On August 8, 1648, Sultan İbrāhim was dethroned and subsequently murdered by a palace clique that claimed he was mentally unstable. The leader of the palace clique was a certain Şofu Meḥmed Paşa (d. 1649), a vizier who was also known as Mevlevi Meḥmed Paşa on account of his allegiance to the Yenikapı Mevlevi Lodge, a Sufi lodge favored by Istanbul’s janissaries. Şofu Meḥmed Paşa retained his vizierial position after the coup, now offering his services to the seven-year-old sultan, Meḥmed IV. An archival serendipity allows us to see the bundle of imperial affairs that İbrāhim’s seven-year-old son Meḥmed inherited on the day of his enthronement. Several grand vizierial communications (telḥiş) attest to the final discussions between Sultan İbrāhim and his vizier, in which the grand vizier assumes an instructional tone. On one occasion, for instance, the grand vizier explains to the sultan the purpose of the small note papers attached to petitions: they serve to summarize the petitions for the sultan, so that he would not need to read all of them at length. On other occasions, the grand vizier objects to the sultan’s wish to send the Crimean khan a third letter in a row, reminding the sultan of the diplomatic inappropriateness of such an act. Yet another vizierial note politely warns the sultan to attend the imperial council’s meetings in a timely manner, intimating “the sultan’s early arrival would multiply the council’s merriment upon seeing the sultan.”

Notably, through these communications, the vizier also instructs Sultan İbrāhim—and later, his successor, Meḥmed IV—in the intricacies of staging a political spectacle, a fine art that had become a crucial part of the ruler’s
craft. For instance, when the sultan ordered the execution of a certain criminal in front of the Tower of Justice, the vizier overruled the imperial order. The said criminal was of low standing (alçak ballû)—so lowly in fact that he remained nameless throughout the correspondence—and his execution thus deserved only a modest scene. Therefore, the vizier instructed that the criminal be executed in his neighborhood of residence instead. The vizier’s note goes on to state an important principle of urban space and the decorum of political spectacle:

Execution in front of the Tower of Justice must be reserved for major figures. [For instance,] it is appropriate to punish the bandit named Bıçakçıoğlu in front of the Tower of Justice; he has been arrested in Rûmîli and he is about to arrive. The likes of that bandit will be handled [in this manner]. 3

The Bıçakçıoğlu in question had been involved in one of the most notoriously bloody revolts of the seventeenth century. On February 5, 1623, a group of ʿulamā gathered at the Fatih Mosque to demand the deposition of Sultan Muştafa I, whom the ʿulamā—and some soldiers who supported them—deemed insane and thus unfit to rule. When soldiers supporting Muştafa I’s tenure broke into the mosque, the protest turned into an armed clash. Nineteen mosque-goers were killed. Adding insult to injury were the rumors that of these nineteen Muslims killed at the mosque, nine were madrasa students and three were sayyids, or descendants of the Prophet. 4 Bıçakçıoğlu was involved in this scandalous clash on the side of the ʿulamā, and therefore ranked high in the hierarchy of Ottoman rebels, far above common criminals whose death penalty merited merely a neighborhood spectacle. In this manner, the sultan and his vizier worked on various levels of urban spectacle for bandits, rebels, and criminals, sometimes resorting to ignominious parading (teshir) before an execution. 5

Early modern Istanbul was never short of political spectacles. In fact, according to the ethical-practical wisdom of the day, one of the major signs of good government was the effective management of “the theater of the city.” 6 Starting in the 1580s, however, the monopoly of the imperial court on staging spectacles was threatened, and eventually broken, by new political actors, such as the janissaries, scholars, artisans, and the urban population. In this chapter, I study the emergence of the politics of the crowd in the late seventeenth century with special attention to the theater of the city—namely, the urban public space that became the site of daily politics in the early modern period. 7
I start with a discussion of Ottoman imperial festivities as early modern ceremonial inventions that facilitated the participation of urban audiences in politics at a gradually increasing level. I then turn to the late sixteenth century, when staging political spectacles ceased to be an imperial prerogative. By focusing on select urban rebellions and contemporary narratives about them, I underline the gradual expansion of the political nation with its conceptual ramifications. In other words, the focus of the chapter is the connection between political events of the century and political thought. Did the regular participation of publics in politics throughout the seventeenth century accompany a change in the Ottoman conception of sovereignty?

