

The Blurred Boundaries of Slavery and Freedom in the Early Modern Crimean Khanate

📅 May 29, 2024 (<https://Trasisblog.unibe.ch/?P=322>) 👤 Turkana Allahverdiyeva (<https://Trasisblog.unibe.ch/?Author=10>)

In Summer 2023, the TraSIS project organised a joint conference (<https://trasisblog.unibe.ch/?p=254>) with the Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS) in the picturesque Swiss lakeside town of Murtensee. Some of our guests generously agreed to contribute a blog post in which they discuss one of the sources they presented on at the conference. In the second post of this series, Turkana Allahverdiyeva, a doctoral student at the BCDSS, discusses a case of non-elite household slavery in the early modern Crimean Khanate.

We recommend that readers explore our other blog contributions which are linked here (<https://trasisblog.unibe.ch/?p=125>).

Introduction

The Crimean Khanate was a semi-autonomous polity situated in the Crimean Peninsula, the last surviving successor state of the Mongol Golden Horde. It flourished from the mid-15th century to the late 18th century as a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire, but occasionally enjoyed brief periods of independence, projecting its power and influence over neighbouring territories.

The Crimean Khanate organised slaving expeditions against the non-Muslim populations to the north, leading to the enslavement and sale of thousands of men, women, and children. Caffa (Kefe) was a prominent entrepôt on the Crimean Peninsula, and served as one of the main hubs of this slave traffic. Enslaved persons were often shipped from Caffa to different parts of the Ottoman Empire via the Black Sea route.

The Crimean Khanate's economy and social structure, as well as the larger framework of the Ottoman Empire, were greatly impacted by the slave trade. In addition to enhancing the wealth and influence of the Crimean elite, the slave trade provided labour for the Ottoman Empire in domestic, military, and agricultural contexts. Notwithstanding the historical significance of the Crimean Khanate in this regard—especially for its provision of white slaves to the Ottomans—the subject has received scant attention in existing scholarship. Studies of slavery in the Crimean Khanate are thus clearly a scholarly desideratum. There is a particular dearth of work on hired labour, freedom, and slavery/slavery-like practices as featured in archival sources. The most important repositories in this context are the registers of the Crimean kadiasker courts. As in the European and Anatolian territories of the Ottoman Empire, the sultan appointed a chief judge for the Crimean Khanate, known as the kadiasker.

The kadiasker sat on the khan's ruling council and resided in Bakhchysarai, the capital city. Kadis handled administrative duties related to notarial and judicial processes in the several districts of the Khanate.[1] The material preserved in surviving court records is crucial for understanding individual cases of slavery and slavery-like practices.

Examining legal cases involving slavery in the court registers raises numerous questions. However, in this particular piece, I want to focus on the blurred boundaries between slavery and freedom. Though it is not explicitly used in the documents, I use the term “slavery-like” to denote the experiences of individuals who existed in the interstices between slavery and freedom. Several main lines of enquiry emerge from the perusal of these archival sources: what do the terms “slavery” and “slavery-like” truly encapsulate, and how do they intertwine with historical practices? Can one exist in a paradox, legally free in status yet tethered by circumstances reminiscent of servitude? One pivotal consideration here is the occasional blurring of the boundaries between slavery and freedom, where an individual may be legally free while their life experiences resonate with those of enslaved persons.

This blog post embraces the concept of asymmetrical dependency, an innovative approach in the historiography of slavery developed by the BCDSS, with the aim of providing deeper insight into the social history of the Crimean Khanate from the perspective of enslaved persons. This concept allows us to focus in on the social and legal dynamics of relationships including slavery, hired labour (*icâre*), domestic service, tributary or coerced labour, and debt bondage.[2] The asymmetrical bonds in various interpersonal relationships were deeply shaped by intersectional factors such as gender, legal status, ethnicity and religion, which reproduced this asymmetry.[3] It is crucial to acknowledge that these asymmetrical bonds could manifest in various ways, allowing for different forms of agency.[4] In this blog post, I use the term agency to describe the capacity of individuals living in the early 18th century Crimean Khanate to assert some level of choice, control and resistance within the constraints of their circumstances. I focus on a case from the early 18th century Crimean Khanate involving a teenaged convert to Islam named Marziye bt. Abdullah. Her case reflects well the blurred and complex boundaries between freedom and unfreedom in this context.

Marziye was a female hired labourer who converted to Islam and subsequently successfully pursued legal action against her non-Muslim “employer” (I use quotation marks to reflect the ambiguities involved). This case offers a fascinating lens through which to examine the dynamics of asymmetrical dependency and agency, and sheds light on the disadvantaged litigant's capacity to influence the proceedings of the kadi court.

