

The Precarious Path to Freedom: Runaway Slaves in 16th-century Ottoman Sarajevo

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Recent historiography has seen the rise of interest for researching slavery in the Ottoman Empire. Not only that these studies pay attention to the enslavement, but also to the ways enslaved people could become free. The most attention has been paid to the legal ways of gaining freedom, such as through an emancipatory act initiated by the owner. However, several studies have also recognized and researched the problem of fugitive slaves, as an illegal form of gaining freedom. The due attention has been paid to the legal stance towards runaway slaves as well as to their treatment at the Sharia courts. Although such studies brought improvements, the analysis carried out in this research has shown that there is a disbalance between the information on slavery available about the inner parts of the Ottoman Empire, in comparison towards the periphery. This paper argues that if we want to get a more nuanced image about the history of slavery in the Ottoman context, we need to broaden the research scope towards borderland provinces as well. To achieve that goal, this article is focused on researching the data on runaway slaves recorded in the 16th-century Sharia court registers of Sarajevo, a city located in the borderland sancak of Bosnia. These sources contain data about fugitive slaves which allow us not only to explain the legal treatment of runaway slaves, but also to understand their identities, escape routes, social interactions as well as important parts of their life stories. This article uses documentary evidence to show that their journey was often uncertain, full of dangers, and thus often led to their recapture and re-enslavement instead of a much-desired freedom, much because of the fact that the Ottoman state imposed a set of measures devised to prevent the slave flights.