

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Being a Forestry Labourer in the Late Ottoman Empire: Debt Bondage, Migration, and Sedentarization

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Abstract

This article examines the survival strategies of forestry workers and craftspeople in the late Ottoman Empire. Through the example of the Tahtacı, a semi-nomadic community specialized in lumbering in the forests along the western and southern coasts of Anatolia, it visualizes the adaptation strategies of forestry labourers in the changing economic and ecological environment of the Mediterranean Basin, which became warmer, less forested, and more integrated into regional and global markets after the mid-nineteenth century. Contrary to the generally accepted view that perceives the Tahtacı as a self-isolated, authentic clan with a static way of life, this article considers them a highly adaptive community that developed a wide range of strategies to earn their livelihood under intense commercialization in forestry and agriculture.

Introduction

In the second half of the nineteenth century, labour relations in Ottoman forestry underwent a substantial transformation. The expansion of market relations in forestry and agriculture created new confrontations between forestry labourers and timber merchants, officials, and landowners. This article provides an analysis of these confrontations through the struggles and adaptation strategies of a group of forestry labourers known as the Tahtacı, a semi-nomadic community specialized in lumbering in the forests of Mediterranean Anatolia.

For a long time, studies on nomadic adaptations were limited to archival and field research on pastoral nomads. Such studies tended to overlook spatially mobile craftspeople, traders, entertainers, and peddlers, who were either ignored or considered “social anomalies” or “aberrant cases”, even though these groups constituted an integral part of rural life.¹ From the end of the 1970s onwards, anthropologists extended

¹Joseph C. Berland, “Peripatetic Strategies in South Asia: Skills as a Capital among Nomadic Artisans and Entertainers”, *Nomadic Peoples*, 13 (1983), pp. 17–34, 17–19; Matt T. Salo and Joseph C. Berland, “Peripatetic Communities: An Introduction”, *Nomadic Peoples*, 21/22 (1986), pp. 1–6, 1.

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the concept of nomadism to include subsistence practices beyond the traditional pastoral and hunter-gatherer strategies. They unearthed the adaptation strategies of *peripatetics*, a term referring to mobile groups selling specialized goods or services, such as basket makers, sieve makers, tinkers, and blacksmiths.²

Despite this inspiring literature, peripatetic adaptations have received scant attention from historians of the Ottoman Empire.³ In Ottoman historiography, research on nomadic adaptations is restricted to analyses of pastoral strategies,⁴ even though peripatetics were significant in the countryside since the products and services they provided were vital for other nomadic groups and sedentary people living in towns and villages. Likewise, the literature on artisans concentrates on settled craftspeople organized into formal networks.⁵ Nomadic craftspeople and service providers lacking these networks are either invisible or only problematized with respect to their ethnic identity rather than their extensive links with their environment.

This tendency is probably best reflected in the literature on the Tahtacı. Occasionally cultivating and stockbreeding, these peripatetic hill communities were specialized in cutting, processing, and transporting trees. For at least five centuries, communities widely referred to as the Tahtacı (literally “woodcutters”, denoting the economic activity they were known for), trod the forest-covered highlands and the fringes of Mediterranean Anatolia to source wood, timber, charcoal, bark, and other forest products to be used by the state, sold to the local population, or exported to other regions by timber merchants.⁶ According to an official report from 1918,

²Some examples include Joseph C. Berland, “Peripatetic, Pastoralist and Sedentist Interactions in Complex Societies”, *Nomadic Peoples*, 4 (1979), pp. 6–8; Robert M. Hayden, “The Cultural Ecology of Service Nomads”, *The Eastern Anthropologist*, 32:4 (1979), pp. 297–309; Joseph C. Berland, “Paryatan: ‘Native’ Models of Peripatetic Strategies in Pakistan”, *Nomadic Peoples*, 21/22 (1986), pp. 189–205; Sharon Bohn Gmelch, “Groups That Don’t Want In: Gypsies and Other Artisan, Trader, and Entertainer Minorities”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 15 (1986), pp. 307–330; Matt T. Salo, “Peripatetic Adaptation in Historical Perspective”, *Nomadic Peoples*, 21/22 (1986), pp. 7–36; Aparna Rao (ed.), *The Other Nomads: Peripatetic Minorities in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Cologne, 1987); Joseph C. Berland and Aparna Rao (eds), *Customary Strangers: New Perspectives on Peripatetic Peoples in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia* (Westport, CT, 2004). Also argued in Leo Lucassen, “A Blind Spot: Migratory and Travelling Groups in Western European Historiography”, *International Review of Social History*, 38:2 (1993), pp. 209–235.

