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ERZURUM GÜMRÜĞÜ, AS AN INTERNATIONAL TRANSIT CENTER, AND SOME PROBLEMS OF ADMINISTRATION

Neşe ERİM

In this paper* I will present the result of a study concerning the customs of Erzurum in the 18 th century, which is based upon the *mukataa* and gümrük registers. The *mukataa* registers form a consecutive series beginning with the dawn of the 18 th century ¹ unfortunately the customs registers have survived only for certain years ² As Erzurum often has been the theatre of war, nothing remains of the local *kadı* registers, which normally would have permitted us to answer questions which the *mukataa* and gümrük documents leave unanswered. Apart from quantitative data the two extant series contain information on the manner in which the customs of Erzurum were administered; thus our study, while mainly economic, also is relevant to political historians.

The Sources

The unit known as *mukataa* may consist of one or several sources of revenue whose collection was entrusted to a given

* This paper presented in the First Skilliter Library Colloquium on Ottoman History, Cambridge, 9-11 April 1992.

1 From 1702 to 1771.

2 1744 and 1769 and customs supervision registers.

official (*emin*) or tax farmer (*mültezim*). Even though the revenue sources thus combined may be quite disparate, the registers give us only a single figure as the mukataa revenue for a given month, year or period of years. This was also true of the Erzurum custom registers. In the 18th century *ihtisab* (dues collected from tradesman), *mizan-ı harir* (silk weighing dues), *pençik-i üsara* (duties on imported slaves), revenues from the Ardanuç mire and heirless properties all were amalgamated with customs duties in a single mukataa. Whenever it was considered necessary to increase the sum of money demanded from the Erzurum customs farmer, he might be accorded additional mukataas situated in the province, so that Erzurum customs finally constituted a large group of mainly trade-based taxes. In addition there existed a mukataa known as customs supervision (*nezaret gümrüğü*). Before the 18th century the governors of Erzurum had collected special dues as a fee for their supervision of the customs administration; in the 18th century these dues were converted into a separate mukataa, whose revenue was generally 33 percent lower than that of the customs farm. Due to this correlation, we can compute the value of the original mukataa for certain years for which data are missing. But we shouldn't forget that, only goods coming from Iran paid *nezaret* dues. From goods sold in Erzurum were demanded *ihtisab* and *kassabiye* while wares which left the city again paid a transit tax called *reftiye*. The customs registers also give us the names of traders coming to Erzurum from Iran, Rum and Caucasus (Ahıska), along with the kinds of goods they brought into the city.

War and the Transit Trade

The Ottoman-Iranian wars of the early 16th century³ all but destroyed the city, which in 1540 consisted of no more than 21

3 Kütükoğlu, 1962.

families⁴. However the city recuperated nearly century-long peace which followed the conclusion of the treaty of Kasr-ı Shirin in 1639. In the early 18th century, Erzurum had approximately 25.000 inhabitants⁵, and the traveller Brant, who visited the city in the early 19th century estimated its population at about one hundred thousand.⁶

Erzurum constituted a centre of transit trade; goods from Iran and Caucasus passed into Anatolia, while Anatolian goods were exported to Iran. While the city derived considerable advantages from transit trade, it was vulnerable to any change in trade routes. And trade routes changed more easily in this area than in many other places; Erzurum was a centre of Ottoman power on ever restless frontier and also the only place in northeastern Anatolia where traders could pay their dues. After entering the Ottoman realm by way of Kars or Van merchants were issued a document (*tezkere*) which they presented to the customs officials in Erzurum. Entry by any other route was regarded as an attempt to evade customs. But many semi-independent potentates in this region offered traders lower customs⁷ if they consented to leave the official routes and pass through the former's domains instead. In this fashion, Erzurum customs officials lost money, and we need to reckon with a certain amount of trade which was never entered into the registers. But enough traders paid customs duties to permit the reconstruction of Erzurum's far-flung trade and active hinterland.

