

The Sale of Public Offices in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire, 1580s-1830

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Office-selling, referring to the practice of buying and selling public offices, which were positions within the government that provided income, status, and power, was a common practice in the early modern world. By using historical evidence and social scientific insights, this paper examines the relatively understudied case of the Ottoman Empire that differs from highly institutionalized practices of venality in early modern Europe. It suggests that irrespective of differences, office selling can be best studied as an integral component of the birth and development of modern states. Modern Ottoman historiography on the sale of offices revolved around the question of legality, whether it was legally acknowledged or a symptom of corruption. Instead, this study focuses on the internal dynamics of the sale of offices and the extent to which competitive forces govern it. I argue that non-monetary factors such as the bargaining power of prospective officeholders often shaped the government's incentives. Despite the limited and fragile rights of officeholders, a considerable number of candidates remained interested in paying for these privileges. The paper also includes a quantitative analysis, demonstrating that there was a remarkable decline in the price of provincial and district governorships during the second half of the 18th century. Although this also reflects the changing balance of power between the sultans and the elites during the period of concern, competition was not the governing force, and the state revenue generated through the sale of offices was declining.