³For an exception, see Yilgür’s pioneering studies: Egemen Yilgür, “Türkiye’de Peripatetik Topluluklar. Jenerik Terimler ve Öz Etnik Kategorizasyon Biçimleri”, *Nişantaşı Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 5:1 (2017), pp. 1–25; Egemen Yilgür, “Son Dönem Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nda Devlet ve ‘Çingener’. Vergi, Askerlik ve Adlandırma Meseleleri”, *MSGSÜ Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 2:18 (2018), pp. 267–302.

⁴Some examples include: Andrew Gordon Gould, “Pashas And Brigands: Ottoman Provincial Reform and Its Impact on the Nomadic Tribes of Southern Anatolia, 1840–1885” (Ph.D., University of California, 1973); Meltem Toksöz, “The Çukurova: From Nomadic Life to Commercial Agriculture, 1800–1908” (Ph.D., Binghamton University, 2000); Yonca Köksal, “Coercion and Mediation: Centralization and Sedentarization of Tribes in the Ottoman Empire”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 42 (2006), pp. 469–491; Reşat Kasaba, *A Moveable Empire: Ottoman Nomads, Migrants, and Refugees* (Seattle, WA, 2009).

⁵See, for example, Donald Quataert (ed.), *Manufacturing in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, 1500–1950* (New York, 1994); Suraiya Faroqhi, *Artisans of Empire: Crafts and Craftspeople Under the Ottomans* (London, 2009).

⁶The first known official records mentioning the Tahtacı in the Ottoman Archives date to the 1430s. In exchange for tax exemptions, twenty-seven Tahtacı families in Aydın Eskişehir were obliged to produce 300

their total population was approximately 150,000. From the northernmost Aegean region of Anatolia to the Binboğa plateau in Maraş, Tahtacı communities were scattered throughout the chains of valleys and forests in the provinces of Hüdâvendigâr, Aydın, Konya, and Adana. However, most of the population was concentrated in the sub-provinces of Isparta, Antalya, İçil, and Mersin.⁷

Despite the many studies on the Tahtacı, the literature has seldom focused on their lived experience and everyday practices, such as their struggles and interactions with other groups, the subsistence strategies that shaped their culture, and their concrete contributions to local and regional economies. Instead, the literature is centred on the ethnic and religious origin of the Tahtacı, which remains a matter of contentious debate. Western missionaries, travellers, historians, and anthropologists who visited Anatolia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries argued that they were descended from pre-Greek Anatolian cultures, or were Crypto-Christians that had been forcibly Islamized.⁸ Turkish nationalists, on the other hand, have regarded the Tahtacı as an authentic, Central Asian Turkish clan.⁹

The debates on the ethnicity and religious practices of the Tahtacı mainly focus on the continuities and establish a causal relationship between their isolated way of life and their cultural pureness. Luschan, for example, argued that the Tahtacı in Lycia were a self-sufficient community that pursued an isolated life in high mountains, had not mixed with other peoples, and had therefore been able to preserve their

wooden planks to be used in Ayasuluğ Castle. See Cahit Telci, “‘Cemaat-i Tahtacıyan’. Aydın Sancağı’nda Vergiden Muaf Tahtacı Topluluğu (XV–XIX. Yüzyıllar)”, *Alevilik-Bektaşılık Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 13 (2016), pp. 5–34. Since then, the word “Tahtacı” has persisted in official and daily language as a common term to identify forestry labourers in western and southern Anatolia. Not all woodcutters in the Ottoman Empire employed peripatetic strategies. On woodcutter peasants in Kocaeli, for instance, see Semih Çelik, “‘It’s a Bad Fate to be Born Near a Forest’: Forest, People, and Buffaloes in Mid-Nineteenth Century North-Western Anatolia”, in Onur İnal and Yavuz Köse (eds), *Seeds of Power: Explorations in Ottoman Environmental History* (Winwick, 2019), pp. 111–133.

