

Civilization Boundaries
Цивилизационни граници

AN INVESTIGATION OF OFFICIAL CORRUPTION IN OTTOMAN EGYPT: PROCESSES AND DOCUMENTS OF OTTOMAN ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract. The investigation in question is recorded in a series of thirty-eight register entries on a case of financial malfeasance in recently-conquered Ottoman Egypt that was investigated by officials from Ottoman Syria. This case appears in the oldest existing *mühimme defteri*, a register of important affairs of the Ottoman Empire, and provides detailed information about how the Ottomans governed their provinces. It lists many of the taxes and revenues collected by the Ottomans and discusses the most important treasury personnel in the province and the documents they created. It also describes how the Ottoman state worked to control those personnel even at a distance and to induce these officials to adhere to concepts of just imperial rule. The article describes the issues in the case and identifies the provincial officials involved in the investigation, the documents they were supposed to collect or create, and the procedures they were commanded to follow. The conclusion examines the implications of the case for our understanding of the place of Syria and Egypt within the wider Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century. This episode presents an instance of the Ottoman integration of newly conquered lands in a period when records are fairly plentiful (in contrast to the conquest of Rumeli, where most of our evidence comes from chronicles written at a later date). Beyond that, this case illuminates the whole issue of how an empire operates and challenges the stereotype of general Ottoman oppression of the conquered territories.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire, provincial governance, Ottoman documents, provincial officials, corruption, criminal investigation

The Ottoman head judge (kadı) of Aleppo (Haleb province), Mevlana Salih Çelebi, received an order from Sultan Kanuni Süleyman that stated:

I order you now to go to Egypt together with the head judge of Egypt, Mevlana Muhyiddin, in order to inspect some matters related to the imperial revenue in Egypt. When this order arrives, do not lose a moment. When you

reach Damascus, the aforesaid judge of Egypt is staying there, and I have written an order that your needs must be seen to by the governor of Damascus. When you get there don't delay, get together and go to Egypt with your suite of attendants and fulfill your appointed service. Thus may you know, [may you put your trust in the imperial seal].¹

This order is one of a series of thirty-eight register entries on a case of financial malfeasance in the oldest existing *mühimme defteri*, a register of important affairs of the Ottoman Empire. Such registers recorded important orders issued by the sultan and grand vizier, together with information on the petition or situation that prompted the issuance of the order. Most of these registers are found in the Prime Minister's Ottoman Archive (Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi) in Istanbul, but the oldest register is located in the Topkapı Palace Archive. This register contains file copies of the sultan's outgoing orders dated 1544 – 1545 (951 – 952 Hicri), only twenty-seven years after the Ottoman conquest of Syria and Egypt in 1516 – 1517. The case referred to in the order quoted above is interesting because it provides information on how the Ottoman governed their provinces. It lists many of the taxes and revenues collected by the Ottomans and discusses the most important treasury personnel and the documents they created. Further, it describes how the Ottomans worked to control those personnel even at a distance and to induce their officials to adhere to concepts of just imperial rule (Shaw, 1961; Bakhit, 1982; Lellouch, 2006). Understanding how the Arab lands were administered and organized after the conquest is not merely a technical aspect of Egyptian history. It presents an example of Ottoman integration of newly conquered lands in a period when records are fairly plentiful, in contrast to the conquest of Rumeli, where most of our evidence comes from chronicles written later and not from contemporary documents (for another example see Greene, 2000). It also illuminates the whole issue of how an empire operates and challenges the stereotype of general Ottoman oppression of the conquered territories.

During the sixteenth century, the growth and enhancement of provincial governance was one of the trends that characterized the era in the Ottoman Empire, as well as in the rest of Europe, together with military development, the expansion of commerce and craftsmanship, and the growing role of religious ideologies. The Ottomans began the century with two provinces (Rumeli and Anadolu), both governed largely from Istanbul. By the second half of the century the empire contained 34 provinces, most of them having their own provincial staffs and treasuries (Howard, 2008: 91). With the expansion of provincial officialdom, the central bureaucracy, and the empire's road network, the government gained better control over flows of information and money between the provinces and the capital.

