

Çiftlik Debate Revisited: New Findings and New Questions

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Privately owned estates and farms (çiftlik) presumably engaged in commercial production have long been an issue for the social and economic history of the Ottoman Empire. The nature of land ownership and the extent of commercial agriculture are the two main questions of this topic. Even the term çiftlik can be elusive depending on the context. Although scholars have already addressed the questions, it is very difficult to talk about a general explanatory framework for this phenomenon. During the “classical age” of the empire (1300-1600), the Ottoman state owned most of the arable land (miri) apart from the waqf and other private holdings in the Balkans and Anatolia, where the timar system effectively settled. Peasants lived on these state-owned lands with their usufruct rights (tasarruf). In this structure, the peasant household is the basis of agricultural production, and the state, i.e., the ruling elite, had the claim over surplus in the form of revenue. The legal framework of the miri land regime persisted until the Tanzimat Era. However, that does not mean that the state remained the sole owner and beneficiary of the arable land, and there was no agrarian transformation in the countryside. After all, the significant presence of the privately owned çiftlik before the Tanzimat Era complicates this picture. Canonical studies approached this question in relation to broader themes like the degeneration and decentralization of the classical imperial institutions, widespread implementation of tax-farming (iltizam/malikâne), the emergence of provincial notables (ayan), the transition from feudalism to capitalism, peripheralization, and integration of the Ottoman countries to the new European dominated capitalist world economy. Some scholars even argued that independent peasantry remained the core of the agricultural economy until the mid-nineteenth century, and çiftlik were rather marginal. However, there are many unaddressed questions in this literature and this debate remains inconclusive. This panel aims to raise critical questions about the çiftlik formation processes, revise, and contribute to the çiftlik debate by focusing on concrete cases in different times and localities. It also aims to further complicate the nature of de facto and de jure land ownership and bring the agrarian transformation and change during the early modern era into the debate. In this panel, Georgios C. Liakopoulos locates and analyzes Peloponnesian çiftlik and çiftlik-owners’ identities on the basis of sixteenth-century tax registers. Mehmet Ali Çelik discusses the “military” farms within the conditions of the seventeenth-century crisis in Kütahya and Thessaloniki countryside. İrfan Kokdaş evaluates the relationship between water management and çiftlikization from the seventeenth century onward in the Afyon region. Bedirhan Laçın looks at the role of çiftlik-owning local notables and imperial officials in the illicit trade of wheat with the Western Countries in the eighteenth century. Aysel Yıldız examines the disputes between imperial and waqf authorities and third parties over the property rights of an imperial waqf çiftlik from the late eighteenth century onward. Canay Şahin evaluates the role of title-deeds in the process of transformation of usufruct and ownership rights over the miri lands in the early nineteenth-century Canik region. Finally, Fatma Öncel traces the Ottoman central

bureaucracy's attempts to define çiftliks after the confiscation and liquidation of the landed property of Ali Paşa of Tepedelen.