

The Devshireme System in the Ottoman Empire

Hanxu Qi ^{1,*}

¹ School of Oriental and African Studies, Xi'an International Studies University

Abstract. The Ottoman Empire, as a multi-ethnic empire, was first created by the Turks. In the fifteenth century, the Byzantine Empire was destroyed and the Turks made Constantinople their capital. By the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire had grown to its full potential and reached its peak in the seventeenth century, spanning three continents: Asia, Europe and Africa. In order to rule and administer the empire, the Turkish rulers created a number of unique systems and models of administration, such as the Sultanate, the Tima, the Millet and the Demisheme. The Demesme system was a rigorous selection system that was important to the military and political development of the Ottoman Empire. A study of this system will help us to understand the rise and fall of the Ottoman Empire, its institutional structure and management style, and will also be of some value for the present-day employment system.

1 INTRODUCTION

Originally, the term devshirme referred specifically to the process of collecting the spoils of war entitled to one-fifth of the 'pencyek' [1]. The pencyek system was based primarily on the Shariah provision that one-fifth of the spoils of war obtained in foreign combat went to the sultan, as did one-fifth of the number of prisoners of war. Later, the Demisheme system developed into a system of regular recruitment of Christian children to fill vacant positions in the court and government. The origins of the system can be traced back to the reign of Bayezid I. It was also introduced in the later reigns of Murad II and Mohammed II, and has a significant place in the history of the Ottoman Empire. In this article, we look at the background, content, importance, rise and fall of the demesne system, and analyze its value for future generations.

2 Background to the establishment of the Demesne system

2.1 Military background: the creation and development of the "Ghani Shari Army"

Creation: The Janissaries, also known as the "New Army" and the "Close Guards", were an infantry unit loyal to Sultan himself, with a strong sense of discipline. By the mid to late fourteenth century, the Janissaries, also known as the 'New Army' and the 'Close Guard', were a highly disciplined infantry force loyal to Sultan himself. In the mid to late fourteenth century, the number of prisoners taken by the Ottomans began to rise as a result of the

constant fighting. At this point, the Ottoman strategists thought it would be a good idea to follow the example of the Arabs and select a few able-bodied slaves to form a standing army. Thus, the reign of Orhan saw the creation of such a force, which belonged solely to Sultan himself.

Development: During Murad's reign the Ghanishari army grew rapidly, expanding in number, scope and power. During the reign of Murad I, the number of Ghani Shari was 2,000, but during the reign of Murad II it rose to 3,000, showing that the number of Ghani Shari was inextricably linked to the expansion of the empire. During the reign of Mohammed II, the number increased from 5,000 to around 10,000, and under Suleiman I, to between 12,000 and 13,000.

Composition: The Ghanishari army was originally formed from the best and brightest of the prisoners of war, and the court selected suitable men from among the descendants of the old Balkan or Anatolian princes and nobles who had been notified by the Ottomans to become "slaves of the sultan". The so-called "slaves of the sultan" were in fact slaves according to Islamic law, whose lives and deaths depended on the sultan. [2]

In general, the creation and development of the Ghanishari army laid the foundations for the Demisheme system, and the Demisheme system also contributed to the development of the army.

2.2 Territorial expansion: the expansion of the Ottoman Waiting State in the Balkans

The expansion of the Ottoman marquisate in the Balkans was concentrated between the mid-14th and mid-15th centuries, under Murad I, who expanded the Ottoman Empire to its limits in the Balkans and succeeded in

* qihanxuxisu@163.com

consolidating imperial rule in these newly conquered areas. This had an important role in the rise of the Ottoman Empire and furthered the transformation of the Ottoman state from a nomadic state to a traditional dynasty. At this time the Ottoman Empire had to rely on various forms of slavery to solve the problem of assimilation, which laid the foundation for the establishment and perfection of the Demesne system later on.

2.3 Historical reference: the military slave system

According to early historical accounts of the Turks, they are known to have benefited greatly from this military slavery. During the Abbasid dynasty, Turks from the steppes of Central Asia who had not yet become Muslims were brought to the Arab Empire in various capacities, either as captives, tributes or bought slaves, and they were later trained in Baghdad, some as soldiers loyal to the king, others became administrators indispensable to the functioning of the state. This developed into a new system, the Mamluk system, during the reign of the caliph Al-Mu'tasim (833-847), which from a historical point of view laid a solid foundation for the Demisheme system.

3 The content of the Demesne system

3.1 The main purpose of the Demesne system

During the first three centuries of Ottoman rule, those involved in the administration of the state were members of the ruling class, all of whom were Ottomans. The dominant member of the ruling class was the Turkmen family, which, after the decline of the Seljuks, came to control most of Anatolia and the power of the Sudans was greatly restricted. In order to balance the power of the old Turkic nobility, Murad I had to cultivate a new force to weaken the dependence on the Turkmen tribe and strengthen its authority. This gave rise to the famous Demisheme system.

