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Ottoman Administrative Priorities: Revenue Maximisation in the Province of Karahisar-ı Şarki

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This paper examines the Ottoman priorities and preoccupations in the provincial administration during the 15th and 16th centuries. By studying the local and global conditions on one hand and the priorities and the policies of the Ottoman administration on the other, it aims to contribute towards a better understanding of the working of the Ottoman administrative mechanism. The main sources for this study are the Ottoman tax registers, widely known as tahrij defiers, from 15th and 16th century.

The view of modern researchers concerning Ottoman institutions and bureaucracy is shaped by the accounts of classical western sources which inculcated in their mind unchanging institutional forms and highly regularised bureaucratic procedures. The institutions were also regarded by them as rigidly-constructed models, intolerant of any deviation from a given norm1. Under the strong influence of these views, some scholars studying of Ottoman central administration disregard its connection with the provinces and the larger social, economic and geographical environment. Other scholars doing regional studies on the provinces ignore the regions' connection with the centre. Based mainly on tahrij defiers, the latter group of studies, usually concentrating on a single sancak, create a kind of self-contained universe, disconnected from the surrounding areas and, most importantly, from the central administration. Any interaction and relationship between the central administration and the provinces is ignored2. Only recently this has started to change. The realisation that there was some sort of flexibility and dynamism in the central decision making and the provincial administration of the Empire led some scholars to study the nature of this process3.

It is now widely accepted that the Ottoman state was a dynamic system which consisted of living organisational entities, each with an evolutionary history linked to conditions in particular ages and in particular areas of the empire, rather than existing as static forms4. These studies are however, limited in scope and employ mainly casual as opposed to statistical evidence. I believe that one requires a more systematic and consistent approach supported by statistical evidence to understand properly how the Ottoman political/administrative system functioned and changed.

In this paper, an approach well known in political science, called systems approach, is adopted5. This approach allows one to study patterns of relationships or interactions and interdependence between parts that compose a whole. Based on this approach, I developed a conceptual framework to examine the Ottoman administrative mechanism. The advantage of this framework is that one can

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2 Murphey, idem.
4 Murphey, ibid, pp. 117-118.
study an Ottoman institution without losing sight of its relationships with other institutions and, more importantly, with its environment. This framework is described in detail elsewhere. In the following study I will focus on the Ottoman administrative priorities in administering their provinces, specifically I wish to explore the question of revenue maximisation and I believe this could be done most effectively by looking at a specific case. I have chosen the mining region of Karahisar. Yet before I begin this case study I would like to explain briefly the main primary sources for my study, the Ottoman tax registers or tahrir defters from the 15th and 16th centuries.

The main sources of this study are a series of tahrir defters of Giresun and Karahisar. They span nearly a century, in Giresun from 1486 to 1583, (MM828 of 1486, TT52 of 1515, TT288 of 1554 and TT483 of 1583) and in Karahisar from 1485 to 1569, (TT37 of 1485, TT387 of 1520, TT255 of 1547 and TT478 of 1569). This series of registers taken as a whole covers the reigns of Mehmed the Conqueror, Bayezid II, Selim I, Suleyman the Magnificent, and Selim II successively.

Revenue Maximisation in the Karahisar-ı Şarkı Province

Taken over some ten years before the first survey (1485), the Karahisar region presented the Ottomans with many difficulties and challenges as well as opportunities. It was a high mountainous plateau with an average altitude of 1500 to 2000 meters and with a severe climate. There were very few possibilities for intensive agriculture, but the ground was rich in terms of mineral deposits, especially alum. For in Karahisar in the Middle Ages they had a mine with the top quality alum ore in the world. It was an area exposed to constant skirmishes since the time of the Turcoman Principalities. The Ottoman-Akkoyunlu rivalry caused further damage to the area and made the people suffer a great deal. These conditions contributed to the development of a border society which was ready to move in the event of a disturbance. This was, in fact, what happened in the aftermath of the Ottoman conquest; 38% of the villages and 45% of the mezraas were empty or deserted. However, no desertion is seen in the town of Karahisar, which consisted of a centre (nefs) and 11 mining villages. The reason for this was that the predominantly Christian population of the central town of Karahisar and the mining villages surrendered without fighting. The immediate priority of the

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7 In another study of mine I will explore a second priority in Ottoman administrative practice, namely the creation of an ideal society.


