



EYÜP SULTAN AND THE GJRDJNG OF  
THE SWORD CEREMONJES OF  
OTTOMAN SOVEREJGNS  
(TAKLJD-J SEYF)



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Throughout history, whenever a new sovereign took the reins of power in his hands, ceremonies that today we call 'coronation' or 'enthronement' were held for the purpose of declaring that the new ruler was the lord of all and every thing. These ceremonies were renowned for their characteristic pomp and circumstance. It was all this pomp that brought people to respect the entity, both as an individual and as an institution, and to become its subjects. At the same time, the happiness and pride related to being the subjects of such a powerful and magnificent sovereign were carefully emphasized. In addition to these sociological observations, one must also note the presence in such ceremonies of religious factors like religious symbols and the clergy; the purpose of this was to underscore that the authority over society was based on divine permission. A good example of this is the Sed coronation ceremony of ancient Egypt, where Buto the goddess of the North and Nekhbet the goddess of the South were assumed to have given the pharaoh his crown. In later ages, the kings were crowned by the Pope or by people representing the Pope. Even in the 20th century, when the Shah of Iran Rıza Pehlevî was crowned, he kissed the Quran in the hands of the chief cleric İmam Cuma.

The situation in the Ottoman Empire, which lasted more than six centuries, was totally different. As long as the Empire was in existence, the sultans descendant of Osman Gazi, members of the Ottoman Dynasty (Hanedan-ı Âli Osman), organised *cülus* (accession) ceremonies symbolising their accession to the throne and *bi'at* (oath of allegiance) ceremonies symbolising the acceptance of their sovereignty. Since throughout history, crowns have never existed among the regalia of the Turks, the Ottomans did not use them and thus coronation ceremonies were not carried out. Nevertheless there were approximate Ottoman versions of coronation ceremonies: the girding of the sword (*taklid-i seyf*) ceremonies, mostly performed at Eyüp, and the ensuing sword procession (*kılıç alayı*). It is these

*taklid-i seyf* ceremonies that are the subject of the present article.

The facts that these sword processions were magnificent, that the swords used were among the Islamic sacred relics (*emanat-ı mukaddese*), that the people girding the Sultan with the sword were very high level clerics and that the place where these ceremonies were held was a sacred place like Eyüp, reinforce the thesis that this ceremony was the Ottoman version of coronation ceremonies. Professor Uzunçarşılı, while describing Ottoman court organisation, has clearly stated that the girding of the sword was equivalent to European coronations. Also, in his book titled *Saray ve Ötesi* (The Palace and the Rest), Halid Ziya Uşaklıgil compared the girding of the sword to coronation ceremonies and pointed out that the magnificence of the ceremony was not matched by a magnificence of the route of the procession, concluding that, "The sword procession, the inner meaning and symbolism of which was similar to the girding itself, should have been of the same nature. Or else it should have been abolished." Osman Ergin, writer of *Mecelle-i Umur-u Belediye* (Code of City Administration Affairs) has studied the girding of the sword from the point of view of Akhi religious trade guilds, coming to the conclusion that this was very similar to the ceremonial girding (*şed bağlama*) of the apprentices with the sash (*şed*) symbolising the guild, by the masters of the trade. In his study titled *Bir Türk Kurumu olan Ahilik* (Akhi Guilds as a Turkish Institution), Prof. Dr. Neşet Çağatay has stated that these similarities were a question of perception.

The main point we should clarify, as far as our subject is concerned, is why it was chosen to underline the sovereignty of the Sultan by means of the *taklid-i seyf* and thus why the main object of the ceremony was a sword. The choice could have fallen just as well on other weapons like the *gürz* (iron mace) or the *şesper* (six edged halberd), which traditionally denote wealth, nobility, rank and supremacy or on sacred symbols like the *tuğ* (horsetail attached to a helmet

or flag-staff) or the *alem* (banner or metal object like a crescent or star, attached to a flag-staff) and the ceremony could have been named accordingly. To understand this point, we should study the conceptual meaning of the sword in Turkish society, within the context of social, political and military history.