3.2 Selection mechanism of the Demesne system

The Demesne system was essentially a supplement to the "Sultan's Slave" system of recruiting boys from all over the Balkans, which took place at irregular intervals, generally every five to seven years, depending on the need, and was accompanied by a senior officer with a Sultan's warrant and a large number of recruit uniforms on the day of the great count. At the same time, the priests of the churches in the area being recruited would obey the order to gather the local families of Christian boys who met the conditions for recruitment and send the children and their baptismal certificates to the assembly place on the appointed day, and if the local officials or the parents of the children refused the demands of the Praetorians, they would be punished. During Murad II, the Demisheme system began to be institutionalised, [3] The system was mainly aimed at young boys aged 8 - 18 in rural areas and

was based on village recruitment, one per family, at a rate of one soldier per forty families, with the exception of Jewish converts, the sons of industrialists and merchants, only sons, orphans, those who were too tall or too small and those who were married. In addition, they had to pass a medical examination by a doctor, and only those juveniles who passed were registered and escorted in groups to Istanbul for further training, together with other qualified juveniles.

3.3 Training mechanisms of the Demesne system

The selection process for the elite: the Ottoman Empire had a strict system and procedure for the examination of these young recruits, who were converted to Islam, circumcised and gradually examined for their talents. Only the best of the best became 'ogulans' (which can be interpreted as 'servant boys') and went directly to the court schools in various parts of the country to study. Generally speaking, their studies lasted between two and seven years and included courses in theology, administration, literature and the military, before going through a selection process three times, with the best of them going straight into regular court posts.

Learning about culture: Once the Demisheme system was established, the recruited youngsters were first sent to various Turkic farms in the Anatolian region. They worked alongside the local farmers, learned the Turkic language and were taught about their faith. All the young men were required to read and write Arabic, Persian and Ottoman Turkish, and to study the Koran and other Islamic sciences. [4] Learning military skills: the youngsters selected through the Demesne system receive considerable physical training, particularly in the compulsory subjects of wrestling, archery, weightlifting, javelin and horsemanship. Other important disciplines are the development of unconditional obedience to superior officers and a sense of solidarity and cooperation. Whenever there was a place available in a local training establishment, they were sent there for training and servitude. Strict obedience to discipline: the slaves selected by the Demesne system were subject to strict discipline, isolated from the outside world and even from their families. In order that the legionnaires could receive orders for deployment at the first opportunity, the imperial government specified that all soldiers had to live in barracks, away from their homes and relatives, were not allowed to own their own property, and were not allowed to marry or engage in any work or craft.

4 The impact of the Demesne system

4.1 The demi-scheme system gives the "Garni Sari Corps" an outstanding fighting ability

"The Ghanishari were "slaves of the Sultan" and would not be liberated as long as they held a position in the court or the army. Their survival depended on the Sultan, and to outsiders they were seen as privileged. The young men who are selected are highly capable of fighting after

rigorous professional training and are truly the elite of the Praetorian Guard. As the empire expands, so does the number of Ghanishari, who are highly capable of fighting. [5]

4.2 Effective restraint on the power of the old Turkic nobility

The great advantage of the Demesne system is that it is non-hereditary; it does not create a native-born gentry aristocracy as the older system did. In this way, it does not create any political forces that might threaten the absolute power of the sultan. If traditional Muslims became slaves of the sultan, they would abuse this privilege and their relatives in the various provinces would oppress the population by virtue of their power. And these children from Christian families, after converting to Islam, would become fervent followers of the new faith, and some would even become enemies of their relatives. Overall, the demesne system weakened Ottoman tribal traditions on the one hand and, on the other, significantly increased the Sultan's control at the political level, which had a significant impact on the maintenance of centralised power in the Ottoman Empire and even served to overcome local centrifugal tendencies.

4.3 Promotes fairness in talent selection

For a long time, the Ottoman Empire relied on the Demesne system to build up its new army and to achieve a real sense of relative fairness in the selection of personnel. During the reign of Suleiman I, the Austrian ambassador made the following comment: "Among the Turks, birth is not in the least important; a man's respectability depends only on the position he holds. Sultan did not care about wealth or rank when making appointments he considered the selection on the merits of the matter itself people were promoted in the department on the basis of merit. The system greatly ensures that the appointment to various positions is reasonable." [6]

5 The Abolition of the Demesne System

Against the backdrop of the Ottoman Empire's territorial expansion, the functioning of the demesne system and the maintenance of the new army gradually revealed a number of shortcomings and shortcomings. By the middle of the 17th century, the demesne system had completely collapsed. The main factors were as follows.

5.1 Laxity of the selection system

From the seventeenth century onwards, the new Ottoman army was selected more from Muslim than from Christian families, a sign of the dissipation of dynamism, the beginnings of class entrenchment and the spontaneous rejection of new blood by the vested interests. The ban on marriage, which had been imposed by the Ghani Shari

Regiment as early as the mid-16th century, was not implemented, and this led to the sons of the regiment's soldiers inheriting their fathers' vacancies, making the selection of new soldiers hereditary. As a result, the training of the new army was slowly abandoned and could not be compared to the rigorous training of the past.

