighth volumes were satisfactorily edited by Kilisli Rifat [Bilge] based on a larger number of available copies, whereas the editions of the ninth and the tenth volumes in Latin script are only passable. Despite being based on the unreliable Pertev Paşa manuscript, the İqdâm edition and its many paraphrases in modern Turkish remained the most cited text of E.Ç. for nearly a century.

The first period of research began with Franz Taeschner’s seminal study of E.Ç.’s itineraries in Anatolia. At that time the Seyâhatnâme was predominantly used as a source for historical-topographical studies, mainly in Southeastern Europe (Hungary, former Yugoslavia, Rumania, Greece). Numerous monographs and articles were devoted to specific regions and towns. Translations with more or less extensive commentaries appeared in many European languages. Cavid Baysun’s article in İslam Ansiklopedisi (1948) and Meşkure Eren’s doctoral dissertation on the sources of volume I (1960) opened new paths for research. Numerous popular editions and selections were published one after the other in Turkey (in Özön, Koçu, Danışman, and Parmaksizoğlu). The most reliable edition in modern Turkish was published by Yücel Dağlı et. al.
R.F. Kreutel’s thesis (1971) that the manuscript series S (see bibliography) is an autograph reflects the general consensus among scholars. Yet, it is contested by P. MacKay, who reviewed those manuscripts in 1975. It is also generally acknowledged that all editions and investigations should be based on the first eight volumes of these series, since the last two volumes show minor variations.

There are also a few studies devoted to questioning the credibility of specific descriptions and itineraries, showing, for example, that E.Ç. did not participate in the first Cretan campaign in 1055/1645. There are conflicting opinions as to the exactness of his descriptions of buildings. While M. Kiel argues that “he was much more precise and systematic than all other early travellers, eastern or western,”13 Dankoff’s impression is that “apart from fortifications and bridges” Evliya attempted to be “precise and systematic” only for the living Islamic monuments of the places he visited, such as mosques, medreses, tekkes, public baths, hospitals, fountains, etc. When it comes to churches and monuments of bygone civilizations, Dankoff argues, “he tends to omit them altogether … or else he falls back on fancy and cliché.”14 Understandably E.Ç.’s account on Hungary, where he spent six years, “more time than in any other outlying province of the Empire,” is extremely valuable.15

In recent years philological and linguistic studies as a precondition for a critical edition have gained more importance. R. Dankoff made the greatest contribution to the flourishing branch of Evliya-philology (“Evliology”) with his editions, translations, surveys of the context, glossary of rare and foreign words (with Semih Tezcan), and finally with a comprehensive appraisal of E.Ç.’s life and work.

Seyāhatnāme is by far the best investigated text of Ottoman historiography and literature and remains a great source of information for all branches of Ottoman studies. The international character of the Ottoman research community is reflected in the rich bibliography of works published in nearly 20 languages.16

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   (5) Kiel Universitätssbibliothek cod. ms. ORO 386-387 (vol.1-3) 
   (6) London, Royal Asiatic Society, Ms. 23 (vols. 1-4). 
   (7) Manchester, John Rylands Library, 142 (vols. 4-5). 
   (8) Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. Mixt 1382 (vol. 1).

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   **Editions:**


There are also several popular editions of the work.

Selective General Bibliography

1 According to Dankoff: typical/archetypical.
4 See the chapter on Mûşul, vol. 4, fol. 339-403.
5 See his “statistics” concerning the mosques and other buildings in Istanbul, vol. 1, passim.
8 See vol. 9, 60b.
9 See the list of the books in the library of Abdül Hân in vol. 4, 275a-276b.
10 Stéphane Yerasimos, La fondation de Constantinople et de Sainte-Sophie dans les traditions turques (Paris, 1990), 65.
11 “For reasons remaining unclear, none of the relevant official records have surfaced up to date; and we depend on Evliya Çelebi and other literary men for a notion of their contents.” Robert Dankoff, An Ottoman Mentality: The World of Evliya Çelebi (Leiden, Boston, 2004), xvi.
13 See Bruinessen and Boeschoten, ibidem, 62.
17 For a complete bibliography of publications on Evliyâ Çelebi up to 1991, cf. Klaus Kreiser, ibidem (endnote 16).

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