OLD PLAYERS AND NEW IN THE TRANSITION OF CYPRUS TO OTTOMAN RULE

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On an unspecified day in 1578 an odabaşı of the Ottoman Court, Mustafa Ağa, his brother Mehmed Bey, two female slaves, a younger male slave and two servants disembarked together on the island of Cyprus with the aim of computing a secret mission.1 Contrary to all expectations, the expedition was not to be led by the two Muslim gentlemen, but by the two girls, who led the group from the city of Mâğösa to an unnamed place in the hinterland of what was then the small port centre of Tuzla.

Following the indications of the two slave girls, the group moved on until reaching a spring near the village of Voroklini. The group pitched a tent in which, safe from prying eyes, the servants started digging. Meanwhile, as a further precaution, the three slaves intercepted and warded off the peasants flowing to the spring. Later the peasants would talk of having recognised the two maidens and the boy as being the children of the feudal landlord who had owned five villages in the surrounding countryside. They said he was ‘a wealthy aristocrat whose family had been captured and separated during the time of the conquest’.2 As the qâdı of Kirine, who was possibly involved in the plan, had not hesitated in providing the necessary travel papers for undertaking this venture and allowing the group to leave the island, the sultan suspected that treasure buried before the war had been retrieved and ferreted away. After all, it was reasonable to think that the prospect of a handsome ransom could have motivated not only Mustafa Ağa (who owned the three slaves) and his brother, but also, naturally, those directly concerned, who saw the success of the expedition as their only hope of freedom. The investigation was reopened following the discovery of some gold coins (qôrôna altûni) of unknown origin at Mustafa Ağa and Mehmed Bey’s father’s home. During the interrogation carried out by the qâdı of Istanbul, the brothers came up with two contradictory versions of the expedition, arousing further suspicion amongst central government officials.

1 BOA, Mühimme Defteri 35, hükûm 455, 23 Cemazüülahir 986 (27 August 1578).
2 Ibidem.
Under Ottoman law, the action was not seen as the legitimate repossession of a private inheritance, but rather as the theft of goods that the conquest had rendered ‘public property’, seeing as it constituted part of the booty for the Ottoman army and the imperial government.3

This episode was one of many involving the almost 14,000 prisoners captured at Nicosia on 9 September 1570.4 According to a census taken by the Venetians during the siege, the population seeking refuge within the city walls reached 56,000, more than double the number of inhabitants registered in times of peace (20–25,000).5 Worried about the dangers of an enemy invasion, many peasants sought refuge in the capital, whose city walls had been fortified by the Venetians over the previous 30 years. After three months of siege, the Ottoman cavalry broke through the breach opened by the artillery and began to sack the city, killing many people. They mainly killed soldiers, but also civilians and members of the clergy. In the following hours a wider sector of the population was captured and inventoried in an apposite register. Knowing that the campaign was still far from over, Lala Mustafa Pasha, commander in chief of the Ottoman army, was determined to make Famagosta surrender, demonstrating the sorry fate awaiting those who, like the citizens of Nicosia, tried to withstand the victorious advance of his troops. Echoes of the catastrophic events at Nicosia were also evident in the Ottoman census of Cyprus, carried out at the end of 1572, in which the once populous capital of the previous regime contained no more than 220 khâne, 11 bachelors and 3 invalids, figures that were more in keeping with a medium-large village.6

Slavery would not lead to the same fate for all those prisoners—soldiers, religious men, nobles, artisans and peasants—who were about to be integrated with the lowliest status into Ottoman society. A few days

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