

**SLAVERY AND CONVERSION Of The SLAVES TO ISLAM IN  
THE OTTOMAN SOCIETY  
According to the Canonical Registers of Bursa between  
XVth and XVIIIth Centuries**

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**ÖZET**

**XV-XVIII. Yüzyıl Şer'iyye Sicillerine Göre Osmanlı  
Toplumunda Kölelik ve İhtida**

XIX. yüzyıl sonlarına kadar, hemen bütün dünyada köle ticaretinin oldukça yaygın olduğunu biliyoruz. Özellikle harplerde elde edilen esirler "köle pazarları"na getiriliyor ve burada el değiştiren bu talihsiz insanlar yeni ve zor bir hayatı kabul etmek zorunda kalıyorlardı. Bu yazıda kısaca harp-kölelik ilişkisi ile bu harp esirlerinin Osmanlı toplumunda nasıl bir kültürel değişime uğradıkları -ihtidalar esas alınarak- bir belgenin ışığı altında değerlendirilmeye çalışılacaktır.

In Bursa as well as in other cities of Anatolia, among the groups who had converted to Islam, the slaves occupied an important place. We know that the slave trade, throughout the middle ages, was very widespread all over the world. There were naturally thousands of captives and slaves in Anatolia. At the period of Seljuks, Yabanlu (a small fair place in east Anatolia) was an important market where slave trade was made.<sup>1</sup> From Kipjaks, Georgians, Armenians and Greeks living in Muslim countries, briefly from all nationalities, slaves were bought and sold at this market. One of the principal sources of slaves at this period, was wars. It was during and after wars that thousands of people were, reciprocally, captured and then often sold into slavery .

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<sup>1</sup> Sumer, Faruk, "Yabanlu Pazarı", Turk Dunyasi Arastirmalari, issue: 37, p. 21-24.

At the period of Seljuks, we know that the Muslim armies, constantly struggled in all battlefields, especially at the frontiers of the country, and captured a lot of people. The famous historian Ibn Bibi reports that the Seljuk princes who lived at the frontiers of the country captured hundred thousands of people every year, and most of them embraced Islam.<sup>2</sup> It must be noted that the situation was not any different during the first Ottoman conquests which approximately took place under the same conditions. Then, we can say that thousands of captives were imported into the Ottoman cities every year, sold in the markets of slaves and placed in the Muslim houses as male and female slaves.

What was the ratio of the slaves in Bursa with regard to its general population? How long did they stay within the status of slavery? In which conditions were they emancipated and how did they continue their life after the emancipation. What cultural changes did they face with in the Islamic society of which they had become members? How long could they keep their former religion and in which conditions did they embrace the new one, since they had entered the Turkish houses. How were they welcomed in this new environment? Which motives, for example, had an influence on them in their choosing new names?

It is possible to add on these questions. But in such a short paper, we cannot answer every question. We know that the answers to these questions are available in the canonical registers of Bursa. Nevertheless, we will not deal, in this paper, with the history of slavery per se, its sources, the slave trade, the status of the slavery in the Ottoman society. What we will instead look into is the conversion cases of the slaves according to the data given by the Bursa canonical registers.

We believe that it is impossible to determine the real ratio of slaves in Bursa unless its population is known. The fact that no census (in modern sense) during that period had been made leaves us with great difficulties.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the wars that began at the XIV (fourteenth) century and continued in the course of the Ottoman history, led to the importation of countless captives to the Ottoman cities. For example, a record in the canonical registers gives us sufficient information on the trade of the slaves captured at Eflak war

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<sup>2</sup> Ibn Bibi, *al-Avamiru'I-Alaiya fi'l-Umuri'I-Alaiya* (facsimile), pub. A.S.Erzi, Ankara, 1956, p. 26-27; Osman Cetin, *Selcuklu Muesseseleri ve Anadolu'da Islamiyetin Yayilisi*, Istanbul, 1981, p. 160-163.

<sup>3</sup> Halil İnalçık, *H. XV. Asir Satıyı ve Ticaret Tarihine Dair Vesikalar*, *Belleten*, XXIV, 93; p. 45.

in February 1650.<sup>4</sup> According to the same source, every two Ottoman soldiers had possessed in this war 15 captives who were later sold for the price of 45.000 akçes.