9 A higher scale of desertion is seen in the neighbouring sancaks of Bayburt and Kemah where 42.9% and 67.7% of the villages were deserted. The main cause for this scale of desertion was the wars between the Ottoman and the Akkoyunlus, and the Ottomans and the Safavids. On this see ISMET MIROGLU, 16. Yüzyılda Bayburt Sancagı, Istanbul, 1975, pp. 29-35; ISMET MIROGLU, Kemah Sancagı ve Erzincan Kazası (1520-1566), Ankara, 1990, pp. 34-37. A similar phenomenon at a lower scale is observed in the nearby sancak of Harput where out of 164 villages 24 were deserted (viran, hali). MEHMET ALI ÜNAL, XVII Yüzyılda Harput Sancagı (1518-1566), Ankara, 1989, pp. 67, table 9.

10 The mining villages were recorded as having a permanent population at the end of TT37, pp. 883-888 under the title of Kuray-ı Şebehe-i Karahisar. No desertion is seen among these villages and mezraas. The situation is the same for the fortress of Karahisar-ı Şarkı. See, TT37, pp. 818-820.

11 Kemal Paşaçade makes the following statements on the capture of Karahisar: "Hisar içinde olan Türkmanlar ol halı mütevazi meali ki gündürler, maccaleri kalmaryub avaze-i "el-aman"i dervaze-i asumana irgördüler, karayi amana testim idib hasem-i haşim-i sultan-i zamanandar emin oldular". İAN KEMAL, Teyrarih-i Al-i Caman, VII Defter, edited by ŞERAFETTIN TURAN, Ankara, 1957, p. 357. COLIN IMBER makes the following quotation about the capture of Karahisar: "On Wednesday 24 August we, the Ottomans, marched to (Şebin) Karahisar. When we set up cannon and began to destroy the fortifications ... (the governor) Dara Bey came out, seeking peaceful surrender (...). We did not remove the existing townspeople (...), but we left there one-thousand of our men with abundant supplies. We removed
Ottomans in the administration of the area was, therefore, to resettle the deserted villages and mezzaqs and to operate the alum mine in the most beneficial way for the state. Their strategy was, therefore, to levy taxes at much lower rates than usual and to grant very generous tax immunities to those who were already living there.\(^\text{12}\)

Another Ottoman policy through which they made their rule acceptable and appealing to the locals was to acknowledge and to confirm the previous statuses and the rights of the local interest groups such as, the freeholders, pious foundations (vakufs) and peasant soldiers (müsellems)\(^\text{13}\).

As for the strategies the Ottomans developed to secure the peaceful surrender of the local mining community, the state allowed them to continue mining as they had been doing since the antiquity. The employment of local Christians in the mine work is a typical example of Ottoman policy of adopting local conditions at the initial, uncertain stages of the conquest. The adoption of this policy secured the uninterrupted production of alum and hence income. The Ottomans were realistic enough not to oppose directly the established tradition in the newly conquered areas. The local mining community was granted such generous immunities as the exemption from the head-tax (çizye), tspençe (the equivalent of çift resmi for non-Muslims), and its relations (behre ve risum-i saire), extraordinary taxes (avariz), all other customary duties (tekalif-i örfye), being called away for the performance as oarsmen for the fleet (karekgi) and child recruitment levies (acemi oglani), in return for working in the mine and producing alum\(^\text{14}\).

The alum mined in Karahisar was of the best quality and was used mainly for textiles during the dyeing process and in the manufacture of leather. It was also used by pharmacists and goldsmiths. After the Ottoman take over, the export of alum by Genoese merchants was disrupted and it was channelled to supply the demands of the internal market\(^\text{15}\). From its conquest until the 1570s the alum mine was operated directly by the state, and after that it was farmed out to various individuals\(^\text{16}\). The reason for running the mine by the state may show the state’s concern for the local mining community at the initial stages of the conquest. The estimation of the amount of revenue to be derived from the mine might have also been difficult at this early stage. There might also be the prospect to improve the mining activities and thus to increase the revenues. All of these might have contributed to running of the mine by the state. At this initial stage, around 1485, the income from the alum mine, which was 150,500 akçes, was the highest income source in the area, and was assigned to the mirliva of Karahisar as a hass\(^\text{17}\).

