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Symbolic Capital and Privilege in the Ottoman Provinces: The Case of Seydişehir

Ayşe Değerli Velet [1]

[1] İzmir Demokrasi Üniversitesi, Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi, Tarih Bölümü, İzmir, Türkiye

Abstract This article uses Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the "social field" to analyze the production and contestation of hierarchy in a premodern imperial province. It argues that symbolic capital—derived from sacred lineage or state-sanctioned service—functioned as a productive and convertible asset, not merely as a static honorific. Using the pre-modern Ottoman town of Seydişehir as a case study, the analysis moves beyond the traditional *askerî* (ruler)-*reaya* (ruled) dichotomy to examine the strategies of the intermediate strata. Based on archival sources, the study maps the local social field, tracing how groups such as sayyids and zawiya sheikhs converted symbolic capital into economic capital and how the value of this capital was negotiated and challenged. The findings demonstrate that privilege was not a fixed state grant but a relational status, contingent on continuous struggles for recognition and vulnerable to devaluation by central authorities or nullification by coercive force. The study's primary contribution is a sociological reconceptualization of the Ottoman provincial order as a dynamic field of symbolic power, offering a methodological model for applying sociological theory to historical archives.

Keywords Symbolic Capital · Privileged Groups · Tax Exemption · Seydişehir · Ottoman Empire

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Corresponding author: Ayşe Değerli Velet ayse.degerli@idu.edu.tr

Symbolic Capital and Privilege in the Ottoman Provinces: The Case of Seydişehir

The Ottoman social structure of the classical period is often understood through two fundamental categories: the *askerî* (ruling class) and the *reaya* (the ruled). According to this classification, the *reaya* represented the tax-paying producer class, while tax exemption was considered a privilege of the *askerî* order (İnalcık, 2000, p. 52). However, this binary distinction is insufficient for fully reflecting the complex, stratified, and negotiable structure of provincial society. This study focuses on the case of Seydişehir between the 15th and mid-19th centuries, a period in which the legal and symbolic boundaries between groups became increasingly contested. Drawing on archival sources—including cadastral surveys, sharia court records, and imperial decrees—spanning over four centuries, the article examines how local actors navigated and redefined the social field. Although Seydişehir was founded in the early 14th century, this analysis concentrates on the pre-modern Ottoman period before the onset of full administrative centralization and modernization under the Tanzimat. In Seydişehir, groups such as the *sayyids* and *sharifs*, *zâviyedars* (*zawiya* sheikhs), *derbendçis* (pass guards), and miners, despite being legally in the *reaya* status, transcended the classic obligations of the *reaya* through various tax exemptions and their symbolic capital, even acquiring an "intermediate class" identity by undertaking administrative functions in some cases. The legitimacy of these groups was reinforced not only by the *berats* (imperial decrees) they received from the central state but also by their recognition and social acceptance by the local populace. This situation elevated them to the position of "legitimate intermediaries" who were influential in maintaining the provincial order. Consequently, it is observed that social stratification in the Ottoman provinces was determined not so much by the legal classifications of the central administration but by the *de facto* positioning shaped by the social struggles of local actors, their provision of services, and the accumulation of symbolic capital.

As in the case of Seydişehir, categories such as *sayyid*, *zâviyedar*, *derbendçi*, or miner often occupied an intermediate position outside of both the *reaya* and *askerî* statuses or transgressed the boundaries of these categories. This indicates that social strata were shaped not by their definitions but by their actual functions, the ways they were perceived, and local power dynamics. Therefore, the structure of provincial stratification appears not as a fixed, defined, and uniform system, but as a functional, pragmatic, and negotiable series of social arrangements. This directs us to evaluate these strata based on the roles they played in practice, their symbolic positions, and their social acceptance, rather than defining them within a legal or theoretical framework. This approach points to a social reality that aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the social field (Bourdieu, 2015).

Which groups in the Ottoman provinces obtained privileges, and based on what types of capital? How did these groups legitimize and sustain their privileges? How did the local populace react to these privileges? At what stages did the state intervene in this struggle, and how did it transform the regimes of privilege? These questions will be answered through the case of Seydişehir, using the theoretical framework Pierre Bourdieu developed for 20th-century French society. At first glance, applying concepts produced for the analysis of a modern-capitalist society to the social structure of a pre-modern and different geography appears to carry the risk of anachronism. Indeed, the tastes, consumption practices, and lifestyles that Bourdieu analyzed in his work *Distinction* (2015) were shaped within the specific class structures, educational system, and market conditions of 20th-century France. However, Bourdieu's fundamental conceptual tools—"field," "habitus," and "capital" —are analytical instruments designed not to explain phenomena specific to a particular historical period or geography, but to elucidate the universal mechanisms of social struggle and

power relations. Therefore, applying these concepts to Ottoman social history with proper contextualization, rather than leading to anachronism, allows for a more profound understanding of the strategies of historical actors and the dynamics of the social structure.