As it is well known, the sword has very ancient origins and a symbolic value present even in our days in certain ceremonies. This deeper meaning and symbolic value of the sword was even stronger in Turkish societies. The fact that the sword had a definite place in society as a cultural value, since the very earliest Turkish societies and in addition to its more prosaic function as a weapon, put it in a privileged position among weapons. There are many examples underlining the importance of the sword in pre-Islamic Turkish societies. A statue of a Hun warrior on horseback, found in the Second Pazırık fortification of the Altays, had a sword hanging on the saddle. References to the sword are present in a very old manuscript written with the Göktürk script and a Göktürk inscription mentions how Kül-Tigin killed six warriors with a lance and the seventh with his sword. As is the case in many other Turkish tribes, the Kırgız also used the sword as an element fortifying an oath of allegiance. During such ceremonies they placed a sword between the two people swearing allegiance to each other by saying *Bu gök girsin, kazıl çıksın* (Let it enter clean and come out bloodied). In the shaman religion, which was one of the main Central Asian religions of Turks, when the shaman prayed for safety from Erlik Han, the evil spirit, he described him as having a sword made of 'green iron'. This is the first example of the sword being mentioned in a religious context. This same concept appeared during Islamic times as *Seyfullah* (sword of God).

After the Turks' conversion to Islam, the sword gained in importance, both conceptually and as far as its shape was concerned. In *Kutadgu Bilig* (Yusuf Has Hacib 1070, Section

VI), which was one of the first works of the Turks' Islamic period, the vizier ÖGDÜLMÜŞ, called on his ruler KÜNTOGDI ILİĞ: "Oh my ruler! Three things are necessary for the rule of a country and of a state. A sword on the right hand, a favour to be bestowed on the left and sweet words in the mouth. A pen will be as much needed as the sword is. A conqueror of provinces, conquers them with his sword, but administers them with his pen." As one can clearly see from these expressions, a strong relation existed between the sword on the one hand and the social, political and cultural aspects of society on the other. Kaşgarlı Mahmud mentions the sword in a proverb included in his work *Divan-ı Lüğati't Türk*:

"*Kılıç tatıksa iş yunçır, er tatıksa er tunçır.*" (If a sword gets rusty, it will not serve its purpose, if a warrior gets rusty, his blood will degenerate)

In the Book of Dede Korkut (a Turkish epic) Bamsı Beyrek, who had fallen in love with Banu Çiçek, swore by asking to be "carved up by my own sword" if he failed. Also in the Book of Dede Korkut, Salur Kazan stated, "I have taken my invincible sword and fought with it, consumed with the love of the religion of Muhammad", thus pointing out not only the strength of his sword, but also the fact that he has been using it for a noble purpose. When Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror, after the conquest of Istanbul, swore to safeguard the colony in Galata, he did not omit mentioning his sword, by swearing on the 'honour of the sword with which I am girded'.

These examples stressing the significance and importance of the sword can be repeated many times over, in contrasting fields like popular poetry and Divan (classical) poetry, Central Asian wall frescoes and Anatolian folk paintings, tombstones and monumental structures, symbols on flags or banners and the Ottoman coat of arms, names of persons and of places. All these examples could even be subjects of separate studies.

While on the one hand the concept of sword was being enriched in meaning, its physical aspect was also being enriched by means of intricate decorations. These decorations took the shape of various patterns, inscriptions carved with great care within medallions or cartouches, in the kûfi, talik, sülüs or celi sülüs scripts and sometimes of a mühr-ü Süleyman (a geometrical figure, Solomon's seal). The inscriptions included the name and title of the owner of the sword or elements that were thought to instil sanctity to the sword and power to both the sword and the warrior, like some of the names of God (*İsm-i Celâl*), verses from the Quran or hadis (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad or recordings of his acts). The most famous *hadis-i şerif* (noble hadis) in this context, is the one that refers to the Prophet Muhammad's sword Zulfikar, which he is said to have given to Hz. (abbreviation of Hazreti used as a title for exalted personages) Ali during the battle of Uhud (625), when his own sword broke and to the bravery of Hz. Ali with this sword: "*Lâ Fetâ illâ Ali, Lâ Seyfe illâ Zulfikar*" (There is no one braver than Ali and there is no sword but Zulfikar). As it has become clear after all this, the nature of the sword girding ceremony called *taklid-i seyf* and the fact that a sword was considered as the symbol of transfer of power, instead of the more usual crown, were not coincidences. They were consequences of the sanctity of the sword, which went as far back as pre-Islamic times and to the intimacy between sword and Turks.