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\(^\text{12}\) The mining community, müsellems and various groups and individuals were granted tax exemptions. The taxes due to be paid by the resmi of the villages cultivated by outsiders (hariciden) and the villages with low population were also calculated in lump sums which were lower than usual taxation rates. These are examples of wide-spread tax exemptions and the generosity of the state at this initial period of conquest. See ACUN, Ottoman Administration, pp. 92-96, 104. Granting tax immunities was, in fact, a typical Ottoman policy aimed at securing faithfulness of the native peoples. However, such privileges were not granted permanently and could be withdrawn by the Sultan at his pleasure. HALIL INALCIK, "Ottoman Methods of Conquest", Studia Islamica, II (1954), pp. 107-108.

\(^\text{13}\) About 10% of the population of the area were made up of müsellems, freeholders and vakf owners who had pre-Ottoman roots. Their previous statuses were confirmed by the state, and in the case of müsellems, who constituted 9% of the recorded population, they were exempted from regular taxes altogether in return for waging wars. ACUN, Ottoman Administration, pp. 92-93.

\(^\text{14}\) See Appendix.


\(^\text{16}\) Possession and control of mines was of critical importance to the state as they supplied metals for the military and industry and they also were a source of wealth and prosperity. The operation and administration of mines in the empire were, therefore, under the close control of the state. Depending on the source of the capital invested to operate a mine, the mining activity was organised mainly by the state or private sector. The state administration of mines was generally applied to the disused mines or to those requiring a higher level of investment to render them profitable, whereas operating mines with a yearly regular production were farmed out to private investors. RHoads Murphey, "Mû&m", EI, second edition, pp. 974-975.

\(^\text{17}\) The entry from TT37, p. 888 reads as follows: "Ma‘şul-i Şebhane der nahiye-i mezâ‘ure hassa-i mirliva-i Karahisar fi sene 150,500".
Thirty-five years later, around 1520, the most important change in the empire's general circumstances was the sudden expansion of territory in the Asian provinces of the empire which translated into a 976% increase in land during the short reign of Sultan Selim I. Accordingly, with the conquest of neighboring territories, the region became a hinterland and thus safer. After the initial uncertainty of the conquest, the previously empty or deserted settlements were now either inhabited or abandoned, and new ones were also established. Now, in the state's view fiscal matters took precedence over administrative and other matters and the state channelled the highest revenue source of the region directly to itself: the amount of income from the mine tripled, reaching 459,000 akçes and was diverted from the hass of the mirfiya to the imperial domains of the Sultan.

The Ottomans allowed the local Christians to have a monopoly on the mining business, whose population increased sharply in the subsequent surveys. The number of miners had increased from 161 males (nefer) around 1485 to 771 males in 1547 and to 1300 males in 1569. This increase was so great that by 1569, one of the mining villages, Maden Görece, recorded 423 males (of these 246 were bachelors (mücerred) and 177 were head of households (hane)). The increase in the number of miners was accompanied by an increase in the number of villages (the number of mining villages was 11, 17 and 23 in 1485, 1547 and 1569 respectively). The concentration of the Christian population around the mining villages was probably a result of the Ottoman policy of lower taxation and special protection given to the mining community. The influx of population to the mining villages seems to have been from the nearby Christian villages, rather than caused by any form of deportation.

The constant increase in the number of miners secured an adequate work force for alum mining. However, not all miners were absorbed by the work in the mine: at the beginning of the period (1485), there were four alum pits and 161 households in the mining villages. At the end of the period, i.e. in 1569, the number of pits rose to six whereas the miner population increased, much faster, to 1300 households.

Such an overcrowding in the mining villages seems to have led the Ottoman officials to revoke the policy of lower taxation because this policy was now causing loss of revenue for the treasury including the loss of revenue from the head-tax (cizye). The state's financial concerns now became more prominent giving priority to resource extraction.

