

FEUDAL LANDHOLDING IN THE NAHIJA OF TETOVA DURING THE 15th CENTURY

Elfat SULIMANI

Department of History, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Tetova
elfat.sulimani@unite.edu.mk

Abstract

This study examines the organization of feudal landholding in the nahiya of Tetova during the 15th century, within the framework of the consolidation of Ottoman administration in the Balkans following the incorporation of the region into the Eyalet of Rumelia. The landed property on which the timar system functioned appeared in three forms: state-owned land, private land, and waqf land. According to the cadastral defters of the 15th century, all three categories of fiefs were present in the nahiya of Tetova. Initially, the *has* constituted the main source of feudal revenue, whereas in the second half of the 15th century, *ziamets* and *timars* became dominant. Fiefs were granted exclusively to the military class, on the condition that it fulfilled its obligations to the state. Meanwhile, the *raya* population engaged in productive activities and paid taxes and dues to the state and the sipahi. The data indicate that feudal property was distributed predominantly among Muslim sipahis, as opposed to the limited number of Christian ones. The data also show a gradual transformation of the feudal structure and the integration of local elites into the Ottoman military-administrative system.

Keywords: Nahija of Tetova, Ottoman censuses, feudal property, timar system

Introduction

The expansion of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans during the 15th century marked one of the most significant transformative processes in the political, economic, and social history of the region. With the establishment of Ottoman rule, the conquered territories were gradually integrated into a new administrative and economic system, which aimed not only at consolidating central authority but also at ensuring sustainable resources for the functioning of the state and its army. In this context, the timar system became one of the fundamental institutions upon which the organization of the Ottoman Empire was based, closely linking land ownership with military and fiscal obligations.

Essentially, the timar system represented a specific form of feudal relations, in which land was considered state property and was granted for use to representatives of the military and administrative classes in exchange for service to the sultan. This mode of organization allowed the Ottoman state to maintain a large and ready-for-war army without the need for an expensive financial apparatus, since the timar holders themselves derived their income directly from the local population.

The implementation of the timar system in the Balkans reshaped land ownership and reorganized economic life. The process of integration into Ottoman structures often involved the transformation of earlier land-tenure practices and the incorporation of local elements within the new order. Against this backdrop, and through an examination of the cadastral defters, this study will analyze the forms of feudal landholding in the nahiyah of Tetovo during the 15th century, addressing issues related to the structure of the fiefs, the distribution of revenues, military obligations, and the composition of the feudal class.

Body of manuscript

The need to support a large army within a medieval economy led to the emergence of a system closely linked to the Empire's financial, social, and agricultural policies. The Ottoman Empire, compelled by the circumstances of the medieval economy where exchange relations between goods and money were still insufficiently developed and, on the other hand, by the need to continue its expansionist wars and maintain a centralized state, gradually began, with the conquest of the Balkan territories, to transform these lands into typical Ottoman provinces where the timar system was implemented.¹⁷

According to Ottoman law, the lands within the empire were divided into three categories: 1. Lands subjected to the tithe tax – *yshyrlık* (parts of Asia Minor); 2. Lands subjected to the haraç tax – *haracli* (Egypt); 3. State-owned lands – *eraz-i mirie*. The latter category included the regions of the Balkans and Western Anatolia.¹⁸ The conquered Balkan lands were incorporated into the Eyalet of Rumelia, headed by a beylerbey (mirimiran). His residence shifted over time—from Edirne to Gallipoli and later to Plovdiv. From the 15th century onward, its center was moved to Sofia, and later to Manastir.¹⁹ The Eyalet of Rumelia was also divided into smaller administrative units called livas or sanjaks, headed by a sanjakbey or mirliva, acting as a vassal to the beylerbey (the Pasha of the Eyalet). They were appointed by the central authority, usually upon the recommendation of the beylerbey.²⁰ Within the Eyalet of Rumelia, the sanjaks formed in Albanian territories during the 15th century were also included. The sanjakbeys had their own deputies called myteselim and the commanders of the sipahis, known as allajbeu. The sanjaks were further divided into smaller units, initially into vilayets, and these into nahiyahs. The division into vilayets was temporary and applied to newly conquered regions by the Ottomans; later, these were replaced by nahiyahs. Such was the case with the Polog plain, which in the 1452–1453 register was recorded under the Vilayet of Tetovo, while in the later 1467–1468 register it was listed as a nahiyah.²¹

Alongside vilayets and nahiyahs, the sanjaks were also divided into kazas, as units parallel to the former. In fact, a kaza constituted a territory over which the kadi (judge), a representative of the Ottoman judicial system, exercised authority. Beyond being a judicial-territorial unit, the kaza also functioned as a regular administrative unit. The size of a kaza depended primarily on the number of Muslim inhabitants in a given region. Therefore, it can be observed that several nahiyahs were usually included within a single kaza.²²