According to Bourdieu, social life consists of hierarchical and relatively autonomous fields where actors struggle using different types of capital (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic). This study treats the Ottoman province, in the context of Seydişehir, as a social field with its own rules, legitimacy mechanisms, and actors. In this field, groups such as *sayyids*, *zâviyedars*, or *derbendçis* struggled to protect their status and legitimize their privileges. The types of capital for which they competed differ from those in 20th-century France; for example, "cultural capital" here manifests not as a taste for classical music or knowledge of philosophy, but as lineage-based sanctity (*sayyid*ship), membership in a religious order, or the legitimacy provided by a *berat* from the state. However, the function of capital as a resource that produces value and provides power to actors within a field is universal.

Habitus refers to the schemas of perception, thought, and action that individuals and groups internalize based on their social positions and past experiences. This concept avoids a mechanically deterministic explanation for the consciousness of "innate" or "fated" superiority among privileged groups in the Ottoman provinces or for the reactions and strategies of the common people toward these privileges. For instance, the "consciousness of nobility" transmitted through generations in a sayyid family can be analyzed as a *habitus* that shaped their posture, manner of speaking, and relationships with other social groups. Likewise, the collective practices of defense and rebellion developed by the *reaya* who were subjected to the arbitrary practices of tax officials or the violence of bandits are also a product of their *habitus*. Therefore, although *habitus* has a specific historical content (Ottoman provincial culture), it signifies a universal mechanism that mediates between structure and agency.

The article is structured to analyze these concepts through distinct strata. Section 2 examines the sayyid class, tracing the mechanisms of capital conversion (from symbolic lineage to economic waqf control) and demonstrating the contingency of symbolic capital's value in a destabilized field. Section 3 uses *zâviyedar*s (lodge sheikhs) to explore how institutional piety and land management produced a shared habitus and a negotiated legal status. Finally, Section 4 analyzes *derbendçi*s (pass guards) and miners to illustrate how the state itself acted as the primary arbiter in the social field, defining the 'conversion rate' of strategic service into social and symbolic capital.

Although the *askerî-reaya* dichotomy has long been critically reassessed in Ottoman historiography (e.g., Faroqhi, 2000; İnalcık, 2003; Salzmann, 2004; Singer, 2012; Abou-El-Haj 2018), this scholarship has often focused on political or economic permeability rather than the precise sociological mechanisms of status reproduction. Building on recent work that emphasizes negotiated provincial authority (e.g., Yaycıoğlu, 2016), this article applies Bourdieu's concepts of social field, capital, and habitus. In doing so, it aims to show how the *askerî-reaya* boundary was not just blurred but actively contested and redefined through localized struggles over symbolic legitimacy.

The selection of Seydişehir as a case study in this work stems from the unique qualities the town offers for analyzing the struggles for status and legitimacy in the Ottoman provinces. According to Suraiya Faroqhi's urban classification[1], despite being categorized as a "small town" with approximately 490 tax households in the mid-16th century (Değerli, 2013, p. 53), Seydişehir was home to an important commercial structure,

[1] In her classification of Anatolian settlements during the Ottoman period, Faroqhi (2000) defined "small towns" as centers containing 400 to 999 taxpayers (households) (p. 14).

a *bedesten* (covered bazaar), which was generally found in larger centers. This situation indicates that the town possessed a functional complexity that exceeded its population size and, in this respect, constituted a highly representative micro-field that challenges classic urban definitions. However, the most significant reason for its selection is the richness of the primary sources of the region. Numerous documents regarding the legal, economic, and symbolic struggles of the privileged strata examined in this article are found in cadastral registers (*tahrir defterleri*), imperial decree and complaint registers (*ahkâm* and *şikâyet defterleri*), and sharia court records (*şer'iyye sicilleri*). Therefore, Seydişehir, with both its intriguing contradictions and its rich archival sources, provides an ideal ground for an in-depth examination of how the regimes of privilege operated in the Ottoman provinces.

Sayyids and Sharifs: Politics of Lineage and Tax Exemptions

In the Ottoman social order, legal, economic, and penal privileges were granted not only for administrative functions but also to social statuses that possessed symbolic legitimacy. Within this provincial social field, certain groups could leverage historically recognized forms of prestige to secure and reproduce their status. Among the classes considered to have penal immunity in Ottoman law codes (*kanunnâme*s), sayyids and sharifs, along with *fakih*s (Islamic jurists), are ranked at the forefront (Akgündüz, 1990, p. 23). The respect shown to the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad was institutionalized through political, social, and economic privileges, transforming the sacred lineage into a potent form of symbolic capital.

