

Village Life in Cyprus at the Time of the Ottoman Conquest



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Village Life in Cyprus at the Time of the Ottoman Conquest

Edited by

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To all Cypriots

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EDITORS' NOTE

The late Ronald C. Jennings, from the Department of History of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, wrote many articles on Ottoman Cyprus and some of them were published by The Isis Press of Istanbul in a collected volume.¹ Besides he completed his important and lengthy work "*Village Life in Cyprus at the Time of Ottoman Conquest*" in the year of 1990, mainly based on the Turkish Archives. One typed copy of this work is still kept in the National Archives in Kyrenia, Cyprus. He gave one of the typed copies to Mustafa Haşim Altan, who was the director of the Kyrenia's National Archives, in those days because he wanted to obtain some assistance regarding the spelling of some place names, but unfortunately Jennings's valuable work couldn't be published due to several reasons.

This work, as Jennings mentioned himself, relies on the manuscripts tax and population survey of Cyprus (=TPSC) called *Defter-i mufassal-i livay-i Kıbrıs*, which is kept as a unique copy at the archives of the General Administration of Land Registry and Cadastral Survey, in Ankara, as an important source of Cyprus history. This manuscript, which was completed in 1527, lights up the way as a reflection of the Turkish point of view of the island, and also contains information on the management and applications during the island's previous Ottoman period. In particular, the original data about the Venetian period on the island of Cyprus can be found in this copy. Therefore, many scholars were able to study this copy of the manuscript before Dr. Jennings. There are also some scholars who still continue to analyse it.

Whilst his book *Christians and Muslims in Ottoman Cyprus and the Mediterranean World, 1571-1640*, (New York University Press, 1993), which was published before his death along with other articles relating to Cyprus were mostly based on the Cyprus Court (*Şeriye Sicili*) Registers, *Village Life* was based mainly on the Ottoman population and tax survey dated 1572. He studied systematically only 174 villages from the 1,145 units providing housing (including *mezra'*) registered in this manuscript. He researched these villages carefully from the aspect of their agricultural production, and discovered that there was a lot being produced from this

¹Ronald C. Jennings, *Studies on Ottoman Social History in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: Women, Zimmis and Sharia Courts in Kayseri, Cyprus and Trabzon*, introduced by Suraiya Faroqhi, The Isis Press, Istanbul, 1999.

agricultural production. From his point of view, the island was a great source of grains, immediately after the Ottoman conquest. Wheat, barley, millet, oats and wetch were grown in many places across the island. Besides these, carobs, broad beans, lentils, black-eyed beans and chickpeas were also produced, and taxed by the Ottoman administration.

Cyprus was also very rich from its abundance of fruits and vegetables. Nearly all the necessities of the Mediterranean world such as fruits, wine, grape juice, colocasia and olives were seen as the main fruits of the island. There were also many walnuts, almonds and acorn trees on the island. Besides these, it was also considered to be abundant with livestock. Pigs, bees and sheep were taxed, and it was supposed that the vital cotton yield was also taxed during those years. Hemp, linen and silk cocoon trading were the crafts that people knew on the island.

He also provides information about sesame seeds, saffron, taverns, mills, and tanneries in his writings and offers valuable information to his readers about the year of 1572 in Cyprus, from manuscripts that had remained hidden for many years.

We should not forget to point out that he had some concerns regarding the spelling of some name places that were mentioned in his writings. He wrote some of the places names that he mentioned in two or three different ways, such as; *Girine*, *Girniye*, *Girne* or *Magose*, *Magosa*. But this does not reduce the value of his work. Cyprus's historical topography has yet to be solved, therefore, a few spelling mistakes should be excused. With his serious work, he filled a missing gap in the history of Cyprus, and has put the setting of Cyprus in to some sort of context during that relatively period of unknown Mediterranean history, compared to the information published in the 1970's and 1980's, hence, at last, someone had broached this topic. Moreover after the publicising of this topic, since 1990, there has been an increase in the number of young Turkish researchers who have become interested in Cyprus's history, and they have started to present new information related to the island to the academic world.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important reasons that I understood this study of village agriculture is that I have long been interested in village life. Between 1963 and 1965, right after graduation from college, I spent two years as an English teacher at the *Maarif Koleji* (now called *Anadolu Lisesi*) in Samsun, Turkey. In afternoons, on weekends and on vocations I devoted much of my free time to visiting villages. First in the civinity of Samsun, but then slowly, steadily expanding my horizons a long much of the rest of the Black Sea cost, into the Black Sea mountaion range and then into central and eastern Anatolia, I had many fascinating and instructive visits which made imdelible imprints on my mind.