As for the population, it was broadly divided into two categories: the military class (including the Sultan, sadr-ı azem, Sheyhül-Islâm, kadiasker, defterdar, viziers, beylerbey, kadi, subaşı, sipahi, janissary, imam, etc.) and the common population, or raya, both Muslim and Christian. The raya were engaged in productive activities and paid taxes and other obligations to the state and to the sipahi. Within this stratum participated peasants, merchants, and craftsmen who produced material goods, which were protected and exploited by the ruling class.²³

The second category of society under Ottoman rule was also divided into two main groups, according to the type of settlement: those living in cities, small towns, and villages, and the nomads. Each group had specific rights, privileges, and obligations, and anyone wishing to move from one place to another required official permission. The most privileged of the raya

¹⁷ Halil Inalcik, *Perandoria Osmane – periudha klasike 1300-1600*, përkthyer nga: Edvin Cami, Tiranë, 2013, p. 143-145; Selami Pulaha, *Pronësia feudale në tokat shqiptare (shek. XV-XVI)*, Tiranë, 1988, p. 119.

¹⁸ Selami Pulaha, v. c., p. 106.

¹⁹ Skender Rizaj, *Historia e përgjithshme-Koha e Re (1453-1789)*, Prishtinë, 1985, p. 42.

²⁰ *Историја на македонскиот народ*, II, Скопје, 1998, p. 38-42.

²¹ Qerim Dalipi, *Ndarja administrative-territoriale e trojeve lindore dhe verilindore shqiptare nën sundimin osman (shek. XV-XVI)*, në: “Albanologji” nr. 10, v. II, Prishtinë, 2019, f.173.

²² Александар Стојановски, *Македонија во турското средновековие, (XIV-XVII век)*, Скопје, 1989, p. 38.

²³ *Historia e Kosovës*, I, Prishtinë, 2025, p. 391; Stanford J. Shaw, *Historia e Perandorisë Osmane dhe e Turqisë moderne*, Tiranë, 2006, p. 181; Halil Inalcik, *Devlet-i ‘Aliyye, studime mbi Perandorinë Osmane – I*, përkthyer nga Eduart Caka, Tiranë, 2021, p. 311.

were the city dwellers, who also held a special status known as *şeherli*. They were exempt from military service, many taxes, and from forced labor obligations imposed on the peasants.²⁴

The land, as *eraz-i mirie* or state-owned land, was granted by the Sultan for use to the ruling class, which represented the Sultan's authority (administrators, soldiers, and clerics). These land plots were also referred to as *dirliks*. They could not be inherited or sold without the Sultan's permission. These land plots were divided into three categories:

1. *Hass*: a fief yielding annual revenues of 100,000 to 1,000,000 akçe. Typically, *hasi* were held by the Sultan, the Grand Vizier, viziers, beylerbeys, sanjakbeys, and other state elites.
2. *Ziamet*: a fief yielding annual revenues of 20,000 to 99,000 akçe. These fiefs were held by *allajbeus*, naval commanders, noble families, etc.
3. *Timar*: a fief yielding revenues of 1,000 to 19,999 akçe, held by *sipahis* (cavalry-soldiers), *ghulams*, clerics, castle guardians, and others.²⁵

In fact, the Ottomans inherited the *timar* system from Byzantine feudal law regarding land ownership. As a legacy of Byzantine law, for centuries land as a whole was considered to belong to the sovereign (emperor, king, etc.). In this way, the obligations of the population toward the central state authority for agricultural produce were motivated, forming that part of the rent collected by the Byzantine state (the central rent). The remaining portion of the rent belonged to particular individuals, representatives of the wealthy class who stood at the head of military, political, and economic life in the provinces. This two-part rent system limited private landownership in various ways. It was upon this form of rent that the Byzantine feudal institution of landownership had been established and functioned.²⁶

However, the *timar* system differed from the system of private landownership. The distinction lay in the fact that, to implement the *timar* system, the Ottoman Empire needed to establish absolute control over the land, free from any private property rights. Consequently, the state declared that all land under Ottoman rule was *miri*—state-owned land. Exceptions were lands held as full *mülk* (private property) and *waqf* (religious endowments), which could either remain as such or be re-evaluated at the Sultan's discretion. In this regard, driven by the need to establish a highly centralized authority, the Ottoman state pursued the policy of converting lands into *timars*. Thus, lands that had previously been under absolute ownership by Christian proprietors, as well as lands belonging to monasteries, were transformed into *timars*.²⁷