5.2 The Harem Alliance gradually replaces the Demesne Group

When the ruling class became embroiled in intricate and trivial battles, the Sultans were reluctant to intervene in these battles and their outcomes, so their attention turned more to the harem. In addition, the princes' service in provincial government departments and the army for exercise was cancelled and they were trapped in the palace. At the same time, the ruler's other brothers were executed in order to avoid any action for the throne. The system of succession by the most able son of Sultan was replaced by a new system in which the throne was held by the longest living male relative or by a member of the royal family favoured by the most powerful faction. The inevitable consequence was a conflict for power between the Sultan's brothers and sons within the court, and over time various alliances formed by these harem groups replaced the Demisheme group within the court. [7]

5.3 Corruption of the imperial ruling class

The corruption that spread from the top soon spread throughout the ruling class of the empire. The practice of offering large gifts to the Sultan and other high-ranking officials, as was often the case with the granting of important posts, soon spread throughout the ruling class, with a corresponding increase in corruption and bribery. Now each grantee had to pay for privileges and in return he was able to recoup his capital, make profits and rightly expand his own political capital and that of his faction.

6 Evaluation of the Demesne system

Some may think that the Turks were inhumane, imposing a 'blood tax' on Christians, recruiting young children as slaves, forcing them to be separated from their parents, and even requiring them to adopt other faiths and to determine their lives at will. However, in those times, when war was raging and people were looking at things differently than they do today, it was inevitable that the demesne system would emerge in order to maintain Sultan's political rule.[8]

All good systems that are not rigorously implemented eventually lead to corruption. The Ottoman Empire was no exception to this rule, as the Demesne system brought the Sultan a valiant army, but it also gave rise to powerful interests, which, in order to consolidate and even strengthen their vested interests, often sought to undermine the system that had allowed them to rise to power, thereby excluding new profit-makers. In addition, the lack of experience in ancient empires and the absence of effective mechanisms for regulating and correcting their own mistakes led to the collapse of the empire once

it had begun to decline, and later to the abolition of the demesne system as a result of the corruption of the ruling class and the decline of the economy.

However, in any case, the Ottoman Empire was at the top of the world, ruling over a vast area of Western Asia, North Africa and South-Eastern Europe, and the contribution of the Demisheme system to the realisation of this grand endeavour cannot be underestimated, providing valuable lessons for future generations of rulers, such as its rigorous and complex selection mechanism to ensure the overall quality of the talent selected and to avoid wasting educational resources. The Demesne system, for example, had a comprehensive and integrated approach to the training of young people, with a curriculum that took into account the humanities, physical exercise, practical skills and vocational training, and even the development of their talents in military and vocal music. This has something in common with the contemporary system of education, which seeks to develop the whole person, intellectually, physically and aesthetically. In contrast to the Turkic aristocracy, the Demesne system recruited people from simple family backgrounds, and even those from lowly backgrounds had the opportunity to use their talents to enter the core management of the state, which in a way broke down class entrenchment and promoted fairness in the selection mechanism, something that we need to learn from in our modern hiring mechanisms.

7 Conclusion

The Ottoman Turkish Empire, the last great world empire built by nomads, was a glorious empire that was once dominant on three continents, Europe, Asia and Africa, and the Demesne system played an important role in the military glory of the Ottoman Empire and in the governance of the empire. In addition, with the implementation of China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative, exchanges and cooperation between China and Turkey are becoming more frequent in various fields. This is why a deeper understanding of Turkish history will help to promote mutual understanding, cultural identity and friendly relations between the two countries.

REFERENCES

- [1] Charles H. Argo, *Ottoman Political Spectacle: Reconsidering the Devshirme in the Ottoman Balkans, 1400-1700*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Arkansas, 2005, p. 233.
- [2] Zhang Chuqiao: 'A Study of the Rise of the Ottoman Empire from the Perspective of Civilizational Interaction', PhD thesis, Department of History, Northeast Normal University, 2012, p. 71.
- [3] Davidson, *From Disintegration to Rebirth: The Modernization of Turkey*, translated by Zhang Zengjian and Liu Tongshun, Xue Lin Publishing House, 1996, p. 48.
- [4] Izkowicz, *The Anatomy of Empire: The Institution and Spirit of Ottomanism*, translated by Wei Depei, Xue Lin Publishing House, 1996, p. 47.
- [5] Lin Jia Shi Zi, *The Ottoman Empire: Five Hundred Years of Peace*, translated by Zhong Fang, Beijing Daily Press, 2020, p. 61.
- [6] Mehrdad Kia, *The Ottoman Empire, United States: Greenwood Press*, 2008, pp. 132-133.
- [7] Patrick Balfour, *The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire*, translated by Luan Lifu, CITIC Publishing Group, 2018, pp. 214-218.
- [8] Stanford Shaw: *The Ottoman Empire*, translated by Xu Xuya and Zhang Zhongxiang, Qinghai People's Publishing House, 2006, pp. 251-253.