In Anatolia, this process was spatially manifested through institutions such as the *dârü's-siyâde* or *hankâh-ı sādāt* since the Seljuk period (Eflâki, 1986, p. 210), and it was formalized under the Ottomans through numerous tax exemptions and legal privileges (Küçükaşcı, 2009, pp. 87-130). This was not merely an administrative exception but a normative regulation that officially recognized the dominant position of this group within the social hierarchy. In this respect, sayyids and sharifs did not simply represent a lineage-based religious elitism; they actively managed a network of social prestige that was publicly recognized and highly valued within the provincial field.

Seydişehir provides a compelling micro-history of how this symbolic capital was accumulated and institutionalized. Two families, the Seyyid Harun and the Şeyh Ahmed Alaî, stand out as officially recognized descendants of the Prophet. These two families obtained social and economic privileges at various levels, based not only on their religious lineage but also on the waqf system, the relationships they established with local authorities, and their spatial expansion within the town. Below, these two sayyid families will be evaluated in the context of their struggle for position within the provincial social field, with respect to the forms of symbolic and economic capital they possessed.

From Symbolic to Economic Capital: The Seyyid Harun Waqf

In Seydişehir, the Seyyid Harun family provides a quintessential example of the conversion of symbolic capital into durable economic and social power. Their accepted lineage as descendants of the Prophet was institutionalized through the establishment of a vast waqf, which became the primary mechanism for transforming sacred prestige into material assets and social control. Building on Fatih Bayram's analysis, these privileges are traceable to concrete pre-Ottoman endowments from regional rulers like Eşrefoğlu Mehmed Beg and Karamanoğlu İbrahim Beg, whose patronage was later ratified and expanded under the Ottomans (Bayram, 2008, pp. 130-134). The waqf thus became the institutional memory of these layered endorsements, emerging as a hegemonic actor that actively shaped the local social field.

The Seyyid Harun Waqf's economic power was based on both rural and urban assets. While agricultural income was significant, the waqf's hegemony was anchored in its strategic control over Seydişehir's core commercial infrastructure. It owned and operated key urban economic nodes, including the primary hamam (bathhouse), han (caravanserai), kapan (weigh-house), and crucial production workshops such as the tannery, dye-house, and bakery, which were protected by state-enforced monopolies (Değerli, 2013, p. 264; TKGM. A, vol. 137). The hamam is a prime example of this power. As a key economic asset, it generated over 61% of the waqf's total urban income in 1530. Sociologically, however, its significance transcended its financial yield. As a central venue for ritual purification and social gathering, its control provided the waqf with a powerful tool for embedding its authority in the communal habitus. By dominating these spaces of production and exchange, the waqf did not merely accumulate economic capital; it actively structured the social field, converting material wealth back into the symbolic capital of a legitimate urban patron.

The waqf's dominant position was reinforced by state power; the Ottoman administration initially prohibited the construction of any rival bathhouse, protecting the waqf's monopoly (Fatih Devrinde Karaman Vakıfları, pp. 33-35; Murad Çelebi Defteri, pp. 54b-59a). However, the emergence of local actors named Hacı Nasuh and Baba Ahmed, who built and endowed a new bathhouse in the city center toward the mid-17th century, signaled that this monopoly was beginning to fracture. It is noteworthy, however, that a portion of the income from this new structure was allocated to the kitchen of the Seyyid Harun Zâviye as *taamiye* (a food allowance) (A.DVN.ŞKT.d, vol. 118, p. 442). This is significant because, according to Bourdieu, every social field operates through the accumulation and circulation of capital according to its own internal dynamics, and new actors in this field gain legitimacy either by directly confronting the existing hegemonic structure or by establishing a symbolic compromise. Although the new waqf of Hacı Nasuh and Baba Ahmed was an actor emerging on the economic scene, it submitted to the still-dominant symbolic position of the Seyyid Harun family, thereby having its legitimacy accepted through an allocation resembling a "tribute". This situation signifies the voluntary conversion of a portion of economic capital into symbolic capital; that is, the existence of the new waqf was not just an economic intervention but also a ritual gesture of alignment within the provincial field of power. Thus, the relationship between waqf institutions in Seydişehir can be interpreted as a struggle for positioning and recognition within the field, one that involves much more than mere competition for material gain.

The fact that fundamental production and consumption facilities in the Seydişehir urban economy, such as the *debbağhane*, butcher shops, *boyahane*, and bakery, operated directly under the Seyyid Harun Waqf reveals that the waqf was not merely a religious and charitable institution but also a hegemonic actor that directed the economic field on a city-wide scale. The organization of these structures within the waqf's body brought with it a decisive position in the regulation of social life that went beyond economic functioning. In archival documents, it is explicitly stated that the opening of independent businesses of the same type outside of these waqf-owned facilities was prohibited (TKGM. A, vol. 137, TT. d., vol. 387, pp. 65-66; vol. 455, pp. 935-939). This situation indicates that the production and supply chain of the butcher and bakery shops, particularly those operating in the city center, functioned with the logic of a monopoly under the waqf's control.