After this process of dispossessing the local populations was implemented, the Sultan, through the application of the *timar* system, began granting land plots. Fiefs were assigned only to the military class, and it was strictly forbidden for such land plots to be given to the *raya*. This practice often led to fiefs being inherited with the permission of the authorities from father to son, provided that the successor fulfilled the military obligations toward the state. The application of this criterion resulted in the 15th century in the inclusion of Christian *timariots* within the *timar* system, with the aim of integrating the local noble class into the state apparatus. This was in line with the state's policies for the continuation of new conquests in the Balkans.²⁸ The feudal lord who held this land plot had certain rights of control over the land, including the authority to collect *raya* taxes derived from the *timar* system, as well as a portion of the state's central taxes from the population. He could also lease free properties based on agreements with interested peasants, from which he would receive a share of the rent. In this way, the state closely tied the feudal class to the state apparatus through the granting of fiefs with a temporary character and conditional upon military service. Through this system, the state secured

²⁴ Stanford J. Shaw, v. c., p. 182.

²⁵ Skender Rizaj, *Historia e përgjithshme – Koha e re (1453-1789)*, Prishtinë, 1985, p. 46, 47; Masar Rizvanolli, *Vendosja e sistemit të timarit në Kosovë në gjysmën e dytë të shekullit XV*, Prishtinë, 2021, p. 166-168.

²⁶ *Historia e popullit shqiptar*, I, Tiranë, 2002, p. 381.

²⁷ Halil Inalcik, *Perandoria Osmane...*, p. 143-145.

²⁸ *Историја на македонскиот народ*, II, p. 59.

substantial military forces and additional revenues that enabled continuous expansionist expeditions.²⁹

According to Ottoman law, the sipahi resided in the village he controlled but did not engage in agricultural production. To meet his needs and maintain the animals he possessed, the sipahi received from the state a *çiftlik* a land plot whose size varied depending on the region, ranging from 60 to 150 dunums.³⁰ In addition, the sipahi could also possess an economic plot called a *hass*: vineyards, orchards, mills, trees, etc., which were granted to him directly by the authorities for use and were exempt from any obligations to the state. Meanwhile, for cultivation and planting, the sipahi utilized the corvée labor of the *raya* under his control.³¹ The sipahi also held all other lands not in use by the villages, such as fallow lands, pastures, groves, fruit trees, and plots for building houses or mills. It should be emphasized that the holder of the fief did not own the economic lands (*hass* or *çiftlik*) as private property. Consequently, neither sipahis, *zaims*, *beylerbeys*, etc., could sell, bequeath, or donate them. They only had the right to lease or lend them.³²

At the same time, based on the revenues from his *timar*, the sipahi had military obligations toward the state. Sipahis earning under 3,000 *akçes* were required to join military expeditions personally; these timars were called *kelleç timars*, or “timars for a sword.” Those with higher revenues were required to provide armed men as well as small or large tents.³³ According to the scholar Inalcik, the sipahi had his own horse and was armed with a bow, sword, shield, lance, and mace; if the revenues of his *timar* exceeded a certain amount, he also wore body armor. Regarding the income threshold at which a sipahi was obliged to maintain and equip an additional mounted soldier (*cebelü*) for war, the sum was set at more than three thousand *akçes*, while *beylerbeys* maintained one *cebelü* for every five thousand *akçes*. During military expeditions, sipahis, under the command of their *subaşı*, assembled under the banner of the *sanjakbey*. The *sanjakbeys* gathered under the banner of the *beylerbey*, and each *beylerbey* then joined the army of the sultan.³⁴

The land ownership established by the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans, which formed the basis for the entire *timar* system, was manifested in three distinct forms: state lands (*eraz-i mirie*); lands under the direct private ownership of certain feudal lords (*eraz-i mülk*); and *waqf* lands (*eraz-i vakf*), property of religious institutions.³⁵

The 15th-century cadastral registers provide data showing that the Ottoman state had extensively implemented state land ownership in the Albanian regions, which also formed the basis of the *timar* system. This included all arable lands, fallow lands, pastures, underground resources, rivers, and trade route junctions. From these 15th-century cadastral records for the *nahiyah* of Tetovo, we learn that all three categories of fiefs were present in this region. *Hasses*, as the largest category, occupied the most significant share of the feudal rent revenues at the early stages of implementing the *timar* system. Below, we present a table of *hasses* in the 15th century for the *nahiyah* of Tetovo:³⁶

It should be emphasized that during the 15th century in the Ottoman Empire, *hasses*, *ziamets*, and *timars* had not yet been precisely classified according to their revenues, as discussed earlier.