In addition, the unusually high quality and accuracy of the detailed Ottoman register of 1572 (*defter-i mufassal-i liva-yi Kibrus*) demanded my attention. That quality had long ago been noted by Halil Inalcik; Gilles Veinstein and Benjamin Arbel are presently involved in the painstaking process of preparing a complete edition, with translitreation and translation of the whole register. Even though village life in Cyprus currently is quite seriously thretened by europeanization, especially anglization and even though vicil strife and the Turkish intervention of 1974 with its tragic population movements have provided more threats to village life, three visits to the Turkish sector and one to the Greek stregthen my feeling that the register is highly accurate. That register, which purpots for purposes of taxation to idnetify every adult taxpayer, according to village or town quarter, as well as the entire collective annual taxation for each village, is preserved in the cadastral archive (*Tapu ve Kadastro Arşivi*) in Ankara.

The register of 1572 is so extremely important because it is only known census ever made by the Ottoman government with detailed information about the population and economy of the villages (and towns, of course) of Cyprus. That is so unfortune, because one can only view population and economy in a simple, static glimpse, whereas I have been able to show profound demographic and economic fluctuations in the Kayseri region by using four or five registers covering more than a century¹ (that has also been done by a few other scholars in their areas). So despite the

¹Ronald C. Jennings, "The Population, Society, and Economy of the Region of Erciyes dagi in the 16th Century," in *Contributions à l'histoire économique et sociale de l'Empire Ottoman*, ed. J. Bacqué-Grammont and P. Dumont, in Louvain, 1986, 149-250.

excellence of that register, the picture of Cyprus which can be shown in necessarily is somewhat one-dimensional. Because of the well known Ottoman tendency to continue, at least temporarily, most elements from the previous systems of taxation and economy in newly conquered territories, that census is almost as useful for the study of Venetian as for Ottoman Cyprus. It would be extremely difficult to determine exactly when that taxation may have applied, if ever, so I have avoided making any statements about the relative burdens under Ottoman or Venetian taxation, or even the precise nature of that taxation.

From the detailed population and taxation survey (*defter-i mufassal-i liva-yi Kibrus*) of Cyprus I took notes on the taxation of all of the villages which paid annual taxes amounting to at least 10,000 *akce*, namely 174. For most agricultural products the rate of taxation was per cent 20, or 1/5, so to determine their actual weights or volumes I had only to multiply the figures by five. Most of those villages turned out to be quite prosperous, and rather large. Some turned out to be fairly poor but very large. Others turned out to be very small and very wealthy. Careful notes had to be taken because microfilming or other copying was not permitted.

There is a well known tendency to denigrate villagers and village life, particularly by using the term "peasant". Villagers are usually characterized as unable to think critically, as traditionally oriented people who follow tenaciously in the steps of their fathers and grandfathers, from generation to generation, and are extremely hostile to all change. Without the help of "feudal lords" they supposedly are barely capable of rational actions, such as introducing new cash crops, or even managing their own fields. They supposedly live primitive lifestyles. They avoid, or perhaps even despise, anyone not from their own village, and they refuse to leave their ancient lands. In modern Turkish historiography they are viewed with nearly as much apprehension as dervish orders.

Based on three trips to the north and one to the south, currently Cypriot villagers, at least judging from their European dress, their modern houses, and the profusion of television aerials, their conditions of life almost everywhere that I have been are remarkably affluent. Of course, that does not say much about what conditions might have existed for earlier generations. Although Cyprus has no tradition of good roads, being an island with a couple of good ports and several more that are quite satisfactory for traditional shipping meant that regular shipments of cotton and cotton products, wine and grape products, olive oil, carobs, or flax might be easily made, whether by foreign or by native Cypriot entrepreneurs. At least as important for exports were grains

(almost exclusively wheat and barley) for which they always found markets, in the 16th century, anyway. In a recently published article entitled "*The Population, Taxation, and Wealth in the Cities and Villages of Cyprus*," I have, among other things, described the agriculture of 26 of the wealthiest villages on the island (two for each district), to reveal the remarkably varied and sophisticated systems of cultivation that prevailed in each.¹