The most stable source of income for the waqf was its extensive rural holdings, which generated approximately half of its total revenue. The waqf held lands and properties in over two dozen surrounding villages and numerous city quarters (Değerli, 2013, pp. 263-276). It is understood that a large portion of these lands was not endowed directly by Seyyid Harun but was allocated to the waqf by the region's political and social

elites during various periods, including members of the pre-Ottoman Karamanid and Eşrefoğlu dynasties (Fatih Devrinde Karaman Vakıfları, p. 34; TT. d., vol. 455, pp. 890-895; MAD.d., vol. 241, p. 3a). These examples reveal that the waqf was shaped not by the will of a single founder but through the continuous support of different power centers in the province. The contributions of local beys and notables can be interpreted as a clear strategy for acquiring legitimacy within the existing hegemonic structure. This strategy represents a conversion of capital within the provincial social field: local elites invested their economic capital (land and property) to partake in the waqf's unparalleled symbolic capital (sacred prestige and state-sanctioned legitimacy). By publicly aligning themselves with the Seyyid Harun lineage, these actors solidified their own status and secured their position within the local hierarchy. The waqf, therefore, operated as a central legitimizing institution—a symbolic nexus where the capital of the provincial elite was accumulated, consecrated, and reproduced, reinforcing the entire social order.

The waqf also functioned as a quasi-administrative body, directly involved in land tenure regulation. The waqf's *mütevelli* (trustee), in coordination with the *kadı*, registered lands under usufruct and collected the *resm-i tapu*[2], a function that integrated the waqf into the state's administrative process (TT. d., vol. 1135, additional p. 123). This role demonstrates that the waqf was not merely a passive income collector but an active agent in shaping the local economic field. Its authority was not just economic but also socially recognized, blending institutional power with its symbolic prestige.

The waqf's expenditures likewise reinforced the social field. Salaries for various religious, administrative, and educational personnel constituted a major expense item (Değerli, 2013, p. 269). These payments were not just wages but symbolic transfers that cemented a network of high-status stakeholders. For instance, payments to Mehmed bin Alâî, a member of the other prominent Sayyid family, demonstrate how elite groups combined familial capital (lineage) and bureaucratic position to share in the economic resources. This reveals a shared habitus among the privileged: a "consciousness of entitlement" reproduced over generations, where the waqf functioned as a field for producing and distributing not just money but also identity-based symbolic legitimacy.

The Seyyid Harun Imarethane (soup kitchen), a part of the Seyyid Harun Complex, is frequently referred to as the *zâviye*'s *matbah* (kitchen) in archival documents and stands out as the oldest and longest-serving public kitchen in Seydişehir's city center. According to the *Makālāt*, this structure, built under the leadership of Seyyid Harun during the city's waqf process (pp. 41-54), served not only as a charitable institution but also as a symbolic field where socio-religious legitimacy was institutionalized. In records from 1476, it is seen that basic foodstuffs such as bread, meat, and wheat were served to guests in the imarethane; furthermore, regular meals were allocated to the 15 dervishes residing in the *zâviye* and to the madrasa students (Değerli, 2013, pp. 175-176). This situation shows that the waqf was not only a charitable institution but also a space for the production of habitus. The fact that the imarethane served members of the public, travelers, the poor, scholars (ʿālims), and sayyids, in addition to members of the order, turned it into a kind of "public table" that ensured the social integration of the urban community.

The Şeyh Ahmed Alaî Family and the Diminishment of Privilege in the Province

The second prominent sayyid lineage, the Şeyh Ahmed Alaî family, provides a contrasting case of privilege that is dependent not on institutionalized economic power but directly on state recognition. This family, originating from Alaiye (Alanya), settled in Seydişehir during the pre-Ottoman Karamanid period (Değerli,

[2]The *resm-i tapu* was a fixed tax levied on state-owned (mîrî) lands excluded from agricultural activity during the classical Ottoman period and was also known over time by names such as bedel-i öşr, mukâtaa-i zemîn, or icâre-i zemîn (Tabakoğlu, 2007, p. 583).

2013, p. 34). Archival records from the early 16th century confirm their high status; they were recorded as "*sayyidü's-sülehâ*" (the lord of the righteous people) and explicitly granted exemptions from a wide range of customary (örfi) and canonical (şer'i) taxes, a privilege renewed by Bayezid II (TT. d., vol. 40, p. 313; vol. 455, pp. 895-896). Their symbolic capital was potent enough to be inscribed on the urban landscape, as their neighborhood became known as the "Alaylar" quarter, a name derived from their origin and habitus that persists today (Erdoğru, 2006). The residents were likely referred to colloquially as 'Alaiyeliler' (those from Alaiye), a term that phonetically developed into 'Alaylar' over time. This evolution reflects both the family's continuity and its symbolic imprint on the local space. The Alaylar quarter thus embodies a lineage whose sacred status and local memory became spatially inscribed in the urban fabric of Seydişehir. In this way, the Şeyh Ahmed Alâî family's consciousness of privilege, reproduced over generations, left its mark not only in administrative documents but also in the collective memory of the urban landscape.

