



Sultan Abdülmecid's Rumelia Traveland Vaccination Practices

Sultan Abdülmecid'in Rumeli Gezisi ve Aşı Uygulamaları

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Introduction

From a geopolitical perspective, the Ottoman Empire, which exercised control over some of the most strategically significant regions of the world, was a multinational state that managed to preserve its power for centuries despite its cosmopolitan character. Nevertheless, communication difficulties occasionally arose between the central administration and the provinces, and meaningful interaction between the ruling elite and the broader population was not always possible. The provincial tours initiated during the reign of Sultan Mahmud II helped to alleviate this problem to some extent, enabling the populace to convey their concerns directly to the highest authority of the state.

In this context, Sultan Mahmud II undertook a series of journeys between 1828 and 1837 to major settlements such as Tekirdağ, Çanakkale, Shumen, Gemlik, Varna, and İzmit in order to identify local problems and needs firsthand and to listen personally to the demands of the people. These journeys set an example for subsequent Ottoman sultans (1-4). One of his two sons who later ascended the Ottoman throne,



Figure 1. Sultan Abdülmecid (1823-1861)¹.

¹ The original portrait is part of the Suna-İnan Kırac Foundation Collection at Pera Museum.

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Sultan Abdülaziz, even embarked on a journey to Europe in 1867 (2,5).

This article focuses on Sultan Abdülmecid's (Figure 1) Rumelia journey of 1846, undertaken as a continuation of the tradition of royal tours inherited from his father, Sultan Mahmud II, and on the vaccination practices carried out within this context. The 32-page Seyahatname-i Hümayun (Imperial Travelogue), which serves as a travel diary, constitutes the sole primary source on the subject (Figure 2). Given that it was most likely published in 1846, the same year in which the journey took place, this source will serve as our principal reference.

Before examining the details of the journey, it is useful to briefly review the contemporary state of smallpox vaccination practices in the Ottoman Empire during this period.

It is known that shortly after Dr. Edward Jenner announced the effectiveness of the cowpox vaccine, the vaccine was imported from Europe and began to be used in İstanbul in 1801.

As part of the reform initiatives launched with the proclamation of the Tanzimat, the Imperial School of Medicine (Mekteb-i Tıbbiye-i Şahane), established in 1839, was assigned by Sultan Abdülmecid's decree of 20 May 1840 to provide free smallpox vaccinations to children.

Vaccines used during this period were primarily imported from Europe. However, it is also known that efforts were undertaken to administer vaccines prepared from serum obtained from the pustular material of infected cows brought from Beşiktaş under the direction of the Chief Physician, İsmail Pasha. These initiatives represented an early attempt at local



Figure 2. Seyahatname-i Hümayun (original copy) (6).

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vaccine production and application within the Ottoman Empire.

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It has been recorded that Sultan Abdülmecid also took a close interest in the severe smallpox epidemic reported in İstanbul in 1845. One of the greatest tragedies and principal catalysts behind the mass vaccination campaign organized during his Rumelia journey of 1846 was the devastating smallpox (variola) epidemic that had struck İstanbul just one year earlier, in 1845.

Emerging insidiously in the neighborhoods of İstanbul in early 1845, the virus rapidly developed into a major epidemic. What distinguished this outbreak from other epidemics of the period and placed the imperial administration on high alert was the fact that the disease penetrated the imperial palace itself, affecting Sultan Abdülmecid's own family regardless of social status. The deaths of infants and children within the palace constituted the most significant turning point in motivating the Sultan to undertake a personal struggle against the disease.

During the epidemic, the shortage of hospital capacity, coupled with child mortality even within the palace, led Sultan Abdülmecid's mother, Bezmiâlem Valide Sultan, to establish the Bezmiâlem Valide Sultan Vakıf Gureba Hospital. Throughout the course of the epidemic, vaccination activities continued not only at the Imperial School of Medicine but also at Vakıf Gureba Hospital and at vaccination stations established in Üsküdar, Bayezid, and Eyüp. Vaccinators trained at the medical school were dispatched to the provinces to supervise vaccination practices and ensure the preservation and proper administration of vaccine material.

While the 1845 epidemic was still ongoing, a development of revolutionary significance in the history of medicine took place. The traditional method of variolation (çiçekleme), which had been observed in İstanbul by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, the wife of the British ambassador, and subsequently introduced to Europe in the early eighteenth century, gradually began to be replaced by Edward Jenner's safer and more effective cowpox vaccination (vaccination) method.