The question of the link between political thought and public political action—specifically in the form of protests, rebellions, and violence—has an important place in early modern historiography. For a long time, crowd action and violence were understood not as politics but as a failure or suspension of politics, which was itself understood as effective governance of the populace. E. P. Thompson’s 1971 article, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” challenged this notion by underlining that crowd action was made possible by shared notions of legitimacy, in this case the shared belief that a political system was considered just only when it could enable access to affordable food.8 Thompson’s insights were later reinforced by the anthropological turn in history, when crowd action began to be interpreted through the lens of ritual and symbolic action.9

The relationship between political action and political thought has been taken up by Ottoman historians in recent decades. In her 2007 article on the social significance of justice, Linda Darling explicitly linked the concept of moral economy with the Near Eastern notion of justice, which established the rights of subjects to safety, justice, and subsistence in return for taxation. Darling’s study can be seen as a culmination of Ottoman historians’ work on the importance of justice as a political theory informing the contractual relationship between the sultan and his subjects, with implications for government officials at all levels.10 In the same year as Darling’s article, Cemal Kafadar criticized the portrayal of janissaries as “rebels without a cause,” underlining instead their possible political motivations and social alliances. Most notably, he underlined that the protests attested to the janissaries’ claim to being constitutional parts of the Ottoman regime and integral parts of the imperial decision-making processes.11 Invoking a tradition of janissary involvement in succession that went back to the deposition of Mehmed II in 1446, the
janissaries considered their interventions in Ottoman succession processes not as disruptions of politics, but as a political right engrained within the ideal Ottoman order. In these interventions, they also sought and acquired fatwas from the ʿulamā in order to construe their interventions as legitimate, even necessary, political actions. Hüseyin Yılmaz notes the regularity with which fatwas were issued to legitimize dethroning sultans, resulting in the coinage of a specific term for these fatwas: "the deposition fatwā (hâl fetvâsı)."¹² Read closely, therefore, the political events of the seventeenth century attest to a significant change in political ideas, shifting toward the reconstruction of imperial sovereignty as a partnership among multiple claimants to legitimacy and agency.

In this chapter, I argue that the political events of the century and their interpretations by contemporary Ottoman authors mark an ideological shift away from the discourse of the unity of sovereignty to a notion of multiple sovereignties. Whereas the former political language assumed that all forms of political power stemmed from the House of Osman by way of delegation, the seventeenth-century public conceptualized political power as a partnership among various actors with their own constitutional rights and the capability to delimit the power of the center. The chapter also argues that the public nature of the events was not incidental, but essential to their political agendas. The century saw the rise of new forms of political spectacle and symbolisms that were intended to achieve mass mobilization, an important feature of early modern politics. The increasing significance of mass mobilization through spectacle and religious discourse propelled political negotiations on the question of “good versus bad publics,” or the question of who had the right to political agency. The gradual normalization of the political participation of urban publics (cumhûr, şehirli) is an important milestone in the formation of the early modern public sphere. This normalization and justification were largely the product of religious discourse. I therefore end the chapter by arguing that the religious debates of the period were extensions of this larger debate on the right to public political participation, which is to say, on civility (Rûmilik).
The miniature, drawn by the historian Matraççι Naşuh, portrays the square as a collection of memories of imperial glory, clearly centering elements of Byzantine architecture, most notably the three remnants of the Byzantine Hippodrome: the Theodosian Obelisk, the Masonry Obelisk, and the Serpent Column (fig. 1).\textsuperscript{14} Much ink has been spilled on the significance of the Hippodrome as the main public square of the Ottoman capital and the chosen stage of the Ottoman elite for ceremonial and everyday encounters with the city’s public.\textsuperscript{15} Yet, while these imperial aspects of the Hippodrome have often been noted by historians, Matraççι Naşuh’s depiction reminds us of a
forgotten monument right at the heart of the Hippodrome. This monument, shown at the right corner of the public square, is a small open-air prayer space (mescid) built to commemorate a Sufi saint, the Bayrāmî-Melâmî sheikh İsmâ’il Maşükî, executed by the Ottoman order in 1539. This monument served as one of the multiple sites of commemorating the martyr-sheikh, who was widely believed to be the victim of an imperial injustice, across various sections of early modern Istanbul.