²⁹ Halil Inalcik, *Perandoria Osmane...*, p. 146.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 147. Typically, a *çiftlik* referred to a tract of land that could be cultivated with a single plow. At that time, a *dunum* was considered in the legal codes as a plot of land 40 meters wide and long, averaging approximately 1,000 m². One *dunum* was equivalent to 0.094 hectares, and consequently, a *çiftlik* of 70 *dunums* would cover an area of 6.58 hectares. (Selami Pulaha, v. c., p. 106).

³¹ Halil Inalcik, *Devlet-i...*, p. 149.

³² Selami Pulaha, v. c., p. 112, 114-115.

³³ *Историја на македонскиот народ*, p. 58.

³⁴ Halil Inalcik, *Perandoria Osmane...*, p. 151; Stanford J. Shaw, v. c., p. 153-154; Pal Fodor, *Ottoman Warfare, 1300-1453*, nē: “The Cambridge History of Turkey, Byzantium to Turkey 1071–1453, v.I, përgatitur nga: Kate Fleet, Cambridge, 2009, p. 200-201.

³⁵ Selami Pulaha, v. c., p. 104.

³⁶ *Турски документи за историјата на македонскиот народ – Опирни пописни дефтери од XV век*, III, уредно: Методија Соколовски, Скопје, 1976, p. 37-54, 103-112; *Турски документи за историјата на македонскиот народ – Опирни пописни дефтери No 4 (1467-1468)*, уредно: Методија Соколовски – Александар Стојановски, Скопје, 1971, p. 293-303.

For this reason, we can observe that in both registers for the nahiyah of Tetovo, the corresponding category of the fief does not align with the revenues it should have had. Beyond this, we will treat these fiefs as they are named in the respective defters.

In the defter of 1452–53, in the nahiyah of Tetovo, hasses represented the wealthiest fiefs in terms of revenues from the sipahi rent collected from the population of 28 villages. Specifically, the total revenues of the nahiyah of Tetovo at that time amounted to 374,280 akçes (excluding revenues from waqfs and mülks), while revenues from only four hasses reached 204,990 akçes. In other words, during this register, hasses accounted for 54% of the total revenues of this nahiyah.

In the second half of the 15th century, just as in other Albanian regions, in the nahiyah of Tetovo the hasses of the sanjakbeys and other high-ranking dignitaries began to lose importance relative to the expansion and increase of ziamets and timars, as a result of the more intensive implementation of the timar system. This is immediately evident in the defter of 1467–68, where only one hass, comprising 8 villages, is recorded with a feudal revenue of 95,427 akçes. At this time, the revenue from hasses represented only 15% of the total revenues of the nahiyah of Tetovo, which in this register amounted to 631,521 akçes.

As a result of this process, the majority of the lands and population of this region were granted into possession by the High Porte as ziamets and timars. From these fiefs, the Ottoman Empire secured the most significant portion of feudal revenues as well as military service. More specifically, the quantity of ziamets, timars, their revenues, and the associated military obligations will be presented as follows:

Register of the Year 1452–1453			Register of the Year 1467–1468		
Hass of:	Villages under control	Revenues in akçes	Hass of:	Villages under control	Revenues in akçes
Isa Bey	4	17.304	Sylejman Bey	8	95.427
Wife of Isa Bey	7	68.038			
Mehmed Çelebi	9	41.319			
Hasan Bey Zenebishi	8	79.153			
Total revenues from hasses	28	204.990		8	95.427

Defter of the year:	Ziamets						Timars						
	Quantity	Revenues in akçes	Military obligations				Quantity	Revenues in akçes	Military obligations				
			burume	Cebeli	Large tent	Small tent			burume	Cebeli	Ghulam	Large tent	Small tent
1452-1453	/	/	/	/	/	/	58	169.290	1 3	55	3	1 1	8
1467-1468	2	129.84 9	/	3 2	2	2	44	406.245	3 3	10 3	1 0	2 5	6

The granting of a fief to a sipahi was strictly conditioned on his services in military expeditions. This meant that the timar system, in its initial phase, had a pronounced military character, through which the Sultan could gather soldiers from every corner of the provinces for the needs of his campaigns of conquest. In this regard, the sipahis of the Tetovo nahiyah were also obliged to fulfill military duties in various forms. They had to go to war themselves as resources (burume),³⁷ arm a cavalryman (cebelü), provide large or small tents, take ghulams with them, and so on. These military obligations of the sipahis are not recorded in the Defter of 1452–53. Since this defter is incomplete in this respect, we have consequently utilized the partial data on the military obligations of the Tetovo nahiyah from the summary defter published by Hazim Šabanović. From this summary register, we learn that, as a result of the timar system, for the needs of the Ottoman army, the Tetovo nahiyah provided 13 timariots who went to war as resources (burume), 55 cebelî / xhebeli, 3 ghulams, 11 large tents, and 8 small tents.³⁸ Since the data on the military obligations of each individual sipahi are also not recorded in this summary register, it should be assumed that the actual number was probably higher than that presented here.