This study is based on notes taken about every village which paid 10,000 *akce* or more in taxes annually. Despite its small size, Cyprus has an unusual diversity of terrain and geographical features. It has flat, fertile plains, high, barren mountains, and rich hills with great varieties of fruits, vegetables, and grains which thrived in the 16th century. Based on my survey of 174 villages, the most important crops by far were wheat and barley, while small amounts of other grains, like vetch, oats, and millet also grew. Olives, carobs, almonds, and walnuts, in that order, were the major tree crops. The most important vegetables were legumes like chickpeas, broad beans, lentils, and cowpeas. Grapevines were very common, while sesame and colocasia were minor crops. Cotton was by far the most widespread commercial product grown by the villagers, but flax, hemp, linen, saffron, and silk were also available. Although, especially in the wealthier villages, many important commercial crops were grown, most villages seem to have produced nearly all of the grains, fruits, and vegetables that they could consume. Many probably had large surpluses of grains, wines, or olive oil, which they could market, but cotton was almost everywhere the single most important strictly commercial crop.

First, I treated the number of villages, by district, which produced at least enough to pay taxes on each crop or product, and naturally their proportions among the 174 villages. Then I dealt, where possible, with the actual weights or volumes of the crops, by village. Next I calculated the proportion that each crop was of the entire agricultural production of the individual villages. Finally, I determined the proportions per taxpayer (*nefer*) for many of the crops studied. Almost all of the villages studied obviously had a great proportion of their villagers living with a full, healthy, balanced diet, through consuming a variety of palatable and nutritious foods regularly.

Since the Latin crusading Lusignan family took over rule of Cyprus at the very end of the 12th century, Cyprus was renowned for its wealthy, fertile, populous villages and thriving cities. Cyprus was a very important last stage on the pilgrimage routes of Latin Christians, many of whom wrote vivid

¹Ronald C. Jennings, "The Population, Taxation, and Wealth in the Cities and Villages of Cyprus, according to the detailed population survey (*defter-i mufassal*) of 1572", *Journal of Turkish Studies, Raıyyet Rusumu, Essays presented to Halil Inalcik*, 10, 1986, 175-189.

accounts of their visits. The largely Greek Orthodox natives of the island were frequently exasperated by the Latin ruling class who introduced much of the feudal system, especially in rural life. They were primarily interested in enriching themselves at the expense of their subjects and encouraged the development of a cash economy for export. Extensive sugar plantations were created on the island, often models of efficiency with highly developed systems of irrigation that were encouraged by the French ruling class and then the Venetian merchants who became increasingly interested in that place and soon took it for themselves (1489). Several villages, such as Episkopi (of the Corner family), Kolossi (of the Knights Hospitalers), and Kouklia were renowned for industry and productivity.

At least some Islamic legists explicitly consider city dwellers, with their religious and educational nucleus of buildings of a superior order in comparison with villagers and nomads.

Although of high quality, the produce of Cyprus was usually inexpensive. There was much fertile land. Winter rains, seasonal streams, and wells made for bountiful harvests. In the 16th century, it was renowned for producing abundant agricultural surpluses, such as grains, fruits, and vegetables which were in great demand not only in colonial Venice but elsewhere in the Mediterranean world, and even in central Europe. Cyprus was one of the most productive places anywhere. One of the earliest plantation economies began in Cyprus, where sugar cane was utilized as a cash crop. Only when the eastern Mediterranean sugar production was finally undercut by the infusion of cheaper sugar did it begin to give way to cotton as a cash crop. Throughout the 16th century cotton remained the leading commercial export crop. The diversity of Cyprus is quite remarkable, particularly given the fact that it is a very small island, and that so much of the land is mountainous. Its villagers grew a great variety of crops. One village might depend almost entirely on grain production, while others depended heavily on vine cultivation, or carobs and olives. In some places cotton production predominated. However, most villages produced a variety of crops. Since most rural Ottoman taxation required fixed proportions of the various crops, it was imperative for government officials to know in detail the typical annual agricultural production of recent years so that they could have some ideas about the sources and amounts of tax revenues that could be expected.

Another reason for undertaking this study is to dispel the notion that the diets of villagers necessarily had to be dull and insipid, and that disaster normally was just around the corner for them in the Mediterranean world. That idea is relentlessly developed by Fernand Braudel, although he himself derived it in part from certain French geographers. At least for Cyprus (and I hope later to expose this misconception for other Ottoman territories also) it is misleading, to say the least.