Among goods which passed through Erzurum in transit, imports from Europe and its colonies were prominent from the very beginning of our records. Apart from woollen fabrics, we encounter

4 Jennings, 1976, pp. 47-48.

5 Pitton de Tournefort, 1718.

6 Brant, 1836, p. 201.

7 Başbakanlık Arşivi, Maliyeden Müdevver (from now on, MM) 10141, p. 153.

sugar, tobacco and coffee. Among Iranian goods, cotton was already prominent in 1721, but silk was still the most important of transit goods. In 1744 however, silk had been replaced by cotton, and in addition we find coffee, linen, sugar, leather and black goat's hair. By 1770 when Iranian silk had all but disappeared from the market, tobacco took first place among the goods passing through Erzurum in transit. The merchants doing business in the city came from Trabzon, Erzincan, Tokat, Diyarbakır, Kars and Van; and these cities probably were the ultimate destinations of their goods ⁸.

A load of transit goods paid the standart rate of 1,5 guruş per horse load. When our records use the word "load" without clarification, they mean a horse load; camel loads are recorded as *haml-i şütur* ⁹. In addition, the customs officials mention a small load which they call *sülüs*, and which amounted to one third of a horse load. Erzurum's recorded transit trade amounted to no more than 2500 horse load a year, but in all probability, there was a good deal of smuggling going on.

Mukataa Revenues and Some Problems of Administration

The war and post-war years of the late 17th and early 18th centuries were a difficult times for Erzurum's trade. As the Empire was in constant fiscal difficulties ¹⁰ the pressure to increase revenues grew, while concern for the safety of merchants declined. Changes in world trade also contributed their share to the crisis of the Erzurum customs. Principally concerned with the fate of its main mukataas, the Ottoman administration reacted to the crisis by including ever more minor sources of revenue into the Erzurum

⁸ Erim, 1984, p. 135.

⁹ Başbakanlık Arşivi, MM 10151, p. 201, MM 10171, p. 194.

¹⁰ Cezar, 1986.

customs complex. As a result the later became unwieldy and less transparent for 18th century officials and modern historians alike.

At the beginning of the 18th century, the value of the Erzurum customs mukataa was 95.094 guruş¹¹. Between 1710-15, the customs and other sources of revenue annexed to the mukataa produced about 100.000 guruş brutts¹². Fifteen years later, the revenues of the “annexed” taxes had increased by a hundred percent, while the customs proper were at a low level. In 1724 customs revenues had declined to 62.000 guruş, while 35.000 guruş were produced by “annexed” mukataas¹³. Thus the official value of the mukataa about equalled receipts, and the tax farmer had reason to be discontented with his investment. But by 1730 the entire mukataa was losing money.

When did this loss of revenue come about and what were the reasons? In the late 17th century, some changes were made in the administration of the mukataa. For most of the 17th century, the governors of Erzurum collected a share of the revenues and appointed the supervisor (*nazır*) of the mukataa. In 1686 a sultanic rescript ordered the governor to collect only 40 kese akçe from the customs revenues, instead of the 50-60 kese had been allowed when the customs were profitable¹⁴. The governor (*vali*) was to receive his 40 kese akçe in monthly instalments and more over was deprived of the right to appoint a supervisor. However quite a few valis fought back and used their contacts in İstanbul to induce the Divan to come to their aid. As a result, the situation was highly unstable. In the course of the year 1690 alone, three contradictory commands were issued concerning the governor’s control of the customs supervision.

11 Başbakanlık Arşivi, MM 10148, p. 200.

12 Başbakanlık Arşivi, MM 10152, MM 10154, MM 10156.

13 Başbakanlık Arşivi, MM 10167, p. 276.

14 Başbakanlık Arşivi, MM 10307, p. 219.

By cutting down the revenues and political influence of the Erzurum governors, the central administration hope to gain additional sums of money for its war chest, as the war with the Habsburgs was going badly. At this time malikane system had just been instituted ¹⁵ and this system could only work if the government had full control over its sources of revenues. Thus the attempt to control the Erzurum customs directly was part of an empire-wide policy. But financial centralization was operated in different ways from one province to the next and Erzurum apparently constituted a pilot area.

Traders responded to this situation by changing their routes, and this instability largely explains the drop in customs revenue. From the central administration's point of view a highly undesirable situation had been created, which amounted to killing the goose which laid the golden eggs, but since money was urgently needed, both the central and the provincial authorities tried to cope not by lightening the load they place on the merchants, but by intensifying control.