Unlike the first register, in that of 1467–68, the military obligations of both zaims and timariots toward the Ottoman Empire are recorded precisely. In this defter, under the banner of the subaşı of the Tetovo nahiyah, 33 timariot burume, 103 armed cavalymen (xhebeli), 10 gulams, 27 large tents, and 8 small tents were assembled to fulfill their military duties.³⁹

Within the framework of the timar system, the 1452–53 register for the Tetovo vilayet (nahiyah) also included Christian sipahis, who were undoubtedly the remaining part of the old pre-Ottoman feudal class. Particularly, the lesser nobility, who after the Ottoman conquest considered that by integrating into the timar system, they could retain their estates.⁴⁰ Similarly, the existence of Christian sipahis for a certain period was permitted by the Ottoman state due to their highly effective policy of dismantling the local feudal class and integrating into the new Ottoman feudal stratum those nobles who submitted to the new rulers, remained loyal, and agreed to serve in the military campaigns undertaken by the Ottoman state.⁴¹ From the material in this defter, we see that ten Christian sipahis who held timars in the vilayet of Tetova were: Jakovi, son of Nikolla; Pavli, servant of Isa Bey; Miladin, servant of Isa Bey; Milutini, servant of Isa Bey; Pavli, servant of Isa Bey; Vllajçe, servant of Isa Bey; Radani, servant of Isa Bey; Nikolla, servant of Isa Bey; Duka Gin (Duka Gjini); Dragosllavi, son of Vojnuk; and Oliver, his son. Furthermore, in the summary register (1455), the joint timar of Dimitri and Oliver is also mentioned.⁴² Thus, there were a total of 11 timars and 12 Christian sipahis.

While in three other timars no villages were included, they were actually held by old sipahis who, according to the 1452–53 register, had their own timars. During this period, they did not possess these lands, but instead held their bashtinas in exchange for fulfilling their military obligations to the sultan. Accordingly, the first timar included 7 Christian sipahis: Gjurkoja, son of Koja; Pavli, nephew from Gjurko's brother; Dimitri, son of Milovan; Brajo, son of Dimitri; Dushmani, son of Dimitri; Nikolla, son of Dimitri; and Bozhidar, son of Dimitri. Consequently, this timar was held by the uncle and nephew, as well as the father with four sons.⁴³

In the second timar, there were also 7 sipahis: Nikolla, son of Brajko, with his brothers Dimitri and Vojnuku; Kostantini, son of Vllajçiç, and his brother Raguta; as well as Nakoja, son of

³⁷ According to the scholar H. Šabanović, the term burume refers to the turban worn by the sipahis. It was part of an armed attire composed of a shield, breastplate, and other military equipment that high-ranking sipahis with income exceeding 3,000 akçe were required to possess. (Hazim Šabanović, *Krajište Isa-bega Isakovića – zbirni katastarski popis iz 1455 godine*, Sarajevo, 1964, p. 121).

³⁸ Hazim Šabanović, v. c., p. 18–19, 65–96.

³⁹ *Опишан пописан дефтер* № 4, p. 293–410.

⁴⁰ Александер Стојановски, *Македонија во турското средновековие, од крајот на XIV-почетокот на XVIII век*, Скопје, 1989, p. 86.

⁴¹ Selami Pulaha, v. c., p. 43–44.

⁴² Krah: *Опишни пописни дефтери од XV век, në më shumë vende; Krajište Isa-bega Isakovića – zbirni katastarski popis iz 1455 godine*, p. 87.

⁴³ *Опишан пописан дефтер* № 4, p. 395.

Dragosllav, and his brother Nikolla. One of them had to participate each year in military expeditions as a xhebeli (armed cavalryman). The third timar included 9 old Christian sipahis: Miladin, son of Nenad, with his sons Kraguj, Kostantini, and Janku; his brother Gjorgji with his sons Nikolla and Dimitri; and Gjorgji, son of Kostantini, with his son Dimitri. Just like the sipahis in the previous timars, these were also obliged to serve in military expeditions as Cebelü.⁴⁴ These data, among other things, provide evidence that the local Christian or converted feudal elements constituted a minority compared to the Muslim sipahis. At the same time, they also represented the minority of the native feudal class, whereas the majority had been dispossessed, had not reconciled with the conqueror, and thus aligned themselves with the peasantry in the struggle to preserve their freedom.