The particular episode introduced by the opening quotation provides a wealth of detail about provincial finances and central control (or lack of control) at a time when very few financial registers have survived. The revenues and documents

mentioned in the orders are similar to those of Ottoman administration in other provinces. (It would also be interesting to compare them with those of the previous Mamluk regime, which would require collaboration between Mamluk and Ottoman historians.) The tone of the orders suggests, however, that there had been an administrative change in the Arab lands since the Mamluk period. The impression they give is that, while under the Mamluks one would expect officials from the Egyptian center in Cairo to deal with a problem in Syria on the periphery, soon after the conquest the order of importance of these provinces seems to have switched. Syria became more central and Egypt more peripheral. Thus, these orders sent officials from Syria to deal with a problem in Egypt. This series of orders also reveals very clearly the priorities of Ottoman fiscal administration and the processes by which provincial officials tried or failed to implement those priorities. In the age of Süleyman, administrative rectitude was clearly a central goal of Ottoman governance, although just as clearly, there were problems in achieving it.

The background to this set of orders is that the provincial governor (*beylerbey*) of Egypt from 1525 to 1535 was Hadım Süleyman Paşa, and the governor from 1535 to 1537 was Divane Hüsrev Paşa; both men subsequently became Ottoman grand viziers. By 1544 both were out of office, and after his dismissal Hüsrev wrote to the Porte a long list of complaints about Süleyman. This list was so long that it was not called a letter (*mektup*), as was customary, but a register or *defter*. Hüsrev's *defter* of complaint no longer survives, but we know in general what was in it, because there is a separate order in the *mühimme* register covering each one of his complaints and explaining how it should be investigated. Several of these orders will be paraphrased and discussed below. The reason for such a thorough investigation is revealed in the very first order on this case, number 6 in the register. This order, dated 24 December 1544, tells us that on first looking into Hüsrev's complaints, the officials in Istanbul found that they did not have detailed finance registers for Süleyman's tenure as governor of Egypt; they had only received the summaries. The clear implication is that Süleyman was trying to hide something. However, in their view that did not mean that Hüsrev was innocent, because they did not have Hüsrev's detailed registers either. Moreover, according to the summary accounts, while Süleyman had sent his remittances regularly (the entry lists the amounts), in both years of Hüsrev's tenure as governor his remittances were deficient; a total of 140,106 gold pieces (*altun*) were missing. That circumstance casts considerable doubt on all his accusations against Süleyman. The authorities in Istanbul must have felt such a doubt too, because they gave meticulous instructions for a separate verification of every accusation.

The next four orders written after this one are dated 25 December 1544. Most of the rest were issued on 26 December, with some in January of 1545. The following *mühimme* register is missing, so we may never know what happened after that. From several of these orders we learn that while Hüsrev had sent a *defter* to the Porte ex-

posing Süleyman's alleged crimes, Süleyman had also petitioned regarding financial irregularities on the part of Hüsrev (Sahillioğlu, 2002, #75, #81, #97). That petition is not extant either, but in light of the money missing from Hüsrev's accounts, it seems credible. In fact, it sounds as if Hüsrev in his petition was trying to blame Süleyman for discrepancies in his own accounting. One might guess that these two men belonged to rival factions at the capital, and it would be interesting to investigate that.

The initial order also explained that an inspection team had been appointed consisting of the head judge of Aleppo, Salih Çelebi; the former head judge and previously juridical specialist (*müfti*) of Egypt, Muhyiddin; the current governor of Egypt, Davud; and the supervisor of revenue (*nazır-ı emval*) of Egypt, Mehmed. Later orders dated the first of January 1545 added to the team Ali Çelebi, the tax farm accountant (*mukataacı*) of Damascus, who had formerly held the office of tax farm accountant of Egypt. His place in Damascus was filled by promoting the current tax farm accountant of Egypt to Damascus (incidentally confirming the altered rank order of the two provinces), and the chief treasurer (*defterdar*) of Aleppo was informed of these changes (Sahillioğlu, 2002, #97, #127, #128, #129). Tax farming, the private contracting of tax collection, was a prominent administrative technique throughout Eurasia in the premodern period when bureaucracies were small.

