

Favoritism and Bribery in Ottoman Society in the Sixteenth Century: Limits of the Justice and Moral Economy

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This paper examines a selection of documents from the registers of the imperial governing bureau in Istanbul relating to the allegations of administrative and financial malpractice perpetrated by local officials in various provinces of Anatolia in the sixteenth century. From the perspective of the modern age, these cases of malpractices would undoubtedly be categorised purely as “bribery” and “corruption”; however, the Ottoman governing bureau appeared to consider them immoderate in the context of justice and fairness rather than a shameful act for public morality. The documents under research illustrate that wealthy people had the means to benefit from the favouritism of local officials in order to evade administrative and social sanctions and avail themselves of the most advantageous conditions. In this regard, this paper shows that the Ottoman State’s apprehension of the justice and morality notions was founded on its desire to prevent situations from developing that would widen the social gap between rich and poor and make it more pronounced. It argues that bribery and malpractice could not be justified in cases where it would harm the poor and therefore this paper rethinks the practices of bribery in the context of the concept of ‘moral economy’.