How are we to understand the presence of a memorial to an act that to some urbanites symbolized an episode of injustice right by the most significant public square of the early modern Ottoman capital? In this section, I argue that the early modern public square was not the site of unadulterated imperial might, but a space of heterotopia. In other words, it was a space “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.” In order to understand the Ottoman public square as a space where conflicting, incoherent narratives of the Ottoman order overlapped, I turn to a closer analysis of the monument to the martyr-sheikh. The narrative and architectural lives of this unusual monument, I argue, strongly suggest the heterotopian nature of the early modern public square, which juxtaposed elements of imperial ideology to its discontents. This heterotopian character applies not only to the public square as a spatial entity, but also to the public sphere as a political phenomenon.

Istanbulites kept alive the memory of one martyr-sheikh of Istanbul, the aforementioned Bayrâmî-Melâmî sheikh İsmâ’il Maşükî (d. 1539), well into the nineteenth century through multiple narrative traditions and through a number of monuments that were to be erected and renovated during the early modern period. The earliest of such spatial souvenirs to the martyred sheikh was the Üçler Prayer Hall, an open-air prayer space that one follower of the deceased sheikh, the janissary Irâk.îzâde Hasan Efendi, dedicated to the memory of Maşükî. According to Evliyâ Çelebi, the site was believed to be the exact spot where Maşükî was murdered along with his disciples. Maşükî, also known as Oğlan Şeyh (literally, the “boy sheikh”) on account of his young age and beautiful countenance, was one among multiple Bayrâmî-Melâmî sheikhs executed by the state throughout the sixteenth century.

The divergence between the many contemporary sources makes it hard to ascertain the exact circumstances that led to his execution. While the witness testimonies recorded in the court records accuse Maşükî of professing radical criticisms of revealed religion, intra-Bayrâmî sources argue that
Maṣūkī actively sought martyrdom by scandalizing the public with his preaching. According to the latter, the sheikh’s provocative style was inspired by Maṣûr al-Ḥallāj (d. 922), the first martyr of Sufism. Ḥallāj was an itinerant preacher and a controversial Sufi, whom posterity considered to be executed for public pronouncements of *ṣuḥaṭīyyāt*, utterances of mystical ecstasy that were intended to shock the hearer and shake them out of their torpor and indifference. The best-known of all *ṣuḥaṭīyyāt* (mystical utterances) in the history of Sufism—namely, “I am the Truth (enā’l-ḥaqq)”—is associated with the name of Ḥallāj al-Maṣûr.19 For experiential Sufis, Ḥallāj remained an ideal figure who challenged societal conventions on the path of divine love. According to Ottoman authors, the Bayrāmī sheikh Īsā’īl Maṣūkī aspired to the station of Ḥallāj’s martyrdom, and hence disregarded the Bayrāmī order’s practices of secrecy that entailed keeping the more controversial *ṣuḥaṭīyyāt* limited to a private circle.20 The content of Maṣūkī’s preaching is not known with certainty. It is known, however, that the sheikh gathered influential people around his person, having a particularly noteworthy following among janissaries and sipāhis. It is plausible that this political influence was what brought the sheikh onto the radar of the authorities.21