An order on 24 December told the inspection team to compile detailed registers from the originals in the Cairo treasury. The Cairo treasury was the chief treasury of the Mamluk Empire and had not before been accountable to anyone; under the Ottomans, however, it was subordinate to Istanbul and should have been submitting its accounts regularly. The reports of the accounting team, said the order, should show the total revenue collected; the sources of revenue both in cash and in kind; whether it came from the land tax or tax farms; if from a tax farm, how much it was sold for; whether it yielded less or more than that amount; the revenue from the exchange of currency (from the Egyptian *para* to the Ottoman *akçe*); and the reasons for any increases or decreases. The team was also required to prepare detailed records of expenditures, salaries, and purchases, whether these were ordered by the sultan or necessary for some other reason, and to note how much money remained, as well as what had been spent on the fleet to India. It was particularly important to account for the missing 140,106 gold pieces. If the treasury of Egypt held a detailed register, then who lost or destroyed the central government's copy? If such a register did exist, they were to make a copy of it, seal it, and send it immediately to Istanbul. If the register did not exist, for whatever reason, they had to prepare one based on the existing information kept by the treasury. They were to induce the former juridical specialist (*müfti*) of Egypt, Muhyiddin, to sign a statement saying how much money had been sent when he was in office. The finance officer of Egypt should inspect all receipts submitted by tax collectors and their registers. Even if they had gone to Yemen or India, their registers still must be inspected and their names and descriptions sent to the Porte. No one could be protected.

Several other entries refer to a complaint by Hüsrev about a special tax Süleyman Paşa imposed on Egypt when he campaigned to India. The tax was substantial, amounting to two years' worth of Egypt's income, and it was all lost on the campaign; this might not be illegal but it was certainly incompetent (Sahillioğlu, 2002, #98, #99, #100, #101). The sultan commanded the registers to be inspected to determine how much Süleyman actually took on campaign in cash and in kind, what was submitted to the treasury and what was expended, and what were the salaries and expenses of the campaign. In addition, İbrahim Paşa, the commander of the Persian campaign, had been ordered to send 150,000 gold pieces to officials in Egypt and Mecca and the heads of the Arab tribes in Upper Egypt, and what had become of those amounts? If there were losses, they should be written in a register and sent to Istanbul. Other orders specified that since to conduct this inspection the head judge of Aleppo had had to leave his post (and his salary) to another, he should be paid 200 *akçe* per day plus an allotment of grain, and added that for each judge on the team a messenger (*çavuş*) had been appointed who should be paid 10,000 *akçe* (Sahillioğlu, 2002, #97, #99, #106).

Much of the information about the case was repeated in each of these orders, but each one had an additional purpose that demanded such repetition. In this case, one order was addressed to the head judge of Aleppo, the team leader, to encourage him, telling him that because of his piety and trustworthiness and scrupulosity and integrity the sultan was relying on him and urging him to work quickly and diligently (Sahillioğlu, 2002, #97). Other orders addressed to the whole team of inspectors also raised new issues, such as the question of the money taken to India. Still another, after describing the steps that the investigation should follow, ordered each member to appoint a representative (or perhaps a spy), to post with each of the other members, so that nobody could inspect anything without the others knowing what was happening (Sahillioğlu, 2002, #98, #100). One order was addressed only to the governor of Egypt to make sure that he knew what the head judge Salih Çelebi was supposed to receive from him and why. Another order addressed to the governor of Syria added that he should see that the inspection team had enough men with them and to report when they left Damascus and when they should get to Egypt (Sahillioğlu, 2002, #99, #104).

On 26 December a long series of orders was written regarding each of Hüsrev's complaints about Süleyman and how the team should investigate them. The complaints include the following: Süleyman's grants of money to the government of Gujarat out of treasury money supposed to be devoted to the poor; missing tax farming revenues that had not been written into the daily income register; Süleyman's fictitious purchase for fourteen *paras* (worth two *akçes* each) of 50,000 *ardeb* of grain (each *ardeb* being about 198 liters, totaling nearly 10 million liters of grain) which he then sold to Europeans at great profit; the diversion of the output of the state sugarhouses to his own expenses; the breaking of tax farming