Many sources state that the *taklid-i seyf* and the following sword procession were done on the basis of the *Resm-i Dirin-i Selâtin* (ancient ceremonies of the Sultans) or of the *Kanun-u Selâtin-i Kiram* (laws of the noble Sultans), but do not specify what these rules and laws were, nor when they started to be applied. Nevertheless Professor Uzunçarşılı informs us that in the Nîmeti Efendi Regulations and in some protocol books, there are sections devoted to sacrificial slaughters and to the granting of favours during these ceremonies. In addition to

this, it is also certain that the ceremony was organised according to the wishes of the new Sultan, in accordance with traditions.

Both the sword processions and the way the Sultan arrived at and left from Eyüp Sultan changed through the centuries. Some Sultans came by sea and left overland, while others came overland and left by sea. The use of these two different routes was a visual way of underlining the fact that the Sultan ruled both the lands and the seas. Sultan-ül Berreyn ve Hakan-ül Bahreyn Es'sultan İbn'üs Sultan (Sultan of the lands and Lord of the Seas, Sultan son of a Sultan), this was one of the titles of the Sultans that were spelled out in written documents, before his name or his tuğra (monogram).

After the conquest of Constantinople, these ceremonies were always held at Eyüp Sultan. The choice of this place as the site of these ceremonies was due to the desire to be in the good graces of an extremely important Muslim Saint like Hz. Eyyüb el Ensarî, who would, it was hoped, have helped the Ottoman Sultan during his lifetime and interceded for him in the after-life, to the desire to ascend to the throne with Hz. Eyyüb el Ensarî as heavenly witness, but also to the desire to underline the religious aspect of Ottoman rule and thus increase its authority. It was because of this last point that the individual girding the Sultan with the sword were personages like the *Nakib-ül Eşraf* (title which means chief of the descendants of the Prophet and which was given to the representative at Istanbul of the Sherif of Mecca), the *Şeyh-ül İslâm* (Ottoman official responsible for matters of canon law) or other very high level Ottoman scholars. As examples we could mention Emir Şemseddin Mehmed Buharî for Murad II, Akşemseddin for Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror, Üsküdarlı Aziz Mahmud Hüdai for Murad IV, Nakib-ül Eşraf Kazasker Abdürrahim Efendi for Abdülmecid, Şeyh'ül İslam Hayrullah Efendi for Abdülhamid II and finally the Senussi Sheikh Seyyid Ahmed, who came to Istanbul from Bengazi on a submarine,

for the last Sultan Mehmed VI Vahideddin.

The swords used for these ceremonies were the swords kept as part of the *emanat-ı mukaddese* (sacred relics), which had belonged to the Prophet Muhammad, Hz. Ömer or Halid Bin Velid, or swords of previous Sultans like Osman Gazi, Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror and Sultan Yavuz Selim. While some Sultans were girded only with one of the sacred swords, others were girded with both a sacred sword and the sword of one of their ancestors. This served the purpose of underlining the fact that the new ruler, just like his ancestors, held both spiritual and temporal power. As spiritual ruler he was the Caliph of Muslims and *Zıllullah-ı fil Âlem ve fil Arz* (God's shadow on the Universe and on the Earth). As temporal ruler he was the sovereign of all lands and people under the domain of the *Hanedan-ı Âli Osman* (Ottoman Dynasty).

We may summarise by coming to the conclusion that by means of the *taklid-i seyf*, the Sultan declared his authority in matters religious and national, with the Sacred sites of Eyüp as a backdrop and in this way not only legitimised his authority, but also in a way established a solemn covenant, which had divine approval, between ruler and subjects.

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