On the other hand, the population living in the towns was primarily engaged in crafts and trade and, instead of the *ispenseh* (corvée labor), paid the market tax. Besides these activities, a significant portion of the inhabitants were also involved in agriculture and animal husbandry, due to the limited economic development of the towns. These townspeople also paid the tithe and the *ispenseh*, or *çift resmi*.⁴⁵

The remaining portion of the *raya*, the rural population, was allocated arable lands and meadows, which also constituted the most important *miri* lands in the Ottoman Empire. These land plots were called *bashtina* when owned by Christians and *çiftlik* when owned by Muslims.⁴⁶ These plots did not include gardens, vineyards, rivers, or meadows located near village houses usually about half a *dynym* in size nor the houses themselves, which were considered *mülk*, private property.⁴⁷

A peasant who worked a plot of land also had a *tapu* (title deed) for it; however, in reality, he held the status of a hereditary tenant, and in exchange for his labor, he enjoyed the right of usufruct. Under this system, these lands under tenure could not be sold, gifted, or converted into *waqf*; they were *çiftlik* of the *raya*, passing from father to son along with the social status of the *raya*.⁴⁸ A *raya* family could hold a single *çiftlik*, but no more than that. They would sow it, harvest it, and pay the mandatory tribute known as the plow tax (*çift resmi*) and the tithe (*ushyr*) on all agricultural produce and other economic activities. The right of the *raya* was that, once these obligations were fulfilled, they could keep whatever remained from what they had produced through their own labor and expenses.⁴⁹

The *raya* who were landless either as a result of leaving their settlement, being unregistered in the records, or being nomads, were treated as a single class. They worked as temporary labor in agriculture or as peasants on the *timar* lands. The sipahi collected the tithe and the *raya* taxes assigned per *dynym* from them. If they remained in the same place for more than three years, they then became the *raya* of that particular sipahi.⁵⁰

According to the Ottoman *kanunname*, the peasantry was also obliged to perform certain labor for the sipahi on his economic land, because he was always engaged in military service and could not personally take care of the economic activities.⁵¹ As a result, the *raya* was obliged to build a warehouse for the sipahi, but not a house; they had to transport the sipahi's tithes to the warehouse or the market, except when the market was more than a day's journey away; they were required to help with the harvesting of the sipahi's meadows, but not to carry the dry grass to the warehouse. The peasant was obliged to host the sipahi for three days. In some districts, there was a tradition that villages worked one to three days on the sipahi's farm.⁵²

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Skender Rizaj, v. c., p. 64.

⁴⁶ Masar Rizvanolli, v. c., p. 246.

⁴⁷ Selami Pulaha, v. c., p. 126-127.

⁴⁸ Halil Inalcik, *Devleti...*, p. 300-301.

⁴⁹ Halil Inalcik, *An economic and social history of the Ottoman Empire*, v. I, Cambridge, 1994, p. 143-153.

⁵⁰ Halil Inalcik, *Perandoria Osmane...*, p. 150.

⁵¹ *Историја на македонскиот народ II*, p. 60-61.

⁵² Halil Inalcik, *Perandoria Osmane...*, p. 149.

During the 15th century, the ratio of arable land to labor force was disproportionate. This caused sipahis to compete to attract rayas from one another to settle in their timars. A sipahi who lost rayas would lose income; for this reason, the law forbade rayas from abandoning their settlements. On the other hand, a sipahi had 15 years to persuade a raya to return to his settlement, but for this, he needed the decision of a kadi. If a peasant entered a craft guild in the town, he had to pay the sipahi a compensation known as *çift bozan akçesi*, a tax slightly higher than one gold ducat per year.⁵³

Among the raya lands, there were also non-raya lands. One type of these land plots were the *mezra*, territories without rayas, which had once been inhabited but were later abandoned. They could be used by neighboring villages on the condition of paying the *ushyr* (tithe) of the produce. The owner of these lands was the respective sipahi, who had the right to lease or lend these lands, from which he would collect the tithe of the produce. It should be noted that the raya exploiting this land did not pay personal obligations, but only the *yshyr* to the timar holder. Among the fallow lands were also common lands (*mysha*), newly opened lands (*zemin e tarlla*), forest and mountain areas, and winter and summer pastures. Like the *mezra* mentioned above, these lands had the same status in terms of feudal rent, from which only one tenth of the produce (*ushyr*) was collected.⁵⁴