Unlike the Seyyid Harun family, the Alaî family's privilege appears to have been a direct conversion of symbolic capital (lineage) into economic capital (tax exemption), mediated entirely by state decree. This privilege proved precarious. Cadastral documents from 1584 show that the tax exemptions for the Şeyh Ahmed Alaî family were significantly abolished (TKGM. A., KK., vol. 137). This abolition represents a clear devaluation of symbolic capital by the central state. In any social field, the dominant arbiter guarantees the "conversion rate" between different forms of capital. In this provincial field, the state held the ultimate power to define the "rules of the game." Amid a period of fiscal crisis, the state unilaterally changed these rules, decreeing that the symbolic capital of the Alaî lineage was no longer convertible into the economic capital of tax exemption.

This case highlights the internal differentiation within the sayyid stratum itself, based on the form of their capital. The Seyyid Harun family had successfully converted their symbolic capital into durable, institutionalized economic capital (a vast waqf) that was deeply embedded in the urban economy and social habitus. The Ahmed Alaî family, in contrast, relied on symbolic capital that required continuous state recognition for its economic value. When the state, the ultimate arbiter of the field, changed the conversion rate, their privilege was lost, and their position within the local field diminished.

Crisis of Legitimacy: Taxation, Violence, and Symbolic Conflicts

Symbolic capital is functional only as long as other actors in the social field recognize it. This recognition is contingent on a stable social order that the state guarantees, where the "rules of the game" are enforced. During the 17th and 18th centuries, periods of rebellion and crisis, fiscal pressure, and weakening central authority (Faroqhi, 2004; Özel, 2016) destabilized the provincial field. In this environment, the symbolic capital of the *sādāt-ı kirâm* (the noble sayyids) proved to be contingent and vulnerable. Judicial cases from Seydişehir reveal that their status was challenged by officials, the public, and local strongmen, demonstrating that symbolic prestige alone was an insufficient defense when the state's monopoly on violence faltered.

Legally guaranteed privileges were the first to be challenged. Sayyids were exempt from certain taxes, such as the *resm-i ağnam* (sheep tax) for up to 150 sheep. However, a 1761 ruling shows local tax collectors attempting to tax all animals belonging to the *sādāt*, a practice ruled illegal only after an appeal to the center (A.DVNS.AHK.KR.d., vol. 9, p. 25). The general populace also challenged these economic privileges. In 1756, the deputy *nakibüleşraf* and eight other sayyids were forced by the public to make a tax payment, a pressure only relieved by a *fetva* from the şeyhülislam (A.DVNS.AHK.KR.d., vol. 6, p. 359/1). Similarly, in 1757, locals attacked several members of the *sādāt* who held usufruct rights over lands belonging to the Seyyid Harun Waqf. The court ultimately ruled in their favor, stating that because they were working on waqf land,

they were not liable for taxation (A.DVNS.AHK.KR.d., vol. 7, p. 136/1). These incidents show that symbolic status was subject to constant social negotiation and required continuous, active reinforcement from the central legal apparatus to maintain its economic value.

When the field further destabilized, symbolic capital offered no protection against coercive capital (physical violence). In 1775, a local bandit, Sengcioğlu Ali, murdered a *sādāt* member named Terzi Abdülhalim in his shop. The bandit was openly supported by the regional mütesellim (deputy governor), who proceeded to imprison another *sādāt* member for filing a complaint (A.DVNS.AHK.KR.d., vol. 13, p. 130, 156/1). This incident demonstrates the absolute contingency of symbolic capital. The sayyid's lineage was worthless when confronted by a combination of coercive capital (bandits) and corrupt administrative capital (*mütesellim*). It reveals that for symbolic capital to function, the "field" must be stable and its rules guaranteed by the state's monopoly on violence. In its absence, the field dissolves into a base struggle of coercive power, where force trumps the lineage[3].

Finally, the sayyids themselves could abuse the symbolic status. In 1690, a sayyid named Mehmed, leading a band of outlaws, raided a home, committed rape, and assaulted the inhabitants. The case was deemed so egregious that the central government ordered it transferred to Edirne if not properly punished locally (A.DVN.ŞKT.d., vol. 14, p. 98, decree no. 425). This illustrates that the habitus of the privileged was not universally pious; the status could be used as a shield or a tool in the violent struggles for local power. In the 17th- and 18th-century provinces, the *sādāt* distinction was not a fixed identity but a form of capital whose value was constantly contested, devalued, and renegotiated by officials, the public, and the sayyids themselves.