⁷BOA (The Ottoman Archives), DHEUM.2.Şb, 67/54, 20 Haziran 1334 [20 June 1918]. The total population of this region (Aydın province, Adana province, Hüdâvendigâr province, and coastal subprovinces of Konya province) in 1914 was about 3.5 million. See Kemal H. Karpat, *Ottoman Population, 1830–1914: Demographic and Social Characteristics* (Madison, WI, 1985), pp. 170–187. For a number of estimations at the local level, see Felix von Luschan, “Die Tachtadschy und Andere Überreste der Alten Bevölkerung Lykiens”, *Archiv für Anthropologie*, 19 (1891), pp. 31–53, 32; *idem*, “The Early Inhabitants of Western Asia”, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 41 (1911), pp. 221–244, 230; İsmail Engin, “XIX. Yüzyıldan Günümüze Tahtacı Nüfusu Üzerine Veriler I”, *Cem*, 7:72 (1997), pp. 44–47; *idem*, “XIX. Yüzyıldan Günümüze Tahtacı Nüfusu Üzerine Veriler II”, *Cem*, 8:73 (1998), pp. 50–52; Mehmet Ak, “Teke Sancağında 1831 Sayımına Göre Nüfus ve Yerleşme”, *History Studies: International Journal of History*, 6:3 (2014), pp. 15–44.

⁸Felix von Luschan, “Wandervölker Kleasiens”, *Verhandlungen der Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte*, 18 (1886), pp. 167–171; *idem*, “Die Tachtadschy und Andere Überreste”; Theodore Bent, “The Yourouks of Asia Minor”, *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 20 (1891), pp. 269–276; F.W. Hasluck, “Heterodox Tribes of Asia Minor”, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 51 (1921), pp. 310–342.

⁹Baha Said, “Anadolu’da Alevi Zümreleri. Tahtacı, Çetmi, Hardal Türkmenleri Yahud Yanyatur Sırası”, *Türk Yurdu*, 4:25 (1926), pp. 481–492, 482; Ziya Gökalp, *Türk Töresi* (Istanbul, 1339 [1923]), p. 40; Yusuf Ziya Yörükân, *Anadolu’da Aleviler ve Tahtacılar* (Ankara, 2006), p. 146; Naci Kum-Atabeyli, “Antalya Tahtacılarına Dair Notlar”, *Türk Tarih, Arkeoloji ve Etnografya Dergisi*, 4 (1940), pp. 203–212, 211.

Hittite features for more than 3,000 years.¹⁰ The main assertion of the nationalists of the early Republican period – which remains the dominant reading in the historiography on the Tahtacı – was that, as a result of their closed way of life, and unlike other Turkish communities that had degenerated by mingling and mixing with other ethnic groups, the Tahtacı had managed to preserve their Central Asian roots, their Turkmen tribal traditions, and their shamanist, homeland religion by hiding it for centuries like a “divine mystery”.¹¹

The common assertion that the Tahtacı have a traceable, distinct origin stems from the belief that these hill communities had no interaction with their social environment, giving rise to stable cultural practices. Tahtacı communities, however, were more adaptive than is often thought. Like other peripatetic groups, their networks and ability to adapt to rapidly changing ecological, economic, and political conditions made it possible for them to earn their livelihood.

By tracing these adaptation strategies through archival material and oral histories, this article aims to demonstrate the potential of carrying the historical narratives on these communities beyond dominant, ethnonational fixations. Inspired by the ethnographical studies and historiographical debates on upland societies, it is also intended to highlight the limits of considering the livelihood strategies of the hill communities through the lens of a lowland–highland dichotomy.¹² The complicated interactions of the Tahtacı with timber merchants, officials, and peasants reveal the blurry boundaries between highlands and lowlands.

In drawing attention to these vague categories and uncovering complicated interactions in the triad of the forestry labourers, members of the Ottoman bureaucracy, and timber merchants, this article also seeks to emphasize the role of local actors in the introduction of modern commercial forestry. In the Ottoman context, timber

¹⁰Eugen Petersen and Felix von Luschan, *Reisen in Lykien, Milyas und Kibyratıs* (Vienna, 1889), p. 198; von Luschan, “Die Tachtadschy und Andere Überreste”, p. 32; Felix von Luschan, *Völker, Rassen, Sprachen. Anthropologische Betrachtungen* (Berlin, 1922), p. 98; *idem*, “Wandervölker Kleinasıens”, p. 170; *idem*, “The Early Inhabitants of Western Asia”, p. 230.

¹¹Naci Kum-Atabeyli, “Türkmen Yürük ve Tahtacılar Arasında Tetkikler, Görüşler. Tahtacı Türklerinde Manevi Kültür”, *Türk Folklor Araştırmaları*, 1:11 (1950), pp. 175–176, 175. See also Said, “Anadolu’da Alevi Zümreleri”, p. 482; Yörük, p. 145; Nilgün Çıblak Coşkun, “Tahtacılar ve Tahtacı Ocaklarına Bağlı Oymakların Yerleşim Alanları”, *Türk Kültürü ve Hacı Bektaş Veli Araştırma Dergisi*, 68 (2013), pp. 33–54, 34.