Thus, the state decided to re-organise the labour in a way that was thought to be more profitable. The Ottomans started to operate the mine with paid labourers (irgad) and to collect the usual taxes for the treasury. The new arrangement caused some degree of unemployment and certainly a great deal of dissatisfaction among the miners. Only two years later two inspectors of the tax-farms of Arz-i Rum, Sefer Bey and Mehmed Bey, and the treasury inspector (mufettis-i emval-i hassa) who was also the judge of Arz-i Rum, Mevlana Muslihiddin, sent a report to Istanbul stating that the land around Şebbane villages was too infertile and that there was little room for agriculture in the area. It was, therefore, very difficult to make a living by full-time farming and bear the usual tax load. These officials also informed Istanbul that some of the locals had already left the area, while others were scattered around. In order to overcome the difficulties, thus runs the report, the locals opened up two more mine pits in the nearby villages, 24 ovens operating in each pit during both the winter and summer seasons. The administrative officials proposed that the locals process and provide 24 ovens

19 MURPHEY, Conceptual and pragmatic uses of Icmal Registers, p. 114.
20 The entry from TT387, p. 576 reads as follows: "Hasha-i pedişah-i alemperah der kaza-i Karahisar. Mahsul-i Şebbane fi sene-i camile: 459,000; şab men 14,500; nakden: 16,000; beher men fi 20".
21 In 1547 the same village of Maden Görece had a population of 120 males which was made up of 62 bennak, 34 cabo and 22 mücerred. Notice the high number of bachelors and people without land (cabo). A similar phenomenon is observed in the village of Haci (modern Gümüşhacıköy) in Amasya where 320 males (nefer) were recorded, of this, 108 were landless, 187 were bachelors and only 25 had land in forms of land-tracts (zemin). It therefore seems that these young and landless inhabitants supplied the silver mine in the village with necessary workforce. OKTAY ÖZEL, Changes in Settlement Patterns, Population and Society in Rural Anatolia: A Case Study of Amasya (1576-1642), unpublished PhD thesis, The University of Manchester, 1993, p. 85. footnote 80.
of alum in each of the pits, they were paid 3 akçeș per person for each men\textsuperscript{22} from the half of the alum produced and, in accordance with the previous decision they were granted immunity.

They stated that the production of alum in the proposed way was profitable to the state. Upon receiving the report, a Sultanic order was sent to the surveyor during the registration asking whether it was possible to sell the 144 ovens of alum for cash or if it was more profitable to the state to operate the mine with paid labourers and collect the usual taxes for the treasury. The surveyor was asked to find out which one of these ways was more profitable to the state and record it accordingly in the new register. An investigation was then conducted into the case. In the end it was found out that in the previous two years 180 households had left the area and their whereabouts were not known. Also the remaining villagers were refusing to work in the mine as paid labourers. Another concern was the possible loss of revenue if the mine had to be operated by non-professional, inexperienced miners. As a result the previous system was reintroduced and it was decided that the miners would produce 144 pits of alum each year and be exempted from the usual taxes\textsuperscript{23}.

The correspondence between the central government and the local officials is very indicative of the fact that revenue maximisation was the Ottomans' highest priority. Accordingly, they sought ways that brought more benefit to the central treasury. However, they did not try to increase their incomes at the expense of the local mining community. Thus, revenue maximisation without impairing prosperity of the locals was the Ottomans' main principle in the administration of the area.

**Conclusion**

As we stated at the beginning, the maximisation of revenue was the Ottomans' primary objective concerning provincial administration. In order to achieve this objective they developed strategies of revenue raising. The above examination of the Karahisar area shows that the Ottomans sought to reach their aim by adopting various measures depending on region and its conditions. For instance, as we have seen with the alum mining community of Karahisar, the Ottomans pursued the main policy of maximising revenue, whether this meant recognising the traditional rules and customs of the pre-Ottoman mining community or in the later centuries changing the methods of its administration. Moreover migration and granting tax exemptions are seen to be applied in the area as a way of re-settlement which led to the revitalisation of the local economy which, in turn, increased the potential for revenue collection.

The Ottomans tried to achieve their objective of revenue maximisation by following a particular course of action during which some of their concerns took priority over the others. They organised their priorities in a way that guaranteed long-term revenue maximisation.

This study has also shown that the tahrir defters are very effective sources for demonstrating the policies and preoccupations of the Ottomans to administer an area. Further studies on areas with different ethno-religious, geographic and socio-economic characteristics will provide us with a deeper understanding of the Ottoman administrative system and its working.