Source

I draw here primarily on the kadiasker court registers preserved in the Saint Petersburg National Library. Because of their location in Saint Petersburg, Russian scholars knew of the existence of these documents and studied them extensively from the end of the 19th century onwards. These sources were introduced to Turkish scholars by Halil Inalcık's 1996 article “Kırım Hanlığı Kadı Sicilleri Bulundu” (The Crimean Khanate's Kadi Records Have Been Found).[5] Digital versions of these archives were later acquired by İSAM (İslam Araştırmaları Merkezi, the major research centre and library for Islamic Studies in Istanbul), and have been the subject of a number of MA and PhD dissertations.[6] These dissertations have, however, left the domains of slavery and dependency in the early 18th century relatively unexplored.

While acknowledging the value of this repository for social historians as one that sheds much light on the lives of ordinary individuals, including slaves, hired laborers, children, women, debtors, and more, it is imperative to recognise the limitations of this source. The court

registers are inherently state-centric and employ highly bureaucratized language. Nevertheless, they offer significant insight into the activities, agencies and daily lives of ordinary people.

The Voice of a Teenage Girl, Marziye bt. Abdullah

In the year 1703/1704, a woman from Bakhchysarai who had attained her majority (*balıġa*) and had converted to Islam (*şeref-ü İslâm ile müşerrefe olan*) applied to the kadi court to sue her non-Muslim “employer” Vasilaki veled Aslan.[7] Marziye, a servant, claimed that her employer, Vasilaki, promised her higher wages while working in his household. However, Vasilaki denied making any such agreement and asserted that Marziye served him for only one year instead of the two and a half years she alleged. Marziye, in response, presented two Muslim witnesses to support her claim. Ultimately, the litigants reached an amicable agreement (*sulh*), and Vasilaki paid Marziye 1500 *akçe*. [8]

We hear the voice of Marziye, mediated by the court scribe:

I served at Vasilaki's household and he told me he would pay me more than the agreed upon amount, and that he would make me pleased. So, he hired me, and I served at his household for two and a half years. From now on, I no longer serve [him]. I require my payment, if it is in accordance with the Sharia.

Upon being questioned by the kadi, Vasilaki answered:

Since Marziye is motherless and fatherless, I took her into my house to serve me, in return for caring for her. It is true that I brought her into my house. However, I have not made any contract to pay her wages. And she only served for one year, not more than that. She does not have any right to wages from me.[9]

Vasilaki denied Marziye's claims that they had concluded a contract of *icâre* (hiring), saying instead that he had provided her with accommodation, protection (and likely food) in return for domestic service. Upon Vasilaki's denial, the kadi asked Marziye to prove her claim, and she presented two Muslim witnesses. Thereafter, a *sulh* was reached and Vasilaki paid 1500 *akçe* to Marziye. *Sulh* is a form of conflict resolution in Islamic law, and Muslim jurists disagreed about which cases could be resolved by means of it.[10] The court found in favour of Marziye and against Vasilaki.

The question arises: was Marziye previously enslaved, and did she embrace Islam before joining Vasilaki's household as a servant, or did her conversion occur during her residence there?[11] The motivation behind her conversion is an interesting question. One plausible explanation is that she may have converted to facilitate manumission. I incline toward the view that she embraced Islam while serving in Vasilaki's household, rather than prior to joining it. This view is based on the understanding that, if she had converted prior to joining his household, she would have been ineligible to serve therein.

The document also hints at societal discomfort at a Muslim woman residing as a servant in a non-Muslim household post-conversion. It seems that Marziye, when appearing before the court, was somewhere between 11 and 14 years old. In legal terms, Marziye's attainment of puberty (Ar. *bulūġh*), symbolised by the onset of menstruation, made her an adult, and in social terms this often meant her eligibility for betrothal or marriage. This societal expectation may have compelled Marziye to move out and start a new life, with all the financial challenges this entailed. That she was an orphan would have further accentuated her vulnerability.[12]

The narrative unfolds with Vasilaki seizing the opportunity to take in the vulnerable and unprotected Marziye as a servant to his household. Their arrangement, likely based on an oral agreement, stipulated Marziye's provision of domestic service in exchange for shelter, sustenance, and clothing. The dynamics between them, characterised by Vasilaki's protection and Marziye's dependence, underscore what appears to be a strong asymmetrical dependency. In short, Marziye would have relinquished a significant degree of freedom, a necessity in light of her circumstances as a vulnerable orphan.

