

**ACTA
VIENNENSIA
OTTOMANICA**

Akten

des 13. CIEPO – Symposiums
(Comité International des Études Pré-Ottomanes et Ottomanes)

vom 21. bis 25. September 1998

in Wien

HERAUSGEGEBEN VON

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GISELA PROCHÁZKA-EISL
CLAUDIA RÖMER

WIEN 1999

IM SELBSTVERLAG DES INSTITUTS FÜR ORIENTALISTIK

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 *tahrir defters*, 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 *tahrir defters*, 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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¹ RHOADS MURPHEY, "Ottoman Census Methods in the Mid-Sixteenth Century: Three Case Histories", *Studia Islamica*, LXXI (1990), p. 117.

² MURPHEY, *idem*.

³ SURAIYA FAROQHI studied the petition process by which Ottoman taxpayers used to bring their demands to the ears of the Sultan, and the reaction of the Sultan's administration. "Political Activity Among Ottoman Taxpayers and the Problem of Sultanate Legitimation (1570-1650)", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, XXXIV (1992), pp. 1-39. Reprinted in *Coping with the State, Political Conflict and Crime in the Ottoman Empire 1550-1720*, The Isis Press İstanbul, 1995, pp.13-41. See also her "Political Initiatives 'From the Bottom Up' in the Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Empire: Some Evidence for their Existence", *Coping with the State, Political Conflict and Crime in the Ottoman Empire 1550-1720*, The Isis Press İstanbul, 1995, pp.1-11.

⁴ MURPHEY, *ibid*, pp. 117-118.

⁵ Systems approach to political life was initiated by DAVID EASTON who developed a flow chart of the political system. *A Framework for political Analysis*, Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1965, pp. 110,112. See also his, *A System Analysis of Political Life*, New York, 1965.

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 elsewhere⁶.

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 case⁷. 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 TT43 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, Süleyman the Magnificent, and Selim II successively.

Revenue Maximisation in the Karahisar-ı Şarki 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 world⁸.

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 deserted⁹. However, no desertion is seen in the town of Karahisar, which consisted of a centre (*nefs*) and 11 mining villages¹⁰. The reason for this was that the predominantly Christian population of the central town of Karahisar and the mining villages surrendered without fighting¹¹. The immediate priority of the

⁶ FATMA ACUN, *Ottoman Administration in the Sancak of Karahisar-ı Şarki (1485-15699): An Analysis Based on Tahrir Defters*, PhD thesis, The University of Birmingham, 1993. See also FATMA ACUN, "A Systems Approach to Study the Ottoman Provincial Administration: A Case Study of Province of Karahisar-ı Şarki in North-Central Anatolia", to be published in the proceedings of the II. International Congress on the Historical Sources of Eurasian and North African Civilisations: Computer Approaches, 2-6 June 1998, Moscow.

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

⁸ ANTHONY BRYER, "The Question of Byzantine Mines in the Pontos: Chalybian Iron, Chaldian Silver, Koloneian Alum and the Mummy of Cheriana", *Anatolian Studies*, 32 (1982), p. 148.

⁹ A higher scale of desertion is seen in the neighbouring *sancaks* of Bayburd 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 Ottomans and the Akkoyunlus, and the Ottomans and the Safavids. On this see İSMET MİROĞLU, *16. Yüzyılda Bayburt Sancağı*, İstanbul, 1975, pp. 29-35; İSMET MİROĞLU, *Kemah Sancağı 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 ALİ ÜNAL, *XVI Yüzyılda Harput Sancağı (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 Şebhane-i Karahisar*. No desertion is seen among these villages and *mezraas*. The situation is the same for the fortress of Karahisar-ı Şarki. See, TT37, pp. 818-820.

¹¹ Kemal Paşazade makes the following statements on the capture of Karahisar: "Hisar içinde olan Türkmanlar ol hal-i müsibet meali ki gördüler, mecalleri kalmayub avaze-i "el-aman"ı dervaze-i asumana irgördiler, kal'ayı amanla teslim idüb haşem-i hişm-ı sultan-ı zamandan emin oldular". İBN KEMAL, *Tevarih-i Al-i Osman, VII Defter*, edited by ŞERAFETTİN TURAN, Ankara, 1957, p. 367. 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 *mezraas* 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 there¹².

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 (*vakıfs*) and peasant soldiers (*müsellems*)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 (*cizye*), *ispence* (the equivalent of *çift resmi* for non-Muslims), and its relations (*behre ve rüsum-ı saire*), extraordinary taxes (*avarız*), all other customary duties (*tekalif-i örfiye*), being called away for the performance as oarsmen for the fleet (*kürekçi*) and child recruitment levies (*acemi oğlanı*), in return for working in the mine and producing alum¹⁴.

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 market¹⁵. From its conquest until the 1570s the alum mine was operated directly by the state, and after that it was farmed out to various individuals¹⁶. 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*¹⁷.

garrison-troops, and are taking them with us". (*The Ottoman Empire 1300-1481*, The Isis Press, İstanbul, 1990, p. 217).

¹² The mining community, *müsellems* and various groups and individuals were granted tax exemptions. The taxes due to be paid by the *reaya* of the villages cultivated by outsiders (*haricden*) 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. HALİL İNALCIK, "Ottoman Methods of Conquest", *Studia Islamica*, II (1954), pp. 107-108.

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.

¹⁴ See Appendix.