Regardless of the doctrinal and social circumstances surrounding Maṣūkī’s execution, the state’s handling of the sheikh remained a controversial topic for a long time. The chief mufti of Süleyman I, Ebussuūd Efendi (d. 1574), for instance, had to respond to a query about the legal status of “he who claims that the person known as Oğlan Şeyh, who was murdered, was murdered unfairly (zulmen).”22 Even more dramatic stories of the sheikh’s unfair treatment circulated in Istanbul well after his death. For instance, a passage by Evliyā Çelebi (d. ca. 1684) attests to the association of Maṣūkī’s execution with unfairness in the minds of (some) Istanbulites. According to him, when the sheikh was executed with his disciples, the sultan was at a garden in the Rumelihisarı. At the moment of execution, the sheikh and his disciples appeared on the sea before the sultan, performing the *samāʿ* with their severed heads in their hands. The sea was effervescent that day. The miraculous event showed the sultan that the dervishes were killed unfairly (*nā-ḥaqq kere*).23

As Aslı Niyazioğlu emphasizes, supernatural tales about the martyred sheikh’s severed head emerging in the Bosporus circulated in Istanbul as part of a lore of injustice.24 Two memorial sites were persistent, palpable reminders of this history of injustice against the city-dwellers. The first site was initially formed by simply enclosing the location of the sheikh’s execution with guardrails. In
1552, this open-air prayer space was converted to a “winter mosque,” that is, to a properly built mosque. An endowment that paid the stipends of the mosque employees was created by Murad III. The Üçler Prayer Hall continued its presence at the Hippodrome until 1865, when it was destroyed by a fire. Even after the mosque was destroyed, the sheikh’s tomb was renovated and survived for some time after. In 1879/80, a female devotee renovated the tomb (meshehd) and reinstated a tombstone that commemorated Isma’il Maşûkî as a martyr. The second memorial site was in Rumelihisarı, and the location where the sheikh’s unburied body was believed to have emerged near Rumelihisarı became the site of yet another memorial. A chief secretary and later chancellor of the imperial council, Şiddîk Ahmed Efendi (d. 1662), erected a mosque at this burial location in the seventeenth century. In other words, visible memorials to the martyred sheikh continued to dot Istanbul’s landscape from the sixteenth well into the nineteenth century.

The architectural commemoration of Maşûkî’s martyrdom embodies the heterotopian nature of the early modern Ottoman public square. This heterotopian nature seldom receives attention in historical scholarship, which focuses mainly on the imperial ideology’s self-narration through architecture. Despite its many virtues, the historiographical emphasis on imperial ideology has portrayed the Ottoman state of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries almost as a state-without-society. An emergent historiographical trend, however, aims to reintroduce the publics to sixteenth-century political history. For instance, in their recent work on Ottoman Istanbul, Kate Fleet and Ebru Boyar have challenged the prevalent notion that the courtly protocols of imperial seclusion characterized the essential nature of Ottoman rule. Instead, they emphasize that while rituals of seclusion were significant practices, they must be studied in conjunction with the public-forming practices of the Ottoman center rather than in isolation. Through regularly occurring rituals as well as improvised public appearances, the Ottoman elite inserted themselves into the daily fabric of urban life in the capital, projecting visibility and even omnipresence.

Throughout the early modern period, the sultan and the members of his court developed rituals and practices of visibility in the capital. One of these practices was the Friday processions of the sultans and their retinues. On these ceremonial processions to imperial mosques, sultans accepted petitions from subjects in need of the sultan’s benevolent justice. This ritual sought to cultivate the image of a ruler who was accessible to his subjects and was committed to dispensing justice. In fact, the practice of being visible every Friday
was so central to the sultan’s image as a dispenser of justice and protector of his people that when certain sultans diverged from this practice, they were severely criticized by contemporary observers. Another practice of imperial visibility was “going out in disguise” (tebdīle çıktı), where the sultan inspected the city in disguise and punished those who disobeyed his laws. The earliest accounts of imperial disguise in the Ottoman Empire go back to the reign of Selim I (d. 1520), yet the practice really took off in the seventeenth century, as attested in chronicles as well as lively folk stories about unsuspecting Istanbulites speaking with too much frankness to the sultans in disguise. Despite mentions of these practices, the literature on the public-forming practices of the Ottoman center prior to the seventeenth century remains highly limited.