At the same time, the Imperial School of Medicine assumed a more active role in epidemic control. By order of Sultan Abdülmecid, Abdülhak Adnan Efendi, founder and chief physician of the Mekteb-i Tibbiye-i Şahane (Imperial School of Medicine), together with his team, developed a series of emergency measures.

Most importantly, a mandatory vaccination policy was introduced. Orders were issued requiring the vaccination of every child born in İstanbul, as well as all unvaccinated individuals. Vaccination officers were appointed to neighbor-

hoods, and the importance of vaccination was communicated to the public through mosques and other public venues.

In order to overcome public reluctance toward vaccination—arising from both religious concerns and popular superstition—one of the earliest examples of a public health incentive program was implemented during the 1845 epidemic:

- Free vaccination services were offered to the public at designated centers in İstanbul and at the Imperial School of Medicine.
- Financial assistance and gifts were provided by the state to impoverished families who brought their children for vaccination, thereby significantly increasing vaccination coverage.

The road to the Rumelia journey: The extensive struggle against the epidemic in İstanbul in 1845, together with the demonstrated success of vaccination in controlling the outbreak, convinced Sultan Abdülmecid of the power and value of preventive medicine. Consequently, when he embarked upon his Rumelia journey in 1846, he resolved to bring preventive healthcare services to the provincial population by taking vaccination teams with him.

By the order of Sultan Abdülmecid, a pamphlet was printed in 1846 at the printing house of the Mekteb-i Tibbiye-i Şahane (Imperial School of Medicine) in İstanbul and distributed throughout the provinces in order to explain the benefits of smallpox vaccination and promote the most effective vaccination methods. Published in four languages—Turkish, Armenian, Greek, and Judeo-Spanish—and also known as *Menâfi'ül-Etfal* (Benefits for Children), this work is regarded as one of the major milestones in the institutionalization of vaccination practices within the Ottoman Empire.

During the same period, in response to the growing negative perceptions of vaccination among the public, a fatwa was issued in 1847 by Şeyhülislâm Ârif Hikmet upon the instruction of Sultan Abdülmecid. The fatwa declared that smallpox vaccination provided protection against smallpox and that its administration was compatible with Islamic law (Sharia).

In an effort to personally dispel public skepticism regarding vaccination, Sultan Abdülmecid requested that children be vaccinated in his presence during the Rumelia journey. Accompanying him on the tour were not only the Chief Physician, İsmail Pasha, but also members of the academic staff of the Mekteb-i Tibbiye-i Şahane, including Sigmund Spitzer, Constantine Caratheodory, and J. Paleolog, who personally supervised and carried out vaccination activities.

Whenever deemed necessary, vaccination officers were also dispatched to private homes to inform families about the benefits and safety of vaccination. Following these consultations, parental consent was obtained and vaccination procedures were administered accordingly.

Preparatory Phase of the Journey

Sultan Abdülmecid, who ascended the throne in 1839 and personally governed the Ottoman Empire until his death in 1861, undertook three domestic tours during his reign, in 1844, 1846, and 1850. During his first journey, he conducted extensive inspections in the cities of İzmit, Bursa, and Çanakkale. On his final tour, he had the opportunity to examine the Archipelago Sea and its strategically vital islands, which were of considerable importance to the security and survival of the state (2).

Prior to the Rumelia journey, Sultan Abdülmecid expressed his desire to observe firsthand the implementation of the Tanzimat reforms, inspect military units, and personally listen to the concerns of the population in an official decree (Hatt-ı Hümayun) dated 22 April 1846 (2,3,6-9). Immediately after the decision was formalized, extensive preparations commenced. By virtue of a special imperial order (İrade-i Seniyye) dated 14 February 1846, 3,000 purses of coins were minted to be distributed to Ottoman subjects and senior officials who would welcome the Sultan. Decorations, ceremonial robes (hil'ats), and gifts were prepared, and the Ministry of Finance was instructed to cover all related expenses (2,10).

Initially, 905 ceremonial robes were woven for distribution along the route; however, this number was later increased to 1,169. In addition, 10,000 more purses of coins were added to the existing supply, and a special decoration was commissioned to be presented to a high-ranking Austrian general (2,11,12).