¹⁵ SURAIYA FAROQHI, "Alum Production and Alum Trade in the Ottoman Empire (About 1560-1830)", *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, vol. 71 (1979), pp. 152-153.

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, "Ma'din", *EI*, second edition, pp. 974-975.

¹⁷ The entry from TT37, p. 888 reads as follows: "Mahsul-i Şebhane der nahiye-i mezbure 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 %76 increase in land during the short reign of Sultan Selim I.¹⁸ Accordingly, with the conquest of neighbouring 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 *mirliva* to the imperial domains of the Sultan¹⁹.

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 1569²⁰. 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*))²¹. 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 (*ırgad*) 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-ı Rum, Sefer Bey and Mehmed Bey, and the treasury inspector (*müfettiş-i emval-i hassa*) who was also the judge of Arz-ı Rum, Mevlana Muslihiddin, sent a report to Istanbul stating that the land around Şebhane 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

¹⁸ MURPHEY, Conceptual and pragmatic uses of İcmal Registers, p. 114.

¹⁹ The entry from TT387, p. 576 reads as follows: "Hasha-ı padişah-ı alempenah der kaza-ı Karahisar. Mahsul-ı Şebhane fi sene-i kamile: 459,000; şab men 14,500; nakden: 16,000; beher men fi 20".

²⁰ TT37, pp. 883-888; TT255, pp. 23-32; TT478, pp. 48-64.

²¹ In 1547 the same village of Maden Görece had a population of 120 males which was made up of 62 *bennak*, 34 *caba* and 224 *mücerred*. Notice the high number of bachelors and people without land (*caba*). A similar phenomenon is observed in the village of Hacı (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 *akçes* per person for each *men*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 taxes²³.

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: "*Zıkr olan yirmi üç pare kura ve mezari reayası kaza-ı mezburede olan dört kata şab madenlerinde cizye ve ispençe ve behre ve rüsum-ı saire ve acemi oğlanı ve avarız ve kürekçi ve tekalif-i örfiyeden muaftiyetle kadimden şab işlerler iken şabhaneler ırgadla işlenüb kuray-ı mezbure keferesin dahi harac ve ispençeleri ve behreleri ve rüsum-ı saireleri ve avarızları miri için zabt olunmak ferman olunub iki yıldan ziyade maden-i mezbure ırgadla işlenüb reya-ı mezburenin mahsulatı zabt olunduktan sonra*

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.

²³ See Appendix.

Arz-ı Rum mukaatadı nazırları Sefer Bey ve Mehmed Bey ve müfettiş-i emval-i hassa Arz-ı Rum kadısı Mevlana Muslihiddin dergah-ı muallaya arz gönderüb şabhane köyleri sengistan olub ziraat ve hırasete kabil yerleri cüzi olub maişetleri tamam müzayaka üzere iken harac ve ispençe ve sair rüsüm edasına kudretleri olmamağla bazısı celay-ı vatan idüp sairleri perakende olmak üzere oldukları ecilden kuray-ı mezbure keferesi kadimden işleyügeldikleri dört kata şab madenlerinden gayri Çorak ve Kelice Kahta nam karyeler kurbünde iki kata şab madeni dahi ihdas idüp seyf ve şitada battal komayub beher madende yirmi dörder firun şab zahiresi ihrak idüp ve yirmi dörder kuyu şab virüb ve olgeldüğü üzere hasıl eyledikleri şabın nisfindan beher mennine hisse-i rençberan üçer akçe virülüb ber karar-ı sabıka muafiyetle şab işledükleri mal-ı miriye enfadır deyü arz eyledükleri ecilden bu bendelerine sene 976 Ramazanının yirminci günü (1569) tarihiyle müverrah emr-i şerif varid olub göresin iki maden dahi ihdas olunub cümle altı maden yüz kırk dört kuyu şab işlenüb ve işlenen şab anbarda kalmayub fūruht ve nakd olması kabilimdir yohsa bilfiil işlendiği üzere şab madenleri ücret ile işlenüb ve kuray-ı mezbure keferesin harac ve ispençe ve sair rüsumları ve avarız ve käreğçileri ve acemi oğlanı alınmak miriye enfadır tamam aslı ve hakikati ile malum idinüb kangısı malıma enfa ise ana göre defter-i cedide kayd idesin deyü ferman olunmağın husus-ı mezbur ehl-i vukuftan tefahhus olunub ve kuray-ı mezbure reayası yoklandıkda iki yıldan beri yüzseksen hane celay-ı vatan idüb kanda gitdükleri malum olmayub harac ve ispençeleri ve rüsum-ı sairelerinden nesne hasıl olmayub maden-i mezbur ber karar-ı sabık muafiyetle madenciler olmadıkları takdirce sairleri dahi perakende olduklarından sonra madenleri işletmeye ırgada dahi müzayaka iktiza idüb madenci olmayan kefere şab işlemeye kadir olmayub mal-ı miriye külli zarar olmak muhakkak olduğu malum olmağın vech-i meşruh üzere kuray-ı şabhane reayası sabıktan mamul olan dört madenden maada iki maden dahi ihdas idüb yılda her bir madende yirmi dörder firun şab zahiresi ihrak ve müheyya idüb beher onbeş günde bir kuyu şab derdikleri maden-i mezbure ihyasına ve mal-ı miriye enfa olub madenci reayası dahi her senede vech-i mezbur üzere yüzkırkdört kuyu şab dermeği kabul eyledikleri ve ber karar-ı evvel muafiyetleri defter-i cedide kayd olundu".