Imperial festivities remain the most closely studied Ottoman practice that embodied the public performative aspects of political power. Imperial festivities were grandiose urban events staged on the occasions of key events within the dynastic family, such as circumcisions of princes or marriages of princesses. These turning points in the dynastic family’s history were construed as events of public significance through festivals, in which the Ottoman palace presented itself as a prosperous and generous benefactor to the city and its population. While Ottoman chroniclers, true to form, insisted on framing imperial festivities as an “ancient custom,” these large-scale public celebrations were in fact creations of the early modern age. These lavish festivities were carefully choreographed to reflect the Ottoman center’s narrative of power and might through exhibiting the empire’s riches. The sultan himself played a central role as the center of gravity. His public appearances were immortalized via pictorial and textual descriptions, which described the sultan and the Ottoman order in the loftiest terms. For instance, the messianic language of Ottoman political writing found a metaphorical parallel in descriptions of the imperial festivities, “through cosmological metaphors, likening the sultan to the sun, the members of his retinue to the constellations of stars, and, by implication, the Ottoman polity itself to a reflection of the heavenly order.”

Aspects of the sultan’s appearance were carefully planned and calculated in order to project the pomp and grandeur worthy of the sun of the universe. For instance, Gülru Necipoğlu notes that the sultan’s horse was starved and suspended in the air before public appearances, to ensure glorious gravity.

The extremes to which the imperial center went during the backstage preparations only attest to the significance of the public imperial performance and of the gaze of the audience. The political significance of these festivities
is best understood by casting them as public-forming ceremonies rather than as unilateral projections of state authority. To understand the true force of the public-forming aspects of the rituals, Kaya Şahin suggests reconstructing the sultan as a performer, who “expended considerable time, energy, and resources to please the different audiences he addressed.” The urban publics were thus involved as audiences whose divergent expectations were to be met by the staged performances. Furthermore, during festivities, the palace and the elite occasionally shared the stage with the urban public. Emphasizing the significance of the urban aspects of festivities, Derin Terzioğlu focuses on the role of the public not as mere onlookers approving the existing order, but as a subversive presence. Urban participants experienced the suspension of ordinary hierarchies and normative strictures and were transformed into unpredictable agents during these events. These experiences, it is important to note with Terzioğlu, were not accidental; they were facilitated through official policies such as public permission (izn-i ʿāmm)—namely, a state of lenience and suspension of moral judgment ordained by the grand vizier. In short, the imperial festivities should be taken as case studies of the public-forming impact of the early modern Ottoman imperial practice.

Yet, despite these public-forming impacts of the early sixteenth-century political practice, visual and textual representations of power remained true to imperial decorum, which demanded centering the sultan and observing a neat hierarchy in the representation of the other performances. This decorum, closely observed throughout most of the sixteenth century, placed a deceptive, even partisan veneer on public festivities. In the 1580s, however, a representational shift, which also reflected a shift in political practice, took place: the streets of the city began to take center stage in textual and pictorial depictions. This representational shift has been closely studied by Çiğdem Kafescioğlu. Kafescioğlu’s study on the changing pictorial representations of urban festivities in the early modern era examines the Book of Imperial Festival (Surnâme) by a certain İntizâmî, an illuminated manuscript dedicated to visualizing the 1582 imperial festival. This late sixteenth-century work differs from earlier productions in that the center stage of the depictions, conventionally reserved for the sultan and his close retinue, was now occupied by “artisans and other urban groups, professionals and performers.” The vivacity of the public square as depicted in the 1580s was quite different from the symbolic order of Matraḵčis Istanbul, where “the city as a whole was reduced to a secondary role” by filling the page with imperial monuments and not representing the
streets at all. The change in pictorial representation was reflective of the broader changes taking place in the Ottoman public sphere, where new social groups found visibility in the political stage. The next section turns to the most dramatic examples of this novel culture of public visibility: urban protests and political spectacles.

**THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY PUBLIC: REBELLIONS AND SPECTACLES**

As the foregoing survey shows, the early modern public square was a space of heterotopia: a space for order and disorder, of imperial might and public festivity, of the embodiment of the ideals of justice and memories of injustice at the same time. This complex understanding of the public square parallels the Ottoman public sphere in the abstract sense. The framework of a porous, ever-shifting state-society boundary explains the dynamic realm of the early modern Ottoman state much more satisfactorily than the exercise of a premeditated, unswerving project of the Ottoman imperial power. As of the 1580s, however, Ottoman politics was shaped by new and brave manifestations of broader public participation in politics, most dramatically taking the form of frequent urban rebellions. The Hippodrome, the stage of imperial festivities, came to be known as “the meeting place of rebels” by the end of the century. This transformation was the result of new claimants to political power, who formed coalitions and took to public squares in order to demand changes in officeholders, even sultans, and their official policies particularly in the fiscal realm. In short, as Baki Tezcan phrased it, the seventeenth century was a period of “the expansion of the political nation,” a key transformation that would characterize Ottoman politics for the rest of the early modern period.

Much ink has been spilled on the dramatic nature of the political and social changes that took place in this period following the end of Süleyman the Lawgiver’s reign in 1566. Historians have long debated the nature of this change, and specifically, whether we can apply the term “decline” to that time period—a term that Ottoman observers used generously and vigorously to describe their own era. The now discredited “decline narrative” held sway for a long time, particularly because it perfectly fit grand narratives about the rise of the West and the failure of the East to keep up. However, in the past three decades, the feasibility of a three-century-long decline and the methodological naivete of taking polemical Ottoman treatises at face value have caused the narrative to lose its allure.
Following the periodization formulized by Linda Darling, I consider the period extending from the last quarter of the sixteenth century to the end of the first quarter of the eighteenth century as a period instead of consolidation. Darling underlines that in this period, the political priority shifted from constant expansion to the maintenance of existing borders and to increasing the efficacy of existing administrative institutions and practices. As state institutions continued to develop and expand, they challenged the originally patrimonial nature of the state, in which the dynasty played the leading role. The state came to be conceptualized in a more abstract sense, as a complex structure in which bureaucrats, alongside their household and patronage networks, played an essential role. This extensive network of political authority was the beginning of a transformation in Ottoman political culture toward a model of partnership where the state’s main function was to arbitrate between multiple institutional and noninstitutional political actors. In this period, the new political public sphere also experimented with new political languages, both discursive and symbolic. In this chapter, I focus on the emergence of new political languages as a result of the expansion of the political nation.

Nothing captures the changing nature of early modern Ottoman rulership more effectively than the various discussions of the alternatives to the House of Osman that occurred throughout the many public mutinies of the eventful seventeenth century, during which the idea that the ruling dynasty could easily be replaced was aired explicitly and regularly. During various political manifestations, protesters and participants put forward the following as alternatives to the House of Osman: the Chingizid girays of Crimea, high-ranking military commanders (pashas), the chief mufti then in office, the janissary agha, and even a coalition of the public (cumhur cemiyyeti). Each of these propositions was further justified—implicitly or explicitly—by a different logic, therefore testifying to the prevailing discord on what constitutes political legitimacy. The most popular of these, the proposition to replace the House of Osman with that of the Crimean khans, upheld the importance of the latter’s Chingizid lineage as a compelling reason for their installation. Similarly, the pashas and aghas who were reported to wish to displace and replace the dynasty had familial connections to the dynasty through marriage with a princess, or in one case, planned to establish such a connection by marrying the queen mother. Recorded in the chronicles of the period, these discussions show that a connection with the Chingizid lineage, either through
the Crimean girāys or through the Ottoman dynasty’s members, was still an important component of rulership for some participants in these debates.

