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Yamak (220383)

FOUNDATION FOR RESEARCH & TECHNOLOGY - HELLAS
INSTITUTE FOR MEDITERRANEAN STUDIESTHE ANATOMY OF A REBELLIOUS SOCIAL GROUP:
THE YAMAKS OF THE BOSPORUS
AT THE MARGINS OF OTTOMAN SOCIETY

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POLITICAL INITIATIVES
'FROM THE BOTTOM UP'
IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE*Halcyon Days in Crete VII*
A Symposium Held in Rethymno
*9-11 January 2009*Edited by
Antonis Anastasopoulos

Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı	
İslam Araştırmaları Merkezi	
Kütüphaneleri	
Doc. No:	047089
Th. No:	956.07 HAL D

CRETE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Rethymno 2012MADDE YANIMLANDIKTAN
SONRA GELEN DOKÜMAN

12 Ocak 2018

AN UPRISING BREAKS OUT AMONG A CERTAIN GROUP of insurgents, and then grows in scope and number with the arrival of newcomers. The core consists of a few people; however, it is this initial group of rebels who come to assume the leadership of the upheaval. These are the most active rebels, the ones who hold the initiative. It is generally accepted that the May 1807 uprising which eventually led to the dethronement of Selim III (the so-called Kabakçı Mustafa Upheaval) was a military uprising initiated by the *yamaks*¹ of the fortresses situated along the Rumelian and Anatolian coasts of the Bosphorus, acting on behalf of the janissaries. In its discussion of the May 1807 Rebellion, a contemporary American newspaper claimed that the "masses took no part at all; so that we attribute this catastrophe to some chiefs or parties yet unknown to the Janissaries".² During the revolt, it was the soldiers, or the *yamaks*, from the fortresses along the Bosphorus who played the pivotal role. Thus, although we label the May 1807 incident as a janissary uprising for the sake of simplicity, the *yamaks* were not janissaries in the real sense, and they were mostly newcomers from various parts of the Empire. Therefore, it is reasonable to raise doubts as to whether they represented the janissary class per se. Moreover, the janissaries were not the instigators and joined the rebellious *yamaks* only at their invitation on the third day of the uprising. Neither the janissaries nor other military groups rallied to their cause immediately after the uprising. Indeed, the event turned into a full-fledged janissary uprising only a few days after the rebellion. While the janissaries were not active from the very outset of the movement, the *yamaks*, on the other hand, remained its protagonists. Consequently, if we are to present an analysis of the May 1807 uprising, they are the first group to be studied.

Conventional historiography offers very limited information about the worldview and identities of the *yamaks* except for their unruliness, disobedience, and excess. Special academic or popular interest in this military group is rather limited, unless they are

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1 For a discussion of the meaning of the term *yamak* see below, p. 294ff.2 *Portland Gazette and Maine Advertiser*, XI/21 (7 September 1807), 2.

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