Slavery in general occupied quite an important position in the state structures and social forms of medieval and early modern Muslim empires, including the Ottoman. There were, however, different forms of the phenomenon of slavery in those empires in terms of ownership, status and the occupations of slaves, determining the relative importance of slavery in different areas of the political, social and economic sphere. A major distinction between different categories of slavery can be first made in terms of ownership, between state (or sultanic) slaves and private ones. The former, who are known in the Ottoman case as *gulâm-i mîr* or *kapıkullu*, can be further distinguished into separate groupings depending on whether they carried out labour services, or whether they manned the army (the janissary corps), and the administration, often rising to the highest positions and becoming *paşa*, *beylerbey*, even *grand vizier*. Private slaves too could be given military and administrative duties if owned by high-post dignitaries, however, the bulk of private slaves were used as labour force. Halil Inalcik has given an overview of slave labour in the early Ottoman Empire and points out its presence in all of the major areas of the economy, including domestic services, the crafts, as well as agriculture.¹

In any case, the importance of slave labour as a force of production was not primary in the Ottoman economy, and irrespective of how common it was, it only played a secondary and supplementary role to the work of free small-owning peasants or craftsmen. This was especially true for agriculture, which was based on the work and production of independent *reaya* peasants, Christian and Muslim alike, through prolonged holding of officially

state-owned plots of land under the forms of tapu and tasarruf. The use of slave labour in agriculture during the 15th and 16th centuries is mostly observable in the large sultanic estates (padışah hassları) that were mostly located in Thrace and Bithynia and were exploited through the allocation of parcels of land to people of a sultanic slave status (the ortakçı kullar) on share-cropping arrangements. In those cases, the conditions of work and production pertained more to some type of servile labour, somehow resembling western medieval serfdom, than to a plantation type slave-operating production.2

Slaves were occasionally used in private farming too, and the general view on the subject places them in the large, market oriented estates, çiftlik, that were held by members of the ruling class, or by pious endowments.3 In fact, very little is actually known about agricultural slave holding during the 15th century, outside the ortakçı kullar of the sultanic estates, the more so since private çiftlik estates are not supposed to be common during this early period. Moreover, little if any attention has been paid to the fact that common reaya peasants could be slave-holding.4 In fact, wealthy peasants occasionally appear to possess some slaves, who were presumably used as labour force, assisting those peasants in maintaining and even expanding their farms.5 In this respect, a localized study at a regional level may shed some light on the phenomenon, concerning the question of the very existence of agricultural slavery, its spreading and its relative importance in private farming, relating these matters with the particular historical conditions of the regions under examination.6

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4 Some discussion of this subject is included in Asdrachas, Spyros, Μηχανισμοί της αγροτικής οικονομίας στην τουρκοκρατία (Mechnisms of rural economy under Turkish rule—15th–16th c.) (Athens: Themelio, 1978), 72–74.

5 S. Asdrachas, Μηχανισμοί, 74–75, suggests that private agricultural slaves were generally share croppers. However, this is a speculation based on a projection of the status and working conditions of the ortakçı, of the sultanic and other estates, upon the whole of agricultural slaves. In fact, there is no evidence of share cropping arrangements, or of any other generalized form of work, in so far as the occasional slaves of ordinary reaya farmers are concerned.

6 The present study is based on research that is carried out under the project “Settlements, Population and Economy in the Greek Lands, 13th–16th Centuries” of the Institute of Mediterranean Studies / Foundation of Research and Technology Hellas.