

Ottoman Historical Documents

The Institutions of an Empire

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Devşirme (040432)

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CHAPTER III

The Dynasty: Recruitment into the Sultan's Service

SECTION 1 *PENCİK*¹ AND *DEVŞİRME*

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries most members of the sultan's household – whether as troops, palace servants or as members of the political elite – entered imperial service by one of two routes. The first of these was as prisoners taken in frontier raids and wars in Europe, as described in passage 1. While most prisoners-of-war remained the property of their captors, to be sold in the market as slaves, the sultan took a certain proportion – nominally one-fifth – for his own use, to be brought up in his service. In addition to his share of the captives, the sultan also secured an income from prisoners-of-war by levying a toll on each captive ferried across the Straits from Europe to Anatolia via the ports of Istanbul and Gallipoli, as described in passage 2. The regulations from the time of Bayezid II (r. 1481–1512) laid out in passage 1 show that, among other legislative efforts of this reign, there was an attempt to systematise and control this practice.

The second route into the sultan's service was through the *devşirme* ('collection'). This was the levy of Christian boys made primarily, although not exclusively, in the Balkan provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Passage 3 is a template providing a model for commands to local authorities to carry out the levy and laying out the procedures to be followed. Since the levy was a gateway to a career in the sultan's service and a regular income, and since it also provided opportunities for the recruits to petition the sultan on behalf of their original families and communities, as evident in passage 4, it was not necessarily unpopular. Passages 5 and 6 nonetheless make it clear that some of the boys raised in this way tried to abscond.

1 A decree regulating the *pencik*

The command conveyed by the imperial sign² is this:

Various texts (*naşş*) in the Ancient Word of the Wise Sovereign offer decisive proofs that

¹ *Pencik* (from Persian *panjyak*, 'one-fifth'): the levy of – nominally – one-fifth of the prisoners-of-war for the sultan's service.

² The 'imperial sign' is the *fuğra*, the sultan's cipher which was affixed to sultanic decrees to guarantee their authenticity.

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