**Appendix:**

The long text from TT478, pp. 63-64 concerning the miners reads as follows: "Zikr olan yirmi üç pare kura ve mezari reayast kaza-i mezburede olan dört kita sab madenlerinde cizye ve ispençe ve behre ve rûsam-i saire ve acemi ogları ve avarız ve kéreği ve tekalif-i örfiyeden muafiyetle kâdimden sab işleri ıken şabaneler urgradla işlenüb kuray-i mezbure referesin dahi harac ve ispençeleri ve behrelere ve rûsam-i saireleri ve avarızları mici için zabt olunmak forman olunub iki yıldan ziyade maden-i mezbure urgradla işlenüb reya-i mezburenin mahsulatı zabt olunduktan sonra

\textsuperscript{22} Men is a unit of measurement for weighing heavy goods such as spices, meat and iron. In much of eastern Anatolia, a 'heavy men' was in use, which corresponded to about 7.5 kg. On the varieties of men used in the Ottoman Empire and in the various countries of the world, see WALTER HINZ, Islamische Masse und Gewichte umgerechnet ins metrische System, Handbuch der Orientalistik ed. BERTOLD SPULER, Leiden, 1955, pp.16-23.

\textsuperscript{23} See Appendix.
Arz-ı Rum mukaatata nazırları Sefer Bey ve Mehmed Bey ve misdemeanor emval-i hassa Arz-ı Rum kadısı Mevlana Muslihiddin dergah-ı muallaya arz gönderüb sabhane köyleri sengistan olub ziraat ve hurasete kabil yerleri çözü olub maiyetleri temam müzayaka üzere iken harac ve ispençe ve sair rüşümlar edasına kadıretleri olmamağa başısı celay-i vatan idüp saîrleri perakende olmak üzere oldukları ecelden karay-ı mezbur kefereşi kadımden itleveye alındıkları dört kita şab madenlerinden gayri Çorak ve Kelice Kahta nam karyeler kar ámbünde ikki kita şab madeni dahil idüp seyf ve ştada batal komayub beher madendende yirmi dördür firün şab zahiresi ihrak idüp ve yirmi dördür kuyu şab virüb ve olhgelüğü üzere hasil eylemleri şabanınlardan beher memnune hisse-i reneberan üçer akçe virülüb ber karar-ı sabaka müaaffiyete şab işledikleri mal-ı miriye enfa işdii arz eylemleri ecelden bu bendelerine sene 976 Ramazanın yirminci günü (1569) tarihiyle müverrah emi-i şerif varid olub göresin iki maden dahil ihdası olunub cümle altı maden yüz kirk dört kuyu şab işlenüb ve işlenen şab anbarda kalmayıb farklı ve nakd olması kabiliyetle yohsa bilfil işlendiği üzere şab madenleri ücret ile işlenüb ve karay-ı mezbur kefereşi harac ve ispençe ve sair rüşümları ve avarız ve kâreçilleri ve acemi oğluları alınıb miriye enfa işdii temam aslı ve hakikati ile malum idınıb kârısı malma enfa ise ana göre defter-i cedide kayd ihsen ise defter-i cedide kayd eden olunmagın husus-i mezbur ehl-i vukufdan tefahhus olunub ve karay-ı mezbur reayası yoklandıkda iki yıldan beri yüzseksen hane celay-i vatan idüb kanda giydükleri malum olmayub harac ve ispençeleri ve rüşüm-i sairedelerinden nesne hasil olmayub malen-ı mezbur ber karar-ı sabık müaaffiyyete madenciler olmamıkları talâdzı saîrleri dahi perakende olduklarından sonra madenleri işletmeye ırkarda dahi müzayaka itkiza idâb madenci olmayan kefere şab işlemeye kadâr olmayub mal-ı miriye kâlili zarar olmak muhakkak olduğu malum olmagnın vech-i mesruh üzre karay-ı sabhane reayası sabkından mamul olan dört madenenden maada iki maden dahil idüb yilda her bir madende yirmi dördür firün şab zahiresi ihrak ve miheyya idüb beher onbeş günde bir kuyu şab derdikleri maden-i mezbur ihyasına ve mal-ı miriye enfa olub madenci reaya işdii her sene vech-i mezbur üzre yüzseksen dört kuyu şab dermeli kabul eylemleri ve ber karar-i evvel müaaffiyyetleri defter-i cedide kayd olundu"