The second category of feudal ownership under Ottoman rule, which was also present in the Tetova nahiye, consisted of lands held as *mülk*. This included lands within towns owned by residents, which, according to Ottoman law, they could sell or donate; upon their death, these lands passed to all their heirs. These lands included gardens, vegetable plots near houses, and so on.⁵⁵ Within this category of *mülk*, the most important lands were the *mülk* lands granted to prominent feudal lords for their service to the state. Their owners could practically sell them, donate them, bequeath them to their descendants, or convert them into a *waqf*.⁵⁶ However, the Sultan, as the supreme owner, always retained the right over the *mülks*, enabling him to expropriate their owners and convert these *mülks* back into state-owned land. The holders of the *mülks* had the right to collect the peasant taxes like any other sipahi, as well as the taxes that went to the imperial treasury.⁵⁷

We also find *mülks* in the oldest cadastral register for the Tetova nahiyah, that of 1452–53, where the *mülk* of Mahmud Bey, son of Muhamed Pasha, is recorded. He held the villages of Vrapçisht and Tumçevisht. From these two villages, Mahmud Bey collected the peasant taxes for the benefit of the sipahi, amounting to 10,525 akçe, as well as the *jizya*, valued at 13,600 akçe. In the 1467–68 register, two *mülks* are recorded. The first belonged to Mehmed Bey, son of Mehmed Pasha, who held the villages of Vrapçisht and Tumçevisht. From these, he collected 200 barr of wheat, 200 barr of barley and other crops, must valued at 5,180 akçe, *jizya* and *ispence* totaling 18,000 akçe, along with other obligations, reaching a total of 30,990 akçe. The second *mülk* was that of Mahmud Bey, son of Mehmed Pasha, consisting of the three villages Gallata, Pozharan, Përfshefci, and the *mezra* of Lozhan. From all these settlements, he obtained a feudal rent of 12,066 akçe.⁵⁸

Since the sultan was the owner of all lands, whether private or *mülks*, he had the right to contest such a property, convert it back into *miri* land, and redistribute it among the sipahis. One such case is recorded in the Tetova nahiyah, specifically in the 1467–68 register, where a marginal note bears the date 02.03.1477 – Istanbul. According to this note, the village of Vrapçisht, together with 11 families from the village of Tumçevisht, was granted as a timar to a certain Murat, who collected from this timar a rent of 25,000 akçe. A similar case applies to the second

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁵⁴ *Historia e Kosovës*, I, p. 392–393.

⁵⁵ Selami Pulaha, v. c., p. 143.

⁵⁶ Masar Rizvanolli, v. c., p. 250.

⁵⁷ *Historia e popullit shqiptar*, I, p. 522.

⁵⁸ *Опшрни пописни дефтери од XV век*, p. 137–140; *Опширен пописен дефтер № 4*, p. 404–409.

mülk, which also has a marginal note with the same date and location. In this instance, the villages of this mülk — Gallatë, Pozharan, Përfshefci, and the remaining part of Tumçevisht were granted as a timar to Qemal, son of Japo, who served in military campaigns. From this timar, he collected a rent amounting to 25,000 akçe.⁵⁹

State and private property was complemented by waqf property, which constituted the third category of land ownership in the Ottoman Empire. Waqfs were institutions with religious and social functions, providing services for the benefit of society, such as the construction of religious buildings, roads, fountains, bridges, and schools. The establishment of a waqf was directly linked to economic development, since it was funded by revenues derived from property or various income-generating activities. Accordingly, 90% of waqf founders belonged to the wealthy and ruling classes, while the remaining portion came from the peasant strata. In this context, waqfs were created by Muslim believers who donated their private property — which could include houses, land, vineyards, shops, baths, mills, olive groves, or orchards — with the aim that the waqf donor (the one who endowed the property for charitable purposes) would draw closer to God.⁶⁰ Waqfs were inviolable, even by the sultan himself; they could not be sold, donated, or converted into private property.

Apart from their religious aspect, waqfs also had a legal character, consisting of three elements: the foundational document (waqf-nama); the founder of the waqf (waqif), who simultaneously acted as the benefactor; and the administrator of the waqf (mutawalli). Through these legal elements, a waqf was formally established. The founder drafted the waqf-nama and registered it with the kadi, or, in the case of viziers or members of the imperial court, before the sheikh al-Islam. The founder faced no limitation regarding the amount of property to dedicate for the benefit of society, and could be either a man or a woman. A waqf could be founded by an individual, a public person, or certain groups. Once established and officially registered, the benefactor appointed an administrator who would manage the institution in accordance with the conditions set out in the foundational document.⁶¹