Preparations were undertaken not only in İstanbul but also throughout the travel route. The rulers of Wallachia and Moldavia, as well as the Prince of Serbia, requested information in order to prepare meetings and welcoming ceremonies for the Sultan (2,13). Austria also participated in these preparations (2,14). The Voivode of Wallachia, wishing to demonstrate his loyalty to İstanbul, requested four banners and one tent through his representative in the capital, and this request was approved (2,15).

As a result of Sultan Abdülmecid's personal involvement in the preparations, a new imperial decree dated 7 May 1846 was issued, providing for the procurement of 400 carriages to be used during the journey (2,16).

Furthermore, reflecting the foresight for which Sultan Abdülmecid was renowned, measures were taken to ensure uninterrupted communication with İstanbul during the tour. Accordingly, an imperial decree dated 21 April 1846 authorized the provision of eight to ten postal horses (2,17).

Course of the Journey and Vaccination Practices

Following the completion of these preparations, Sultan Abdülmecid departed on Wednesday, 6 May 1846, traveling from Çırağan Palace to Topkapı Palace. The journey officially

commenced with a grand ceremony attended by the Grand Vizier, the Sheikh al-Islam, the Commander-in-Chief (Serasker), and other leading statesmen (2,18).

On the same day, the imperial entourage proceeded via Hagia Sophia, Divan Yolu, Aksaray, and Yedikule to Ayastefanos (present-day Yeşilköy) (6). The military and civil dignitaries who had accompanied the Sultan bid farewell to the caravan there (2,7). Sultan Abdülmecid remained in Ayastefanos until Friday with an entourage of approximately 500 individuals, including Foreign Minister Reşid Pasha and Grand Admiral Tahir Pasha. After attending Friday prayers at Davutpaşa Barracks, he resumed the journey the following morning (2,6,18).

Departing on Saturday, 9 May, the caravan reached Büyükçekmece after a journey of approximately four and a half hours. It arrived in Silivri on 10 May, Çorlu on 11 May, and Burgaz on 12 May. On Thursday, 14 May, Sultan Abdülmecid entered Edirne amid enthusiastic demonstrations of public affection. Throughout the route, individuals who had not previously contracted smallpox were vaccinated.

At Haramidere, parents of children who had not suffered from smallpox were provided with detailed information about vaccination by the Chief Physician. Subsequently, the children were vaccinated in the Sultan's presence and each received gifts. Men aged between forty and fifty who had never contracted smallpox were likewise vaccinated (6,8).

The Austrian physician Sigmund Spitzer, who accompanied the expedition, later recorded in his memoirs that children were vaccinated for the first time at this location and that the procedure was repeated at every stop where the caravan paused, always in the Sultan's presence. Spitzer further noted that the Sultan took great satisfaction in seeing his subjects protected against a disease whose effects he himself had not escaped and whose scars he bore throughout his life (2,18).

During his stay in Edirne, Sultan Abdülmecid also ordered substantial funding for the improvement of the Maritsa (Meriç) River and the Port of Enez, as well as for the restoration of numerous mosques (6,8).

Remaining in Edirne until 19 May, the Sultan departed for Kazanlık, where he stayed until 26 May (6). The following day he entered Tirnova with his retinue. There he honored distinguished officials and civil servants with decorations and promotions in recognition of their achievements (3,6,8). He also arranged for the vaccination of children, ensured that even individuals suffering from rare illnesses were examined by physicians in his presence, and distributed gifts to the local population (3,6,19).

On 2 June, Sultan Abdülmecid arrived in Ruse (Rusçuk), where he remained until 6 June in a residence prepared for his use. Festivities and public celebrations were organized in his honor, and he received the rulers of Wallachia and Moldavia.

The visit was particularly eventful. Russian General Grayev and Austrian General Dohs, who had come as representatives of their respective states and were honored with decorations and gifts, presented their letters to the Sultan. On Thursday, 4 June, theatrical performances and other entertainments attended by the rulers of Wallachia and Moldavia delighted the people of Ruse, and enthusiastic celebrations took place. The following two days were marked primarily by religious ceremonies and the rewarding of military and civil officials. As at every previous stop on the route, the Chief Physician and accompanying doctors vaccinated numerous children of different religious backgrounds in the Sultan's presence (3,6).