This scenario prompts us to think about the blurred boundary between slavery and freedom. Although there is no consensus on the definition of slavery among historians, it is generally accepted that slaves were property that could be bought and sold.[13] The further question arises as to whether legal status is limited to the binary of "free" and "enslaved," or if people also existed somewhere in between? Was Marziye genuinely free, or did she exist in a state of slavery? In this post, I contend that Marziye occupied a nuanced space between these extremes, which demonstrates the need to think beyond a strict slavery/freedom dichotomy.

In delving into Marziye's story, we navigate the complex interplay of societal expectations, vulnerabilities, and the compromise of personal freedom. This case serves as a poignant reminder that historical interpersonal relationships are often layered and intricate, resisting simplistic categorisations of slavery or freedom. This pivotal moment in Marziye's life showcases her agency in challenging the prevailing asymmetrical dependency. Notwithstanding the blurred boundaries between the extremes of slavery and freedom, Marziye exerted her agency to decrease her degree of dependency. While the veracity of the claims and counterclaims remains uncertain in this case, Marziye's assertion of agency is evident in several actions. She demonstrated an awareness of her rights, an understanding of court proceedings, and the ability to make informed decisions. The circulation of knowledge was also decisive. Being a domestic servant in the household of Vasilaki, Marziye might have easily lived in blissful ignorance of her legal rights. Notably, she took the decisive step of converting to Islam, initiating legal proceedings, gathering witnesses, and demanding compensation, having her day in court. She ultimately secured monetary compensation for her labour. All these actions demand a great deal of assertiveness and agency. Unfortunately, the documents do not allow us to speculate on the involvement of outside parties in the preparation of her case.

Marziye's story unfolds as a narrative of agency within a complex dynamic of dependency, shedding light on the compromises made for survival, the extremes of slavery and freedom, and the nuanced space that exist in between.

Conclusion

This blog post focused on an obscure legal case from the Crimean Khanate separated from us by the span of three centuries. By framing the case in terms of asymmetrical dependencies, we gain a greater appreciation for the intricate interplay between freedom, slavery and slavery-like practices. Rather than adhering to rigid dichotomies, the human experience, as exemplified by Marziye's narrative, unfolds in circumstances that are often highly nuanced, in this case by the spectrum of asymmetrical dependencies.

Marziye, far from being a passive victim of exploitation, emerges as an agent who sought to shape her circumstances, adeptly navigating societal norms and legal intricacies. Examining her case reveals not only the resilience of an individual but the transformative impact of legal

frameworks and the accessibility of legal knowledge. The case of Marziye provides us with valuable insights into the dynamic interactions between individuals and the structures that shape their lives.

[1] Natalia Królikowska-Jedlińska, *Law and Division of Power in the Crimean Khanate (1532–1774), with Special Reference to the Reign of Murad Giray (1678–1683)* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), xxi.

[2] For more information on asymmetrical dependency, see BCDSS Concept Papers 1 and 2: Julia Winnebeck, Ova Sutter, Adrian Hermann, Christoph Antweiler and Stephan Conermann, “On Asymmetrical Dependency,” Concept Paper 1/21 (Bonn: BCDSS, 2021); Christoph Antweiler, “On Dependence, Dependency, and a Dependency Turn: An Essay with Systematic Intent,” Concept Paper 2/22 (Bonn: BCDSS, 2022).

[3] Madeline Zilfi, *Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire: The Design of Difference* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[4] On agency, see Stephan Conermann and Gül Şen, “Slavery is not Slavery: On Slaves and Slave Agency in the Ottoman Empire, Introduction,” in *Slaves and Slave Agency in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Stephan Conermann and Gül Şen (Bonn: Bonn University Press, 2020), 11–30.

[5] Halil Inalcık, “Kırım Hanlığı Kadı Sicilleri Bulundu,” *Bellekten* 60 (1996), 165–89.

[6] Dilek Çelik, “67 A 90 Nolu ve 1017–1022 (1608–1613) Tarihli Kırım Hanlığı Kadıasker Defteri (Tahlil ve Transkripsiyon),” MA thesis, Sakarya University (2011); Emine Yıldırım, “67 a 90 numaralı Kırım Kadıasker Defterine göre Kırım’da sosyal ve Ekonomik Hayat (1075–1076/1665),” MA thesis, Sakarya University (2020); Şahin Kılıç, “17 numaralı Kırım Şer’iyye Sicili (H. 1084–1085/m. 1673–1674) transkripsiyonu ve değerlendirilmesi,” MA thesis, Sakarya University (2019); Mehmet Caner Çavuş, “67 a 90 numaralı (Onuncu cilt) 1077–1080 (1666–1670) tarihli Kadıasker Defterine göre Kırım’da Sosyal ve Ekonomik Hayat (1–70 varak),” MA thesis, Sakarya University (2019); Sema Aktaş Sarı, “3a–3b numaralı, 1648–1679 tarihli Kırım Kadıasker Defterlerine göre Kırım’da Sosyal ve Ekonomik Hayat,” MA thesis, Sakarya University (2016); Fırat Yaşa, “67 A 90 numaralı (Dördüncü Cilt), 1061–1062 tarihli Kadıasker Defteri’ne göre Kırım’da Sosyal ve Ekonomik Hayat,” MA thesis, Sakarya University (2014); Mustafa Işık, “701 Nolu Tapu Tahrir Defterine göre Akkırman Sancağı, Akkırman 701 Nolu Tapu Tahrir Defterine göre Akkırman Sancağı,” MA thesis, Sakarya University (2008).