Yet, descent alone did not suffice. Other proposed alternatives to the House of Osman were based on merit only. Powerful households were considered as potential replacements by merit of their administrative capability and clout. Another argument was based on spiritual merit; if the caliphate was attained by virtuousness, then no one deserved the title more than the chief mufti. Most interestingly, a mob of janissaries in 1703 proposed the idea of rule by a coalition of the public (cumhur cem’iyeti). What prepared the ground for this strong, almost republican, political expression was a century of active political participation by the janissaries, who, as argued above, considered themselves a fundamental constituent of the Ottoman order with established rights, rather than mere slaves of the Porte. For instance, during the 1655–56 revolts, when Sultan Mehmed IV addressed janissaries in the traditional Ottoman manner as “my servants (kullarm),” they protested, reminding the sultan that only God could have servants; the sultan was a mere agent (mütevelli). According to the reports, after demanding their payments, the janissaries continued: “You do what we say or neither you, nor your mother, nor your retinue remains alive.”

None of the above projects was realized, or even pursued as a consistent program. Why, then, are these statements important to the historian? As Feridun Emecen remarks, the ease with which these alternatives were proposed in public mutinies, and the consistency with which written sources recorded them, suggest that increasingly during this period, the Ottoman dynasty was coming to be considered a mutable, rather than a core and indispensable, component of Ottoman authority (dawla or devlet). The marginalization of the sultanate was a major turning point in the formation of the early modern state, defined as a “shift in power away from the person of the sultan and toward newly prominent elites.” The changing constellation of political power, whereby new powerholders claimed and exercised heightened political agency, was not limited to the highest echelons of the empire. Subjects, particularly Muslim subjects, of the Ottoman Empire challenged the established hierarchies in Ottoman society by pushing the limits of upward mobility.

Two momentous phenomena of the turn of the sixteenth century attest to these demands by Ottoman subjects for greater upward mobility. These demands were eventually realized. First, as Suraiya Faroqhi and Halil İnalcık convincingly argue, one of the important political motivations beyond the
The countryside rebellions of the period, known as the Celâlî uprisings, was the desire of the Muslim subjects to turn ʿaskerî, in other words to join the non-tax-paying ruling class. Since Mehmed II’s conquest of Constantinople, functionaries of devşirme origin (converts of non-Muslim origin who held a slave status) had been preferred for the higher offices in the Ottoman governmental apparatus. The preference for the devşirme for high positions was an imperial policy that aimed to replace the Muslim-Turkish aristocracy and had garnered criticism from the latter group from early on. Despite the significance of these early contestations of the limits on upward mobility, it would be mistaken to imagine these criticisms to be widespread political objections throughout the entire duration of Ottoman rule. In fact, Faroqhi carefully notes that the discomfort came to fruition only in the 1570s, alongside a combination of high inflation, population growth, and environmental factors that impeded agricultural production. Through the Celâlî rebellions, Muslim subjects of the empire challenged the limitations on their upward mobility by forcing the state to negotiate with them in order to re-ensure their loyalties to the empire.

Contrary to the perturbation caused by the Celâlî rebellions, the second momentous change governing social mobility happened quietly. By the latter part of the sixteenth century, janissary registers started to include nonslave soldiers considered as outsiders or infiltrators (ecnebî). By the early seventeenth century, the older practice of devşirme had entirely died out in favor of the recruitment of Muslims. Together with changing recruitment patterns, other strictures governing the janissaries had come to be loosened in this same period. Most notably, janissaries became increasingly enmeshed with the civilian population, particularly the people of the marketplace (eşnâf): artisans and merchants. Like the practices of upward mobility and janissary recruitment, another change that happened without formal announcement was the change in succession rules as of the reign of Ahmed I (d. 1617). After this period, the former principle giving every prince equal claim to the throne was replaced with the principle of seniority. These seventeenth-century changes in the gravitational center of political authority were never written down as a new code. Hence, historians have had to trace changing principles back from events.