As it will be understood from the information given by the above mentioned record, seven-fold captives of the soldiers who took part in this war, were imported into the Ottoman territories. But the number of captives after each war did not amount this number. We must accept that between XIVth and XVth centuries, the importation of the captives to the Ottoman cities did not stop and they were sold as slaves. In fact it is possible to find a lot of information on the abundance of booties and slaves in the Ottoman chronicles.<sup>5</sup> It must also be noted that the captive circulation did not end in XVIth century but continued later.

Selim III sent a ferman to the judge of Bursa and ordered in it that those who were captured from Austrians and then possessed by Muslim people as slaves, had to be summoned to the court. If they embrace Islam without any compulsion and threatening, they would be left in their masters' possession, and if they insist on the Christianity, they would be handed over to Austrian officials.<sup>6</sup>

In the response of the high court judge of Bursa, it is expressed that while 29 male and 35 female slaves remained in the hands of their masters, for they willingly accepted Islam, 19 slaves were delivered to the concerned, and accordingly were sent to their country as they insisted on the Christianity.<sup>7</sup>

In October 1789, the Ottomans were defeated in the war against the Austrian and a few cities including Belgrade were invaded by the Austrians.<sup>8</sup> After sometime, the Ottoman-Austrian armies met at a place named Yergöğü, not far from Ruscuk, where, this time, the Austrian army had great losses; five thousand soldiers were killed and one thousand were captured (8 June 1790).<sup>9</sup> After this war, on August 4th 1791, the treaty of Zıstovi was signed between the two states.<sup>10</sup> The fact that Selim III sent an imperial letter above-mentioned addressing the Judge of Bursa demonstrates that a decision had been taken on exchanging captives in this treaty.

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<sup>4</sup> Conanical Registers of Bursa, B 13/191 169 b.

<sup>5</sup> Aşıkpasazade, *Asikpasaoglu Tarihi*, pub. N. Atsiz, Istanbul, 1970, p. 57,60, 72, 125,128,134,138, 188, 211- 212.

<sup>6</sup> Canonical R. B, B 84/286 101 b.

<sup>7</sup> Canonical R. B, B 84/100b- 101a.

<sup>8</sup> Uzuncarsili, İ. Hakkı, *Osmanli Tarihi*, Ankara, 1982, IV , 555-556.

<sup>9</sup> Uzuncarsili, *ibid*, IV , 568.

<sup>10</sup> Uzuncarsili, *ibid*, IV , 571.

As it is understood from the above record, even during the periods in which the Ottoman state receded, its armies began to be defeated and territorial losses were on increase, the importation of slaves into the Ottoman cities still continued. But what is important in this record is that it was also during the periods of recedes and collapses that many slaves embraced Islam leaving their former religion behind. That 64 out of 83 slaves embraced Islam, points out that the ratio of conversion among captives was 77%. More important is that the process in which the captives left their former religion to embrace Islam was very short. Even if we think that it is possible that some of these slaves had been captured at preceding wars, it is more reasonable to accept that most of them was captured in the latest war for they had been subject to the above-mentioned treaty. We understand that three or five years passed between the sending of the imperial letter to the judge of Bursa, and the war. And this shows us that most of the slaves embraced Islam in a very short time of three or four years.

We can now look into another question. What was the situation during the first Ottoman centuries? Were there any movements of conversion seen among slaves at that period? Now let us go back to the XVth and XVIth centuries and find the answers to this question in the light of the practices in that period.

During our research on the canonical registers of Bursa, the records related to the emancipation of slaves has had an important place and drew our attention. It is possible to find thousands of records of emancipation especially in the registers belonging to the XVth, XVIth and XVIIth centuries. In those registers that were written down as "Mukataba", "Itk" and "Tadbir", we can find the names of male and female slaves, their nationalities, what kind of conditions they had been emancipated, on their masters, their particularities, and sometimes their religions. The registers in which the religions of slaves are explained numbers less than the others. Although the names of the slaves inform us about their religions, we have preferred finding out whether there were any slaves whose religions were recorded, so we could determine the ratio of conversion to Islam among them. For this reason, excluding only three of them, we have found 221 registers relevant to XVth and XVIth centuries. So we have tried, according to these registers, to bring into light not only the nationality of the slaves in XVth and XVIth centuries, but also the ratio of emancipation of them and the way they were given their freedom.