contracts, which decreased the state's revenue; the sale of state-owned horses in the Sudan while feeding them with the state's fodder; his trading in state grain on behalf of himself and his men; unnecessary expenditures on the construction of buildings in Mecca, Medina and Jidda and a magnificent governor's palace in Cairo; his possession of a debt of 90 purses of state funds, equal to 9 million *akçes* (and how did he have that much money?); the execution of the tribal leader of Upper Egypt and his replacement by a rapacious deputy; the execution of the equally rapacious former supervisor of revenue and his agent and the confiscation of their excessive gains for himself; the execution of a number of tribal leaders and dignitaries just at a time when they had a lot of state funds; and finally, that although in the first four years of his governorship Süleyman's treasury accounts balanced, in the fifth year the income simply went missing, with the excuse that it got mixed up with the sixth year's income, which was impossible since it was collected on the annual harvest (Sahillioğlu, 2002, #66, #67, #68, #69, #73, #74, #80, #81, #78, #71, #72, #79, #76). Then there is a statement that the former tax farm supervisor İbrahim, one of the people who knew a great deal about the funds in the treasury of Egypt, had been executed, but that was not attributed directly to Süleyman and seems to have happened more recently; it may be an attempt to implicate Davud (Sahillioğlu, 2002, #77). Lastly, there is an accusation that seems to implicate Muhyiddin. In the time of the Mamluks, the judges' stipends came out of the land tax, but at the conquest the judges' stipends were switched to the fees collected for writing legal certificates (*hüccets*) and dividing inheritances. Apparently the then head judge of Egypt, Leyszade, tried to collect both, and Hüseyin estimated that Leyszade had twenty-four purses, almost 2 ½ million *akçes*, of money that he should not have. Muhyiddin, who was then the head juridical specialist, investigated this, but when he sent a petition and register to the capital he received no answer, and when that register was searched for in Istanbul, it was somehow not found, leading to doubt whether it had ever been sent (Sahillioğlu, 2002, #70).

The sultan's instructions for investigating these formidable accusations were very detailed and fascinating, but they are rather repetitious, and so the examples presented here are limited to two. The first example deals with the revenues of Egypt's sugar refineries in the context of the transition from Mamluk to Ottoman tax farming (Sahillioğlu, 2002, #69). This is an order to the whole inspection team, and it begins by stating that Hüseyin gave a *defter* notifying the sultan that the sugarhouses of Egypt belonged to the imperial treasury, and that while excessive revenue was collected from them, Süleyman Paşa caused it all to be diverted to himself; the state sugarhouses were completely removed (presumably from the state's income). The sugar presses in the subdistrict of Kalyub also belonged to the treasury, but only a third of the sugarcane being pressed went to the treasury, and meanwhile Süleyman somehow gained possession of these sugarhouses for himself and collected

the revenue. The sultan therefore ordered that the team inspect the situation “in its proper place”, right on the spot. They should find out how many sugarhouses there were; how much revenue the Mamluk sultans had collected before the conquest; if that was what had been collected after the conquest as well, and if not, had it fallen into the hands of others; how long the treasury had possessed the sugarhouses after the conquest; how they had been extracted from the treasury’s revenue, with what documentation they were held and for how long; and how Süleyman had acquired them. Both those others and Süleyman should bring their title certificates and documents and the team should inspect them. If Süleyman took possession from those people, how long ago did it happen? How many presses were involved? And how much sugar was produced each year? The order commanded the team to write all this in detail in a register and send it to the Porte together with their inspection register. It also related that Hüsrev claimed that Süleyman held a lot of other properties in Egypt too, most of which were actually the treasury’s properties. The treasury properties, especially the sugar presses, must be inspected, and the team must investigate in full detail how Süleyman got them. Did he take or get or buy them from the treasury (the word use, *almak*, means all those things), and if not, if he got them from the people who bought them from the treasury, how did they come to own them? The team must request the title certificates and documents of both the sellers and the buyers: what were their original properties, houses and shops, rooms and commercial buildings, or sugar presses, how many did they have, and from each one how much revenue was produced per year? For how many years had Süleyman been the owner? If these people possessed anything contrary to Islamic law, and if it actually belonged to the treasury, the team was supposed to repossess it on behalf of the treasury, and whatever amount of material they had taken from the produce of the presses since the starting date, the team should have that repossessed for the treasury as well, and report the final result in detail.