Such examples point to both the potential for the privileged position of the *sādāt-ı kirâm* in the provinces to be abused and its vulnerability to attack. For this reason, the question of how this symbolic status was historically limited and redefined must be examined more closely. In the period after the Celali rebellions, the province became not just a geographical area remote from the center, but also a multi-centered field of power where political control was fragmented and different local actors (civil administrators, bandits, notables [*ayan*], and tyrants) entered into a struggle for authority. This transformation created a ground on which the vertical authority structure assumed in the classical Ottoman administrative rationality was de facto broken, and where symbolic privileges could lose their practical validity. The immunity of strata possessing symbolic capital, such as the *sādāt-ı kirâm*, has increasingly become the object of local bargaining and de facto power balances in this environment. Indeed, as Halil İnalcık has pointed out, in the 17th century, administrative authority in the provinces was wielded not only by central officials but at times by semi-official power centers that emerged spontaneously; these actors established their local influence by pushing the boundaries of central law. As seen in the example of Seydişehir, the raiding of the homes of *sādāt-ı kirâm* members, the confiscation of their property, their subjection to violence, or their being subjected to taxation can be read not just as individual attacks but as a collective challenge aimed at redefining the social field. This situation demonstrates that symbolic capital can be functional only to the extent that it is recognized within a legitimate domain and that this recognition becomes fragile in environments such as the province, where the boundaries of the social field become blurred. In the Ottoman provinces, the *sādāt* distinction was determined not only by official privileges but also by whether local power centers recognized

[3] Numerous comparable incidents recorded in Seydişehir's archival corpus confirm that members of the *sādāt-ı kirâm* frequently became targets of assault, extortion, and slander, despite their theoretical immunity. Court documents reveal cases of forced payments, confiscations, home raids, sexual assault, and even murder—each demonstrating the fragility of symbolic capital when detached from the coercive and administrative protection of the state (A.DVNS.AHK.KR.d., vol. 3, pp. 156/3, 168/1, 293/1; vol. 10, p. 21/1; vol. 13, p. 133; A.DVN.ŞKT.d., vol. 72, p. 49).

this status. Under conditions where symbolic recognition was no longer supported by the state's material capacity for enforcement, the legitimacy of the *sādāt-ı kirâm* became fragile and, in some localities, even contested. What distinguishes Seydişehir in this period is not a secular rejection of the sacred lineage but the emergence of a new social reality in which economic violence and fiscal competition undermined the moral economy that had sustained reverence for the Prophet's descendants. The attacks against members of the *sādāt* class in court records do not signal a loss of faith but rather a shift in the sources of power and legitimacy: symbolic prestige was no longer sufficient to ensure deference without material backing and local alliances. The reality of the 17th- and 18th-century province shows that the *sādāt* distinction was not historically fixed or absolute; on the contrary, its boundaries were redrawn in parallel with the political and economic transformations of the period, as spiritual prestige increasingly competed with fiscal and coercive forms of capital in defining local hierarchies. The *sādāt* identity gained meaning to the extent that it was fortified by the support of local civil administrators; however, when this support weakened or when confronted by local notables and criminal networks, this identity was reduced to an abandoned symbol. In this respect, privilege in the Ottoman province was not merely a legal construct but also a sociological one.

Zâviyedars: Representatives of Symbolic Legitimacy in the Province

Beginning in the early thirteenth century, the Mongol invasions triggered large-scale migrations of the Sufis from regions such as Khorasan, Khwarazm, and Transoxiana into Anatolia. These dervish groups, affiliated with various Sufi orders, were organized around zâviyes and tekkes, which served not only as spiritual retreats but also as key institutions in shaping religious communities and local economies during the pre-Ottoman period. Following the Seljuks' defeat at Kösedağ in 1243, the resulting political fragmentation enabled local amirs to consolidate power by patronizing these lodges, securing lands as waqf, and forging ties with rural populations (Wolper, 2003, pp. 27–45). Often established in villages and along travel routes, these lodges evolved into self-sustaining economic hubs with vineyards, fields, mills, and livestock. Beyond sustaining themselves, the dervishes cultivated a distinct form of provincial piety and communal identity through hospitality and local engagement (Barkan, 1942, pp. 279–386).

During the Ottoman and the preceding Karamanid periods, most *zâviyedar*s were held exempt from taxes. This situation is clearly specified in the *Karaman Kanunnamesi* (Law Code of Karaman): "From those who are registered in the New Register (*Defter-i Cedîd*) as *sipahizâde* (son of a cavalryman), *zâviyedar,* and exempt, the taxes of *resm-i çift* (plow tax), *bennak* (tax on peasants with little land), *caba* (tax on bachelors), and *avârız* (extraordinary levies) shall not be taken" (Erdoğru, 1993, pp. 467-516). This ruling reveals that members of *zâviye*s were seen as holding a position that was both exempt from worldly obligations and endowed with spiritual authority. In Seydişehir, *zâviyedar*s appear as actors intertwined with the authority of the waqf in the regulation of the social field. In particular, the *zâviye*s organized within the body of the Seyyid Harun Waqf established a multi-centered religious and economic network, with *tekkenişin*s (lodge residents) serving in the city center and other *zâviyedar*s cultivating waqf lands in surrounding villages (Değerli-Küçükdağ, 2013, pp. 203-228).