We have defined certain criteria in grouping the 221 registers that form the table 1 in this paper. For example, we have defined the registers that inform us about religions of slaves under the categories

of "He/She is a Muslim", "He/She is an unbeliever", "He/She is a Christian", "He/She is a Jewish". To form this table, we have chosen all the records by a random selection out of 18 (eighteen) major registers.<sup>11</sup>

Nationality	Sexuality						General Total	%
	Male			Female				
	Muslim	Non-Muslim	Total	Muslim	Non Muslim	Total		
Abaza	1	-	1	1	-	1	2	0.90
Albanian	7	-	7	10	-	10	17	7.69
Bogdan	1	-	1	2	-	3	3	1.35
Bosnian	25	2	27	20	1	21	48	21.71
Circassian	11	-	11	18	-	18	29	13.12
Eflak	1	-	1	2	-	2	3	1.35
Hungarian	4	-	4	2	-	2	6	2.71
Frenk	4	1	5	1	-	1	6	2.71
Habeş	2	-	2	-	-	-	2	0.90
Hrvat	2	1	3	-	-	-	3	1.35
Egyptian	1	-	1	-	-	-	1	0.45
Laz	1	1	2	-	-	-	2	0.90
Leh	2	-	2	1	-	1	3	1.35
Moroccan	-	-	-	1	-	1	1	0.45
Greek	8	1	9	2	3	5	14	6.33
Russian	27	2	29	15	3	18	47	21.26
Sudanese	1	-	1	-	-	-	1	0.45
Tatar	1	-	1	-	-	-	1	0.45
Yemen	1	-	1	-	-	-	1	0.45
Zengibar	2	-	2	-	-	-	2	0.90
Unknown	18	4	22	4	3	7	29	13.12
TOTAL	120	12	132	79	10	89	221	100
%	54.29	5.42	59.72	35.74	4.52	40.27	100	

Table 1: General dispersion of male and female slaves

<sup>11</sup> Three of these registers belong to XVIIth century (B 201209, B 591253, B 1031316). Others belong to 1478 until 1538.

Table 1 gives us also the following results:

	Total	%
Muslim male and female slaves	199	90
Non-Muslim male and female slaves	22	10

It is clear from this table that there were slaves belonging to more than twenty different ethnic background or countries between XVth and XVIIIth centuries in Bursa. Among them, those who formed the first five most crowded groups, were Bosnians (21.71 %), Russians (21.26 %), Circassians (13.13 %), Albanians (7.69 %) and the Greek (6.33 %). The ratio of slaves who belonged to other nations, was close to each other approximately .

199 out of 221 slaves embraced Islam. All of who embraced Islam, were called "Fulan b.Abullah" or "Fulana bt. Abdullah". This formulation shows us that all of them were converted people. Twelve male slaves and ten female slaves insisted on their former religion and did not embrace Islam. In terms of the percentage of these numbers, we can say that while 90 % of slaves in Bursa embraced Islam, 10 % did not change their religion. The ratio of conversion was 91 % among male slaves and 89 % among female slaves.

As it is seen, the ratio of conversion of slaves and slave girls had big differences in course of time between XVth and XVIIIth centuries. What was the influence of the emancipation of these people on their conversion? As it is known, according to the Islamic law, slaves are freed in different methods.

Firstly: The masters emancipate the slave for nothing but for gaining the contentment of God. (Hasbatan li'llah wa rizaan li-mardati'llah). In this case, the slave pays nothing.

Secondly: Emancipation on condition of death of the owner. In this practice that was called "*tadbir*", if the master says: "This male or female slave will be freed when I die", this becomes his will. His heirs must act according to this testament and free the slave mentioned in the testament.

Thirdly: The method called "*mukâtaba*". In this practice, if the slave pay to the master the amount agreed upon by both sides beforehand, the slave becomes free. This is a case in that the slave was considered to have bought himself with a condition.