Waqfs are also present in the defter of 1452-53 for the Nahiyah of Tetova. In this register, the waqf of Selçuk Bey is recorded,⁶² with the imam of the city of Tetova, Qemal, appointed as the head of this institution. The waqf included the village of Pjaste (Lypjanë) along with its revenues. At that time, this village consisted of 8 families, whose income from the feudal rent amounted to 865 akçe. In the defter of 1467-68, the waqf of Selçuk Bey is again recorded, this time consisting of the village of Lypjan, administered by the Tetova imam Hizri, son of Miskindede. During this period, the village counted 12 families, from whom a total of 1,010 akçe was collected.⁶³

Conclusion

The timar system shaped the economic, social, and military organization of the Ottoman Balkans in the 15th century. Through this system, land—as the main source of wealth and power—was distributed in various feudal forms, directly linking ownership with military obligations and the interests of the central authority. This structure ensured not only a stable army but also strong control over resources and the population.

The case of the Nahiyah of Tetova clearly reflects the significance and practical functioning of feudal property. Data from the defters show the development of the feudal structure,

⁵⁹ *Опишрен пописен дефтер* № 4, p. 404, 407.

⁶⁰ Eduart Caka, *Vakëfet dhe ndikimi i tyre social në Shqipërinë e periudhës osmane*, Tiranë, 2021, p. 52, 63-67.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 69-87.

⁶² From the records of 1545 and 1568 concerning the waqfs of the late Selçuk Bey, we learn that this person had established a **mesjid** in Tetova, and that the imams mentioned as administrators of the said waqf were in fact the imams of his mesjid (*Тетово и тетовско низ историјата*, p. 161).

⁶³ *Опишни пописни дефтери од XV век*, p. 137; *Опишрен пописен дефтер* № 4, p. 404.

highlighting the gradual decline of the role of hases and the strengthening of timars and ziamets, as indicators of the consolidation of the Ottoman feudal system. This distribution of land directly influenced the organization of military obligations and the provision of forces for the state.

On a social level, feudal ownership determined the relations between the ruling class and the peasantry, creating a clear hierarchy based on land control. The inclusion of local elements in this system demonstrates the pragmatic policy of the Ottoman authority, which aimed at stability and the integration of new territories through existing and adapted feudal structures. Overall, the timar-based land system decisively influenced the economic, social, and political development of the Tetova region, serving as a key element in its integration into the Ottoman Empire.

References

- [1] Caka E., *Vakëfet dhe ndikimi i tyre social në Shqipërinë e periudhës osmane*, Tiranë, 2021
- [2] Dalipi Q., *Ndarja administrative-territoriale e trojeve lindore dhe verilindore shqiptare nën sundimin osman (shek. XV-XVI)*, në: “Albanologji” nr. 10, v. II, Prishtinë, 2019.
- [3] Fodor P., *Ottoman Warfare, 1300-1453*, në: “The Cambridge History of Turkey, Byzantium to Turkey 1071–1453, v.I, përgatitur nga: Kate Fleet, Cambridge, 2009.
- [4] *Historia e Kosovës*, I, Prishtinë, 2025..
- [5] *Historia e popullit shqiptar*, I, Tiranë, 2002
- [6] Inalcik H., *An economic and social history of the Ottoman Empire*, v. I, Cambridge, 1994
- [7] Inalcik H., *Devlet-i ‘Aliyye, studime mbi Perandorinë Osmane – I*, përkthyer nga Eduart Caka, Tiranë, 2021.
- [8] Inalcik H., *Perandoria Osmane – periudha klasike 1300-1600*, përkthyer nga: Edvin Cami, Tiranë, 2013.
- [9] Pulaha S., *Pronësia feudale në tokat shqiptare (shek. XV-XVI)*, Tiranë, 1988.
- [10] Rizaj S., *Historia e përgjithshme – Koha e re (1453-1789)*, Prishtinë, 1985.
- [11] Rizvanolli M., *Vendosja e sistemit të timarit në Kosovë në gjysmën e dytë të shekullit XV*, Prishtinë, 2021.
- [12] Šabanović H., *Krajište Isa-bega Isakovića – zbirni katastarski popis iz 1455 godine*, Sarajevo, 1964.
- [13] Shaw J. S., *Historia e Perandorisë Osmane dhe e Turqisë moderne*, Tiranë, 2006.
- Историја на македонскиот народ*, II, Скопје, 1998.
- [14] Стојановски А., *Македонија во турското средновековие, (XIV-XVII век)*, Скопје, 1989
- [15] *Турски документи за историјата на македонскиот народ – Опирни пописни дефтери од XV век*, III, уредио: Методија Соколки, Скопје, 1976.
- [16] *Турски документи за историјата на македонскиот народ – Опирни пописни дефтери № 4 (1467-1468)*, уредио: Методија Соколки – Александер Стојановски, Скопје, 1971.