From the trader's point of view, regular dues were not as irksome as the illegal payments to which they were frequently subjected. Some of these irregular dues were so often demanded that they came to be known by special names, such as *döşeme baha*, *gümüslü* or *kitabət*. Traders accepted this dues as long as they remained within limits, but when the merchants were confronted with demands for extra *cizye* and *avarız* they complained vociferously in Istanbul. Normally traders paid these dues in the cities where they lived on a permanent basis, and therefore could not have been made to pay during a short stay in Erzurum. Thus the dispute between the central government and the Erzurum governors over the *nezaret akçesi* was all too frequently fought out on the

¹⁵ Genç, 1975.

backs of the merchants.

In 1705 *Erzurum gümrüğü* were sold as a malikane ¹⁶. At the end of the first year, the tax farmer claimed that he was losing money and would be unable to pay the yearly instalment he owed to the central treasury. A controller sent from Istanbul observed that the customs area was not fenced off, so that smuggling was very easy. Another contemporary report mentions a decline in the production of Iranian raw silk, which adversely affected the Erzurum customs revenues, at this time as the latter were still dependent on the importation of silk. But this does not necessarily mean that manufacturer were deprived of supplies: the silk trade was highly volatile, merchants usually created stocks which stabilized the market in times of temporary difficulty. In 1744 66 percent of all silk brought into Erzurum was probably placed in storage for future sale ¹⁷. But since silk paid duties at the moment of entry customs revenues should have fluctuated much more violently than the supply of raw silk in Anatolia.

Another reason for the crisis of 1705 was the increasing prominence of Russia in the silk trade. Not only were the Czar and his nobility important consumers, but there was also a certain amount of transit trade to Western Europe by way of the Russian routes. But competition with Anatolian trade routes cannot have been too serious, as the customs mukataa regained prosperity after about 1715. Customs revenues increased, the nezaret akçesi was turned into a separate mukataa and most importantly, the administration was stabilized. In 1718 the first holder of the malikane who had given up his position because of the crisis, seems to have changed his mind with respect to its profitability, for he took up the Erzurum gümrüğü for a second time.

¹⁶ Başbakanlık Arşivi, MM 10170, p. 171.

¹⁷ Erim, 1991, p. 138.

However the fall of the Safawid dynasty, and the Iranian civil war which ensued, once again resulted in a decrease in Erzurum's trade. More over the Russian government became increasingly interested in controlling the silk-producing regions of Iran, and the Russian-Ottoman war of 1724 was partly fought over this issue. Regions invaded and occupied by the different armies involved often stopped producing. In 1724 Mazenderan and Astarabad were conquered by the Russians, while in 1725 Tabriz and Gence were taken by the Ottomans. Both campaigns affected the Erzurum custom, which became extremely volatile. No custom farmer was willing to take on a risk of such magnitude, so that the central government had to send salaried agents (*emin*) to collect dues. Only in 1737 did it become possible to reorganize the Erzurum gümrüğü as a *malikane*, which was split up into 7 shares (*hisse*) for a down payment of 75.000 guruş. This malikane continued to exist until 1770, but changed hands several times. Until 1778, Erzurum customs revenues stagnated at a low level; but when in this year the alternative route by way of Basra was closed down, the trade of Erzurum revived.

Conclusion

The present study constitutes one of the first attempts to wring economic information out of Ottoman fiscal data. This proceeding is of course well-known to European economic historians, but most Ottomanists have shied away from this method because of the discontinuity of the available data and the tendency of fiscal administrators to amalgamate *mukataas*. But in spite of these drawbacks, careful analysis of the Erzurum customs data has yielded worthwhile results, and as more Ottoman custom registers will hopefully become available in the near future, we may yet become able to fill some of the gaps which as yet disfigure our series.

Ottoman administrators had a fairly clear notion of the relative value of the revenue sources at their disposal, and they fully appreciated the need to protect merchants so that the latter would continue to frequent their accustomed routes. But as Mehmet Genç has pointed out, the rudimentary methods of war financing current at even this late age nullified whatever measures the central administration might adopt in order to protect traders.

The fate of the Erzurum customs constitutes a typical example: When conditions became incalculable and redress of grievances unlikely, traders sought alternative routes, travelling by way of Russia or giving up international trade altogether. Many Ottoman revenue sources continued to be prosperous long after Erzurum had run into difficulties, but the story of the Rum, Ahıska and İran customs was a harbinger of the economic crisis which hit many Ottoman provinces in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

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