

Ottoman Greek Entrepreneurs in Istanbul in the beginning of the 19th century

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The paper aims to investigate the entrepreneurial activities of the Ottoman Greek big-merchants (of bazirgan) of Istanbul in the beginning of the 19th century. Contrary to the activities of the Ottoman Greek merchants of Smyrna, for those Ottoman Greek entrepreneurs who were based in the Ottoman capital and participated in the import trade and money lending, we have limited knowledge. In this framework, the various registers of confiscated properties (muhallefat defterleri), which were compiled by the Ottoman administration in the spring of 1821 and afterwards, when the Greek revolution erupted, reveal important information on the business activities of the executed or fugitive Ottoman Greek merchants and entrepreneurs. More specifically, I will refer to 36 people of different economic status, who participated in the capital's economy as 'Merchants of Europe' and guild members, the latter acting also as traders. The confiscated wealth demonstrates that some of them held a prominent social and economic position among the Orthodox community of Istanbul, and also that there was a notable discrepancy between them. In addition, the registers will be studied together with other type of sources, which include lists of debtors and creditors of some of the above mentioned 36 Ottoman Greeks. I will refer to the sources of their wealth, the economic networks in which they participated, their entrepreneurial strategies, and the institutional environment in which they acted. I will argue that these merchants and entrepreneurs can be considered as capitalist nuclei in a non-capitalist economic environment.