*Zâviye*s, within the social field of the Ottoman province, were institutions that reproduced not only religious legitimacy but also economic and cultural capital. In analyzing these structures, the urban and the rural cannot be seen in a dichotomous relationship. As Saygın Salgırlı argues, this "fluid and symbiotic relationship" was fundamentally structured by the financial underpinnings of urban institutions, which were financed "partially, and sometimes extensively, by rural revenue sources" (Salgırlı, 2018, p. 48). This economic reality means that the behavioral patterns of *zâviyedar*s in the villages, their modes of agricultural

production, and their ties with the central *zâviye* were not separate from the urban sphere but were integral components of a single, expansive socio-economic network managed by the institution. This network itself constitutes a key element of the local habitus. The strategic urban placement and architecture of the *zâviyes* reinforced this habitus on the ground. As Ethel Sara Wolper has shown, patrons strategically located these lodges near city gates and market areas, intentionally breaking down the old Seljuk model of a secluded elite core. By blurring the lines between private religious space and the public market, and through architecturally open features for public veneration, these lodges created a new, more accessible public piety (Wolper, 2003, s. 59-85). The distinctive habitus surrounding the *zâviye* was thus constructed through a dual process: the management of a vast rural-urban economic network and the daily performance of a visible, accessible piety within the city's most dynamic public spaces.

Dervishes, who possessed symbolic capital in the province, were generally regarded with respect by the public. However, this privileged position became vulnerable to exploitation. A 1743 ruling provides a striking example of this abuse. A respected Naqshbandi dervish, Dervish Ali, was described as 'a man of learning and chastity, one who has conquered his ego'. Another individual, Dündar Mustafa, usurped Dervish Ali's name and reputation to forge a legal document (*hüccet*), securing a material gain of 1,000 *kuruş* from the Konya Governor's Office. After the fraud was exposed, it was noted that Dervish Ali was unaware of the scheme and should not be offended, and Dündar Mustafa was ordered punished (A.DVNS.AHK.KR.d., vol. 1, p. 182/4). This case demonstrates that symbolic capital can be "put into circulation" even without the actor's knowledge, revealing that public reputation is vulnerable and often requires institutional guarantees.

Similarly, this symbolic status was open to negotiation and challenge. A ruling from June 1779 reveals that a dervish named Mehmed, one of the tomb-keepers (*türbedar*) of Seyyid Harun Veli, was pressured by some townspeople to pay *avarız* and *imdad-ı hazeriye* taxes, despite possessing no property that would require such levies (A.DVNS.AHK.KR.d., vol. 16, p. 23/1). This pressure illustrates that individuals with exemptions became targets during periods of economic crisis. Symbolic legitimacy could be sustained only through institutional recognition and social acceptance; otherwise, it could be usurped or weakened. The status of a *zâviye*dar had to be constantly reconstructed within the tense space between symbolic power and material vulnerability.

Haim Gerber's (1994) assessment of Ottoman law as a "negotiation space" and Leslie Peirce's (2003) concept of the local court as a "public forum" for "dialectical" legal production are crucial here. They argue that the law was not merely top-down but was shaped by local demands, resistance, and the communal need for "social harmony." In this context, the Seydişehir court records—which show frequent debates over dervish tax exemptions and public reactions to these privileges—demonstrate that legal status was indeed a constantly negotiated and transformable structure. The *zâviyedars*' tax exemptions gained legitimacy not just from *berat*s or *kanunnâme*s but also from their capacity to institutionalize their prestige within this negotiated public space. Their status was constantly re-established in relation to both the state and other local actors, revealing the structural nature of law as being intertwined with the local social fabric.

Strategic Service and State-Granted Capital: *Derbendçi*s and Miners

Beyond symbolic capital derived from lineage or piety, privilege in the provincial field was also acquired through direct, transactional exchanges with the state. The *derbendçi* (pass-guard) and miner-exemption systems demonstrate a different mechanism of capital conversion: the state granted social and economic

capital (tax exemptions, privileged status) in return for strategic labor (a form of economic capital) essential for security and resource extraction.

The *derbend teşkilatı* (pass-guard organization) conferred a specific, privileged status on the groups responsible for securing key routes (Değerli Keçici, 2008, pp. 44-53). This was not symbolic in the same way as lineage; it was a direct payment for a service. In Seydişehir, the village of Nuzumla was charged with *derbend* duty at the İlbeyi pass. In return, cadastral registers from 1502 and 1518 confirm that they were exempt from extraordinary taxes (*avarız* and *tekâlif-i örfiye*), a status legitimized by the state's recognition of their service "since ancient times" (kadîmden beri) (TT. d., vol. 40, p. 321; vol. 455, p. 937)[4]. This status, while originating from a practical function, endowed the group with a distinct symbolic position as legitimate representatives of state-sanctioned security, elevating them above the standard *reaya*.