Apart from these methods, there was also another method for freeing slaves called "*ummu valâd*" or "*istîlâd*" which means that in the case of having a baby from her master, the female slave has her

freedom after her master dies, as a result of having a baby .The heirs have no right to treat this woman as a female slave.<sup>12</sup>

We have these results in the second table according to the registers that formed the table 1 from the point of view of methods in freeing slaves.

Form of emancipation	Emancipated				General Total	%
	Muslim		Non Muslim			
	Male	Female	Male	Female		
Itk	75	65	7	6	153	69
Tedbir	3	8	-	-	11	5
Mukataba	41	5	5	4	55	25
Others	1	1	-	-	2	1
<b>Totally</b>	120	35	12	10	221	100
<b>%</b>	54	35	6	5	100	

Table 2 : Shows methods of emancipation of slaves mentioned in table 1 .

As the second table shows us, 140 out of 199 (70 %) slaves were emancipated without paying anything, for only the contentment of God. 46 of them (23 %) were emancipated via the method of "mukataba". We must remember that 41 of them were male slaves. For the mukataba was a freedom obtained by payment or serving, and slaves were in need of this payment or service. Masters used to give opportunities of working and gaining money for the slaves who could do this. Those who were freed by the method of *tadbir* were 11 (6 %) slaves. On the contrary of *mukataba*, female slaves formed the majority in *tadbir* (8 girls).

It is clear that, 22 persons appear in the group of non Muslim slaves .12 out of them were male and 10 of them were female slaves. In total, 13 (29 %) slaves were freed without any payment and service, and 9 (41 %) by way of the method of *mukataba*. There is no record of non-muslim male or female slaves who were emancipated by the way of *tadbir*.

<sup>12</sup> For further information: O. Nasuhi Bilmen, Hukuk-i Islamiyye ve Istilahat-i Fikhiyye Kamusu, Istanbul, 1969, IV, 33-57.

What draws our attention here, is that there is a big difference between the ratio of Muslim and non Muslim slaves emancipated by the means of "**itk**" or "**mukataba**". 75 % of Muslim slaves and slave girls were freed for God's sake, and only 25 % of them by means of the payment. However, these ratios are close to each other in terms of non Muslim male and female slaves (59 % - 41 %). This case points out that Muslims practiced 'freeing' for God's sake as a way to encourage non-Muslims to embrace Islam and indeed they were successful in this. For this reason, we have to accept that ten thousands of slaves who had a place in the Ottoman society between XIVth and XVth centuries converted to Islam and became a component of the Community of Islam. The above-mentioned information, exposes in the most clear form that it must be dwelled upon on this group seriously when the studies on conversion to Islam in Bursa and other cities are carried out.

We would like to conclude the subject by adding an important point. According to the Islamic law, the status of being male and female slaves continues even after embracing Islam. To embrace Islam is not a reason in itself for being emancipated. Apart from this, children of slaves who get married are considered as slaves by law.<sup>13</sup> One wonders if a separate and continuous class of slaves whose parents were slaves as well, came into existence through the marriage of slaves with slaves, in the course of time?

It is not possible to give a clear answer to this question in terms of the Ottoman society and Bursa. However we have encountered some records in the canonical Registers showing that a few people married their male slaves and female slaves off,<sup>14</sup> but we could not find any records about the children not only given birth by them and but at the same time considered as slaves according to the law. If there had been male and female slaves of second and third generations, their parents must have been mentioned as Muslims when they had to be recorded into the canonical registers.

As Fatma Aliye, the daughter of Ahmed Cevdet Pasha -a famous Ottoman historian and lawyer-, informed us that in XIXth century it had become a common belief and practice to free slaves after 7 or 9 years or at least to sell them to the rich who could emancipate them.<sup>15</sup>

All of these demonstrate that slavery had not been considered in Ottoman society as a status lasting throughout their life-time. And most of the slaves were emancipated after a while and joined into society as free members of the Muslim community.

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<sup>13</sup> Bilmen, *ibid*, IV, 31.

<sup>14</sup> Canonical R. B., A 4/4 93 a.

<sup>15</sup> Fatma Aliye, *Nisvan-i Islam*, Istanbul, 1309, p. 22-24.