[7] CCR 36, 35

[8] Standard silver currency unit of the Ottoman Empire.

[9] “...*gıbbe’s-sual Vasilaki el-mezbûr cevâba tasaddî idüb işbu Marziyeyi minel ve anasız ve atasız olduğundan benim evime hizmet iyle seni bakub gözetürüm dîyu evime aldığım gerçektir ve lâkin senin ücretini veririm dîyu akt’i-icare eyledigim yoktur ve hem dahi bir sene hizmet itmişdir ziyâde eylediği yoktur mezbûrenin benim zimmetimde ücret hakkı yoktur dediginde...*”

[10] Işık Tamdoğan, “*Sulh* and the 18th Century Ottoman Courts of Üsküdar and Adana,” *Islamic Law and Society* 15 (2008), 55–83. On *şulh* generally, see Aida Othman, “‘And Amicable Settlement is Best’: *Şulh* and Dispute Resolution in Islamic Law,” *Arab Law Quarterly* 21 (2007), 64–90. Zeynep Abacı Dörtok defines *sulh* as “in its simplest sense, peace or reconciliation; more broadly...an agreement or settlement between two parties to resolve a dispute between them, usually based on a fee to be paid, or a reconciliation form in which the parties with a disagreement resolve their issues by their own consent.” See Zeynep Abacı Dörtok, “Bir Sorun

Çözme Yöntemi olarak Sulh: 18. Yüzyıl Bursa Kadı Sicillerinden Örnekler ve Düşündürdükleri,” *OTAM Ankara Üniversitesi Osmanlı Tarihi Araştırma ve Uygulama Merkezi Dergisi* 20 (2006), 106.


[11] On conversion to Islam in the Ottoman context, see: Tijana Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Marc David Baer, “Islamic Conversion Narratives of Women: Social Change and Gendered Religious Hierarchy in Early Modern Ottoman Istanbul,” *Gender & History Journal* 16 (2004), 425–58 (at 450); Selim Deringil, *Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Anton Minkov, *Conversion to Islam in the Balkans: Kısve Bahası Petitions and Ottoman Social Life, 1670–1730* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 184. See also Veruschka Wagner, Zeynep Yeşim Gölçe, Zeynep Dörtok Abacı and Turkana Allahverdiyeva, *Transcending Boundaries: Rethinking Slave Agency in the Ottoman Empire Through Religious Conversion Practices*, BCDSS Working Papers 14 (Bonn: BCDSS, 2024).

[12] Will Smiley, “The Meanings of Conversion: Treaty Law, State Knowledge, and Religious Identity among Russian Captives in the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Empire,” *The International History Review* 34 (2012), 559–80.

[13] R. Hellie, “Slavery,” in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica online*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/slavery-sociology> (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/slavery-sociology>) (accessed 12/4/2024).

 Uncategorized

(<https://Trasisblog.unibe.ch/?Cat=1>)

 Agency (<https://Trasisblog.unibe.ch/?Tag=Agency>), Asymmetrical Dependency (<https://Trasisblog.unibe.ch/?Tag=Asymmetrical-Dependency>), BCDSS (<https://Trasisblog.unibe.ch/?Tag=Bcdss>), Conference (<https://Trasisblog.unibe.ch/?Tag=Conference>), Court Register (<https://Trasisblog.unibe.ch/?Tag=Court-Register>), Crimean Khanate (<https://Trasisblog.unibe.ch/?Tag=Crimean-Khanate>), Intersectionality (<https://Trasisblog.unibe.ch/?Tag=Intersectionality>), Kadiasker (<https://Trasisblog.unibe.ch/?Tag=Kadiasker>), Mongols (<https://Trasisblog.unibe.ch/?Tag=Mongols>), Murtensee (<https://Trasisblog.unibe.ch/?Tag=Murtensee>)

Comments are closed.