

A HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE ROMA IN THE BULGARIAN LANDS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY¹

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Abstract

The paper aims at presenting new information concerning the Ottoman (short timar) tax registry TD 370 from 1530, comprising the Ottoman administrative unit region (beylerbeylik) of Rumelia (the Eastern Balkans, mostly the current-day Bulgarian lands). The historical record TD 370 offers a copious picture of the structure of the Ottoman society and the integration of the Roma into its different strata during the first half of the 16th century.

*An attempt for interpretation of the data on **the geographical distribution and the quantitative parameters** concerning the Christian and Muslim Roma, the Roma travellers and Roma settlers making their living through cultivating is offered. In addition, tax obligations and occupations of the Roma in the non-agrarian sphere are discussed as well as the integration of a substantial part of the Roma in the military organisation of the muselems.*

Key words: Roma history, Ottoman Empire, taxation, occupations, Roma population.

The Roma people of former centuries left no “autographs” to indicate their past; we have no narratives or records compiled in the Roma’s own environment. Thus, the history of the Roma can be reconstructed only through external evidence. In different archives – mostly in contemporary Turkey as well as in Bulgaria - a great number of historical materials are preserved: authentic archive sources for the Roma people. Usually, these sources are not only about the Roma and this is how, on the primary empirical level, the history of the Roma was organically embedded in the history of the society in which they lived. It is significant that although Ottoman documents did not originate in the Roma’s own environment or institutions, they in fact represent the first large number of sources for the reconstruction of the history of the Roma in their second motherland in the Balkans (Марушиакова, Попов 1993: 19; Марушиакова, Попов 2000: 7).

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This paper is intended as only a step towards the discovery of the Ottoman sources for the history of the Roma through publishing the data, derived from a registry (TD 370), from the beginning of the sixteenth century for the eastern half of the Ottoman Balkans.

The Ottoman materials are not perfect. As with any other historical study, this one faces many limitations, most significantly a shortage of information on important issues. The contemporary Ottoman studies are still at the stage of initial development of sources - many topics concerning the Ottoman institutions are still to undergo primary analysis and the methods of study of the Ottoman documentary materials are being appropated. However, until a **systemic development of the Ottoman “Roma archive”** begins, we shall not be able to evaluate all of its potential. There exist certain debates about whether it is necessary to compile a history of the Roma as a whole; some people questioning the necessity for such a history of the Roma, depicted in the Ottoman documents – without bright protagonists, the classic chronology of important military-political events, or the state scaffolding of every “typical” history. The Ottoman state documentation and particularly the Ottoman taxation registries do not provide statistical information³. Publishing the information from a single Ottoman registry which presents a limited and static picture of only a few traits of the Roma community at the beginning of the sixteenth century seems unattractive. Setting a task like this, I proceed from the assumption that historians traditionally respect the sources and that I cherish the idea that a large number of historical monuments, despite their many imperfections, can tell us a great deal in order to make sure that the Roma have a history without which the “great” history of Bulgarian society and the Ottoman Empire would be incomplete (Стојановски 1989; Зиројевић 1981; Мујић 1953 and many more).

The Ottoman document presented in this paper is one of the well-known *timar* registries or *tapu-tahrir defteri* in the Ottoman fiscal practice. In these registries, towns and villages were listed in terms of taxpayers and revenues which were collected in the form of different taxes, fees, fines, etc. The primary objective of the systemising of information in these registries was to record the distribution of revenues from the households in every town and village to the various “beneficiaries”. This included financial support for the Ottoman militaries (the *sipahis*) in the form of *timar*, *hass* and *ziamet*, the Muslim religious endowments (known as *wakf* or *waqf*), and contributions to the imperial treasury. The *timar* registries under discussion here are detailed and concise. In the detailed registries (*mufassal*) one can find a list of the names of the payees, while the concise ones (*icmal*) provide information only about the total number of payees in a particular town or village, grouped according to their religion, family status, etc.

³ For a general discussion of the potential of registries in Ottoman studies in Bulgarian literature see: Тодорова, М., Тодоров, Н. Проблеми и задачи на историческата демографија на Османската империја. – Балканистика, 1989, 2; Тодорова, М. Балканското семејство. Историческа демографија на българското общество през османскиот период. С., 2002; Първева, Ст. Османски „поземлени“ регистрации от XVII – първите десетилетия на XVIII век. Извор за историјата на аграрните структури и социјалните одношения. – В: Из практиката на османската канцеларија. Сборник материјали од меѓународната конференција „Османските регистри – извор за историјата на Балканите“. Софија, 23 октомври 2009. Составител Р. Ковачев. С., 2011; Иванова, Св. Етнодемографски проучувања во современиот български историографија, XV–XVIII в. – В: Български XV–XVIII в. Историографски истражувања. Т. 1, С., 1987