

Meclis-i Meşveret (Advisory Council) and the Çiftlik Debate in the Early Nineteenth Century

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Meclis-i Meşveret (Advisory Council) played a significant role in the Ottoman central bureaucracy during the transformation between the early modern and the modern era. Officially functioning as a consultative body, it not only shaped the decision-making process but also served to legitimize the Sultan's decisions in the eyes of both public and the ulema. The period was a heightened reliance on ulema support by rules such as Selim III and his successors. Once contributing factor to this dependence was the growing financial autonomy of the ulema due to the expansion of vakıf çiftlikleri.

This presentation delves into the Meclis-i Meşveret discussions on the çiftlik debate between 1820 and 1824, using the case of Tepedelenli Ali Paşa's çiftlikleri as a focal point.

In 1820, Ali Paşa was dismissed from his official duties and his property was confiscated. Following this event, Emlâk-ı Hümayun (Imperial Domains) was tasked with redistributing Ali Paşa's landed property to new actors. However, the Ottoman central authorities found themselves in the need of a precise definition of çiftlik for several reasons.

First, they needed to discern which estates were "owned" by Ali Paşa, distinguishing them from those that were leased, rented, or occupied by him. Secondly, aspiring to establish centralized legal and administrative institutions, the Ottoman rule sought to formulate a standardized legal definition of çiftlik. The confiscation thus marked the beginning of a decades-long legal discussion, and a land redistribution problem focusing on the question of defining a çiftlik.

In addressing the redistribution of Ali Paşa's çiftlikleri, Meclis-i Meşveret tackled intricate inquiries stemming from the Ottoman land system's early modern foundations, which clashed with the developing norms of modern private property institutions. This presentation demonstrates that the çiftlik discussions in the Meclis-i Meşveret were not limited to Ali Paşa, but rather grew to encompass a more comprehensive endeavor to establish a consistent legal definition for çiftlikleri.