Similarly, the state granted exemptions to those who provided labor for strategic resource extraction, such as saltpeter (güherçile) for gunpowder and ore from the Bozkır Mine[5]. Archival records from 1575 to 1840 consistently show that individuals from Seydişehir tasked with these services were exempted from a range of taxes (TT. d., vol. 968; C. DRB., no. 1/37, no. 4/152, 6/264, 41/2047, 57/2831; C. ML., no. 588/24210).

Sociologically, these records reveal the state's role as the ultimate arbiter of "conversion rates" within the social field. The state defined the "rules of the field" (North, 1990) by setting a formal "price" for privilege. The miners' and derbendçis' service (economic capital) was "converted" by the state, via decree, into social capital (exemption from reaya obligations) and symbolic capital (a distinct, protected group identity). This "symbolic protection" was not based on the public recognition of piety, but on the public recognition of the group's special, contractual relationship with the state. This demonstrates the "path dependence" (North, 1990, pp. 92-99) of privilege: once these institutional patterns were set, they guaranteed the continuity of these groups' status, which was reproduced not through lineage but through their continued fulfillment of a state-defined strategic function.

Conclusion

This study has sociologically analyzed the production and reproduction of provincial social hierarchies in premodern Ottoman Anatolia, moving beyond the traditional *askerî-reaya* dichotomy. By applying Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework to the case study of Seydişehir, this article argues that privilege was not a static legal category but the contingent outcome of social struggles within a dynamic "field." The intermediate strata—sayyids, *zâviyedar*s, *derbendçi*s, and miners—were not passive recipients of status but active agents who deployed specific strategies to convert various forms of capital.

The findings demonstrate three distinct mechanisms of capital conversion and status maintenance. First, the case of the Seyyid Harun Waqf illustrates the conversion of inherited symbolic capital (sacred lineage) into vast economic capital (waqf wealth) and institutionalized social capital, visible in the control over

[4] A similar pattern continued into the 18th century, particularly in areas where insecurity intensified. Two localities on the Seydişehir–Beyşehir road, Yılmanbeli and Kılıç, were among the regions increasingly affected by banditry during this period. Archival records report that the Kurdish and Yörük groups were obstructing roads, attacking travelers, and looting property in these zones. In response, the residents of Bulumya village—part of the Sudirhemi sub-district—were officially assigned the derbendçi duty by a decree dated May 6, 1739 (C. DH., no. 80/3960). In effect, the villagers were granted the status of a militarized reaya, tasked with directly confronting threats to public safety. A subsequent ruling dated June 25, 1837, indicates that this obligation remained in force for nearly a century (KŞS, vol. 54, p. 337, decree no. 1).

[5] In the Ottoman Empire, mines were often attached to the mukataa (tax-farm) system and placed under the control of the Public Treasury or the Imperial Mint Directorate; the people who worked in these mines were endowed with their own special tax exemptions and statuses. Saltpeter (güherçile), the basic raw material for gunpowder production, was a type of mineral for which its importance reached its peak. To guarantee the production of this mineral, the Ottomans established saltpeter works (güherçile karhaneleri) and employed the surrounding village populace or military strata for this job (Koç, 2003, pp. 79-92).

the urban-rural habitus managed by the *zâviyedar*s. Second, the divergent fates of the Seyyid Harun and Şeyh Ahmed Alaî families, combined with the crises of violence in the 17th and 18th centuries, reveal the contingency of symbolic capital. Its value was not absolute; it could be devalued by the state (the ultimate arbiter of "conversion rates") or rendered worthless in a destabilized field where coercive capital became dominant. Third, the *derbendçi* and miner exemptions exemplify a more direct, transactional mechanism: the state converted strategic service (a form of economic capital) directly into social capital (privileged status and tax exemptions), thereby defining the "rules of the field."

Ultimately, the Ottoman provincial order is reconceptualized not as a fixed hierarchy but as a negotiated field of power. Privilege was relational, requiring constant validation from the state and recognition from the local populace. This study's contribution is its demonstration of how sociological theory can be applied to historical archives to reveal the mechanisms—conversion, struggle, and habitus—that shaped social stratification. Future research could apply this model to other provincial fields to test the variability of these capital conversion rates across the empire.

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Author Details: Ayşe Değerli Velet (Prof. Dr)
[1] İzmir Demokrasi Üniversitesi, Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi, Tarih Bölümü, İzmir, Türkiye
0000-0001-9035-6745 ayse.degerli@idu.edu.tr

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