The second example deals more closely with the finance documents of the Ottoman state and tells us what kinds of evidence might be available in the archives. This order is also addressed to the whole inspection team, and it also begins, “Hüsrev Paşa gave a *defter*” (Sahillioğlu, 2002, #73). In this *defter* he claimed that Süleyman, while he was governor of Egypt, broke the contracts of the tax farms every year, as it said, “when it became another year,” that is, at the turn of the year. Since the revenue from every tax farm came out lower than the contracted amount, the treasury’s income was “completely destroyed.” So the sultan ordered that the tax farming registers in the treasury of Egypt should be carefully examined. Were the contracts of the tax farms really broken every year at the turn of the year, did the revenue come out low, how long had this been going on, what was the original amount of the tax farms in those years, who did they belong to, how much below the contracted amount did each tax farm come out, how much money was missing in total, and what was the reason for it? The investigative team was to identify year

by year the original amounts and the detailed transactions of each tax farm, make an exact copy of the tax farming registers, and prepare an inspection register. Hüsrev also complained that Süleyman had sent judges and deputy judges to some ruined places to inspect them and write a register of their conditions, making them into tax farms. From some of them, after causing them to come out below the contracted amount, he again subtracted some amount, bringing them in even lower (these transactions are rather mysterious even in the original order). The team was told to summon local experts and unbiased Muslims to testify about this. Hüsrev also claimed that in the houses of Süleyman and his men there were numerous things bought with state funds, which could be found in the registers of state purchases. The team was to investigate how much state money had been spent on these houses and was it necessary, were they the state's houses, were the repairs made on them necessary, were they done by official order, how much did they cost, and how much money was spent altogether and when?

On the same day that these and a number of other orders on similar issues for investigation were written to the team, several orders were also written to the governor of Egypt with various commands related to the case. About two weeks later, on 11 January, came an order to the financial supervisor (*nazır-ı emval*) accusing the chief treasurer of Egypt of turning in deficient remittances, and accusing the former judicial specialist, Muhyiddin, when he was the head judge of Egypt, of giving legal certificates (*hüccets*) validating those defective remittances. You, it told the financial supervisor, have been one of the experts for a long time, serving in those places and knowing all the officials and bureaucrats and everything to do with the taxes; you even wrote the registers sent by Hüsrev. It ordered him with ornate Persianate vocabulary and many impressive expressions, marking the centrality of these issues in the Ottoman view, to inspect the registers from Hüsrev's time together with others and report what they found to the capital.²

Since the next year's register is not extant, we shall never know the outcome of the case, who was actually guilty, or whether any of these accusations of corruption could be proven. Register entries like these, however, contain valuable information about how the central government ruled and communicated with the provinces, and how the Ottoman state sought to control and limit exploitation by its own officials. This particular study has implication beyond the case of Egypt, since while the circumstances of each province's entry into the empire are different, they may also have certain things in common. We have stories like this one of Ottoman and Mamluk officials, officials of the conquerors and those of the conquered people as well, who attempted to take advantage of the chaos of the time and the change of regime to enrich themselves at the expense of the taxpayers and the state treasury. Here in these orders, however, we also see the regulatory mechanisms of the Ottoman state, the care taken to collect revenue in adherence to the registers, and the efforts expended to prevent misuse of power on the part of the state's own officials.

Such cases also testify to the administrative procedures employed and the creation of documents that may still survive, guiding modern researchers to new avenues of study and new types of evidence for the history of past interactions.

Although we cannot know the results of this investigation, conclusions can be drawn from the records it left in the register of important affairs. The story of Ottoman rule is usually one of unmitigated oppression and extortion, told either from the vantage point of disgruntled former officials and religious leaders out of office, or from the viewpoint of peasants and townsmen whose lives had been upset by conquest and administrative change and who continually paid taxes but rarely saw the results of their efforts. A detailed look at the records of provincial organization and finance can modify this picture by revealing not only the problems faced by the new administrators but the efforts and negotiations employed in dealing with them, not only the taxes raised from the population but the infrastructures and accomplishments that were paid for with tax money, not only oppression by officials but their pursuit of justice as well. In this case the investigation was intended to correct the oppressive behavior of these former governors and discover if money had indeed been taken illegitimately, as alleged. The fact that both the oppression and the attempts to suppress it took place during Süleyman's reign helps to counter the glowing image of his era conveyed by chronicles and poetry. It was more mixed than the image portrays; there were problems and crimes as well as attempts to solve and punish them. The *mühimme* registers can also provide new insights into areas of interaction between the imperial capital and the local region, areas that are usually seen from the point of view of local provincial observers. Clearly, when informed of potential oppression by its officials, the state mobilized a team of men to investigate most carefully what had actually happened.