This methodology from the event to the principle has also been at the heart of understanding the changing norms of political participation in the early modern period. Shifts in political mentality have been inferred from events in which the janissaries, ʿulamā, artisans, and urban populations made
political demands of the center and realized their political goals. During the numerous public protests of the seventeenth century, Istanbulites expressed their tacit assumptions about the prevailing social contract between the state and society. In fact, the majority of the statements about alternatives to the House of Osman discussed above were uttered during one or another urban rebellion. Foremost among these urban events were the janissary rebellions. There were six major uprisings in the first half of the seventeenth century: 1622, 1632, 1648, 1651, 1655–56, 1687–88. These uprisings placed direct demands on the Ottoman administration, most often in the form of dismissals of high-ranking officers, including dethronements of the ruling sultans. In 1622, the janissary-led rebellion ended with the first regicide of Ottoman history. Yet another group who took to Istanbul’s public squares to press for policy changes were artisans. The guilds of Istanbul were at the forefront of the 1651 rebellion, when they demanded the repeal of a new tax, and of the 1688 rebellion, when they demanded a change in some leading officials.

More often than not, the Ḥulāmā and other religious officials were involved in these rebellions as an important group that legitimized the demands of the participants. In some cases, the Ḥulāmā gathered at mosques to make the grievances of their own class publicly heard, and to protest against injustice. One such instance took place in 1633, to protest Murad IV’s execution of the provincial judge (kādi) of Iznik without trial. The purported reason was the kādi’s neglect of his public duty, for on his way to Bursa, the sultan had observed that the roads around Iznik were not well maintained. Once the news of the execution of a scholar without trial reached the capital, a large crowd led by the scholar-bureaucrats there gathered at the Fatih Mosque to protest the sultan’s unlawful execution. This protest attests to the rise of the Fatih Mosque as a political space, one comparable in function to public squares of Istanbul that provided forums for political expression. In addition to defending their own autonomy and rights, the Ḥulamā were often invited into conflicts as arbitrators either by rebels who sought out fatwas legitimizing their protests, or by the authorities to help placate the rebels, or both. Ḥulamā networks frequently participated in public political protests not only in the capital, but also in the provinces.

Unlike the rebellions of the sixteenth century, which were military rebellions proper, seventeenth-century janissary urban rebellions were accompanied by significant civil involvement. Istanbul’s urban rebellions were not solely instigated by officially recognized interest groups such as the Ḥulamā, janissaries,
and guilds. To the contrary, these political events garnered significant political participation from the urban public. Different urban interest groups were connected to each other by economic and social interest and therefore acted together. The link between the “people of the market” and the janissaries has been the focus of many studies by André Raymond and Cemal Kafadar. More recently, Eunjeong Yi has suggested that artisans had similarly close ties to other urban elements, such as people of the marketplace or men of religion. As an example of the latter, Yi underlines the participation of Sufi sheikhs in artisan rebellions. Their participation provided a language of legitimacy and drew larger sectors of the public into the fold of urban upheaval. In other words, while the janissaries, the guilds, and the ʿulamā were the most visible elements in urban upheavals, they were often accompanied by larger sectors of society.

The nearly routinized urban rebellions were confrontations between Istanbul’s urban population and the ruling elite, including the dynasty and the high-ranking officials, evoking a contractual relationship with the sultan. In the eyes of the rebels, it was the ruler’s failure to uphold his end of the prevailing contract that justified these rebellions. The acts of rebellion, therefore, were made possible by an implicit—and occasionally explicit—understanding that the relationship between the subject and the ruler was contractual. This shared understanding of mutual rights and obligations informed the demands made through urban rebellions, as well as the frequent success of these political demands. The recent historiographical focus on early modern Ottoman constitutional thought emphasizes the importance of this contractual framework, despite the lack of a written constitution. In the absence of a written constitutional document, the historian’s task is to turn to performance and spectacle as embodiments of implicitly shared political ideals across various strata of society. I turn to a close reading of space and spectacle as embodiments of political ideals in the next section.

**STRUGGLE OVER SPECTACLE: STAGING IMPERIAL POLITICS IN THE EARLY MODERN CITY**

The culture of public political scrutiny led to a dynastic performance anxiety, where Ottoman rulers had to invent new forms of legitimacy and continuously prove themselves in the public eye. The routinization of political spectacles in the court’s daily occupation, as explained at the beginning of this chapter, was one manifestation of the increasing significance of public political statements.