After a long and exhausting five-hour journey, Sultan Abdülmecid arrived in Silistra on the evening of 6 June to a warm and enthusiastic welcome from the local population. On his way to the residence prepared for him, he was greeted by the city governor, deputy judge, mufti, and other prominent local figures. Spending 7 June resting in Silistra, he later received local administrators and notables at a pavilion overlooking the Danube River, where he honored them with decorations and promotions. He also inspected the city and its historic fortress and, as elsewhere along the route, ensured that local children were vaccinated (3,6).

The process of vaccinating a child during this period required logistical and social efforts very different from those of today. Since modern refrigeration technology did not exist in 1845-1846, the vaccine virus (vaccinia) could not be preserved in cold storage. Instead, a "living vaccine chain" was employed.

The process functioned as follows: A healthy child was vaccinated, and approximately one week later the clear fluid from the resulting pustule—when the virus was at its most active—was collected. Physicians would then transfer this material to the arm of another unvaccinated child.

During Sultan Abdülmecid's Rumelia journey, the vaccination teams were accompanied by orphaned children or the children of volunteer families, either brought from İstanbul or recruited from villages along the route. Vaccinated successively from one child to another, these children effectively served as "living vaccine laboratories," ensuring the viability of the vaccine throughout the expedition.

Palace gold and gifts: Encouraging vaccination: Among the public, the new vaccine imported from the West was met with considerable fear and superstition, largely due to the belief that material derived from cattle was being injected into children. Families often hid their children and avoided contact with physicians.

To overcome this resistance, Sultan Abdülmecid devised a remarkably effective strategy. Every vaccinated child received either a special vaccination medal issued by the palace or a gold coin. Toys, new clothing, and sweets were also distribut-

ed. For impoverished families in the provinces, having a child vaccinated meant not only protection from disease but also valuable material support. Before long, children eagerly awaited the arrival of vaccination officers.

Following the vaccination regulations issued in 1845, the vaccination status of every child born in the Ottoman Empire began to be recorded both in official population registers and in the records maintained by local imams and headmen. Young physicians graduating from the Imperial School of Medicine traveled from town to town and village to village, inspecting vaccination scars and recording notes such as "Vaccinated; in good health." If a vaccination had failed to take effect, the child was revaccinated using the arm-to-arm method.

As medical science progressed, this method—which had saved countless children's lives—was eventually replaced by the production of vaccines from calves at dedicated vaccine-production facilities known as Telkikhhanes.

At every location visited during the journey, Sultan Abdülmecid not only exchanged views with state officials and administrators but also took a personal interest in the requests and concerns of local inhabitants. Regardless of ethnic or religious identity, petitions submitted by local residents were carefully reviewed and processed.

For example, 17,250 cent were allocated to the Reaya School in Ruse, while 721 individuals from Çirmen, Silistra, Vidin, Varna, and Tirnova who requested financial assistance received a total of 8,150 kuruş in support (2,8,20). Additionally, petitions submitted by twenty-five individuals involved in various disputes were formally processed and referred to the governors of Silistra and Edirne, with developments closely monitored and regularly reported to the Sultan (2,8,21). Contemporary accounts also indicate that the Sultan was particularly sensitive to addressing potential security concerns and administrative shortcomings (8).

The fact that children were vaccinated against smallpox at every single stop throughout the journey clearly demonstrates Sultan Abdülmecid's commitment to preventive medicine and public health, as well as the success of the mission in achieving its objectives (3).

In the final phase of the Rumelia journey, the Sultan visited Shumen on Thursday, 11 June, and arrived in Varna on Friday, 13 June (6). There, he pleased local farmers by ordering the distribution of seed wheat to the population (3,8).

On Sunday, 14 June, Sultan Abdülmecid completed his forty-day journey, returning to İstanbul aboard the steamship Eser-i Cedid, which entered the Golden Horn through the Bosphorus from the Black Sea (6).

Even in the final moments of the journey, he continued to show concern for public health. Upon noticing a small boat leaving a quarantine zone in the Bosphorus and heading out

to sea, he immediately ordered his vessel to stop, requested information regarding quarantine procedures, and instructed officials to ensure their diligent enforcement (6).

Despite ruling during one of the most challenging periods of Ottoman history, Sultan Abdülmecid remained deeply engaged with the needs of his people and attached great importance to preventive healthcare—particularly vaccination. We remember him with gratitude and appreciation for his contributions to public health and the welfare of his subjects.

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