From these registers, moreover, it is clear that the central administration was not omniscient but was dependent on the provincial documents, petitions, and registers it received for information about conditions in the empire. Only by sending an inspection team could it figure out what should have been in the missing registers, reconstruct the unreported fiscal activity of the province, and discover what had happened to the money it should have received. Officials and bureaucrats in Istanbul had to develop a sharp sense of when to trust the messages and documents they received from the provinces and when to demand checks and inspections. For at least the first twelve years after the provincial reorganization of the Arab lands in 1525, and probably longer, no detailed finance registers for Egypt had reached the capital. It is noteworthy that the bureaucracy responded to this absence of detailed registers only when it was called to their attention by Husrev's petition and the problems arising from it. From this we can deduce that the central bureaucracy was still too small to keep careful track of all the provinces. It is a truism that the sinews of war may be money, but that peace relies on paperwork. Istanbul might conquer

these provinces on its own initiative, but it could only govern them on the basis of reports and petitions from the provinces themselves.

Submitting a petition was thus a political act, and the same could be said for submitting a register. The absence of this paperwork represented a problem for Ottoman administrators which they spent a great deal of money and effort attempting to rectify – not because they wanted their paperwork to be perfect, but because it was their only source of information on provincial conditions and the intentions of their officials. The center’s so-called “control” over the provinces took the form of control over the men in charge. When problems occurred, the state tightened the reins on the provincial officials. Orders often repeated that for an official, submitting these registers was one of the “important affairs” of the empire.

Emerging vividly from this incident is the extensive process of negotiation that Ottoman conquest generated: negotiation between the state and its officials, and between the officials and the local elites and populations. Ruling a conquered province was anything but a top-down imposition of power, as it is usually depicted; rather, it was a constant balancing act between the authority of the distant state and its real inability to exert direct control; between its officials’ impulses to obedience or to self-aggrandizement; and between the conquered people’s level of tolerance of these ruling outsiders and their ability to intervene in the process of rule. Much of this negotiation took place in the arena of fiscal administration, which makes it an ideal site for investigating the typical procedures employed and discovering changes over time.

We can also make some broader statements on the basis of this research, statements concerning the larger implications of the transformation of Syria and Egypt into Ottoman provinces. The transition from Mamluk to Ottoman rule in the Arab lands coincided in time with an era of significant political and administrative development that was widely shared across the Eurasian world and that altered the nature of the Ottoman state and its relationship to its provinces (Darling, 2008). The sixteenth century saw a tightening of the bonds between the provinces and the center in the European countries, in China, and in the Ottoman Empire as well. The government, through its demands for registers, inspections of officials, and appointments of agents, tried to centralize the administration of provincial affairs under its own control, just as various European governments in this period were doing. Simultaneously with the transition of the Arab lands to Ottoman rule, the Ottomans themselves were transitioning from a medieval, “feudal”, compact dynastic state to a major world empire, one of the two Great Powers of the sixteenth-century Mediterranean world (Darling, 1998). The inventions and developments of the era – military, political, and organizational – resulted in governments that were larger, more stable, more centralized, wealthier, and more capable than those of the medieval period. The evidence in the *mühimme* registers enables us to consider the incidents and costs of this process of transition.

NOTES

1. Sahillioğlu, 2002, no.9. The relevant entries, in order of date, are numbers 6, 97, 98, 99, 100, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 72, 7, 8, 9, 10, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 127, 128, 129, 92, and 93. They are cited by register number rather than page.
2. Sahillioğlu, 2002, #92. Whether this was the same *nazır* (undismissed) cannot be determined with certainty, as his name is not given, but if he wrote Hüsrev's registers it probably was the same man.

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