¹²See James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT, 2009). For criticisms of Scottian dichotomy of state-making valley communities and state-evading hill communities, see C. Patterson Giersch, “Across Zomia with Merchants, Monks, and Musk: Process Geographies, Trade Networks, and the Inner-East–Southeast Asian Borderlands”, *Journal of Global History*, 5:2 (2010), pp. 215–239; Bernard Formoso, “Zomian or Zombies? What Future Exists for the Peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif?”, *Journal of Global History*, 5:2 (2010), pp. 313–332; William Noseworthy, “Lowland Participation in the Irredentist ‘Highlands Liberation Movement’ in Vietnam, 1955–1975”, *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 6:1 (2013), pp. 7–28; Ian G. Baird, “Millenarian Movements in Southern Laos and North Eastern Siam (Thailand) at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: Reconsidering the Involvement of the Champassak Royal House”, *South East Asia Research*, 21:2 (2013), pp. 257–279; Tom Brass, “Scott’s Zomia: Or a Populist Post-Modern History of Nowhere”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 42:1 (2012), pp. 123–133; María do Mar Castro Varela and Carolina Tamayo Rojas, “Epistemicide, Postcolonial Resistance, and the State”, *Postcolonial Studies*, 23:2 (2020), pp. 226–240.

merchants took a leading part in disciplining forest labour. From the 1850s on, commercial networks gradually permeated the remote forests of the highlands, which remained impenetrable for the administration for a few more decades. This process brought about more dependent forest labour, which was not only a prerequisite for profit maximization by timber merchants, but also for the “rational” exploitation of natural resources from the viewpoint of modern forest administration. Tahtacı communities’ valuable, cheap labour and localized knowledge of tree species, cutting seasons, forests, paths, and waterways¹³ were vital for the constant supply of forest products for commercial purposes. Not only the technical knowledge (*teçhne*) of scientific foresters, but also the practical skills (*metis*) of the Tahtacı and their ability to adapt to constantly changing environments had to be utilized in line with the goals of bureaucratized, commercial forestry.¹⁴

To contextualize the interaction of the Tahtacı with administrative and commercial actors, the discussion is divided into two parts dealing with two interrelated issues. The first part describes how the commodification of forests changed the subsistence strategies of the Tahtacı. It demonstrates that, in parallel with the rise of commercial forestry in the mid-nineteenth century and even in the absence of aggressive government efforts to penetrate the mountains, lowland dynamics, mainly administrative and trade networks, managed to leak into the highlands. Tahtacı communities developed novel strategies to cope with the impositions of these networks. In the mid-nineteenth century, some Tahtacı groups overwhelmed by the arbitrary debts imposed by contractor merchants found the opportunity to escape their debt bondage by migrating to other active production areas. In the 1870s, when they became subject to mandatory military service, many Tahtacı men strove to have their exemption continued by drawing on the common perception of them as “Gypsies”, thereby seeking to leverage this label in their favour. Nearly three decades later, some Tahtacı obtained Iranian passports for the same purpose.

The second part addresses the impact of the commercialization of agriculture on the Tahtacı communities’ livelihood practices. As a consequence of the increased agricultural productivity following the retreat of the Little Ice Age and the trend of rising demand for wheat and cotton, the Mediterranean region became a prominent commercial centre. As a result, the plains were reopened to cultivation and the need for agricultural labour increased. Not due to administrative pressure from the lowlands but as an adaptation strategy to the rise of export-oriented agriculture, Tahtacı communities adopted a less mobile life at lower altitudes, where they intentionally engaged in closer interaction with lowland communities.

¹³J.R. McNeill, *The Mountains of the Mediterranean World: An Environmental History* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 247; Selçuk Dursun, “Forest and the State: History of Forestry and Forest Administration in the Ottoman Empire” (Ph.D., Sabancı University, 2007), p. 41; Yaşar Baş, “Kocaeli’den İstanbul’a Kereste Nakli ve Kullanımı” (paper presented at the Uluslararası Kara Mürsel Alp ve Kocaeli Tarihi Sempozyumu II, Kocaeli, 2016), pp. 1083–1091, 1083.

¹⁴Scott proposes these two forms of knowledge as opposite poles in a dichotomy. See James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT, 1998), pp. 309–341.

Commodification of Forests, Bonding of Labour: Debt Burden and Migration

In the nineteenth century, the shipbuilding, mining, and construction industries – not to mention the development of public works, especially investments in communications and transportation facilities – spurred increasing demand from the Ottoman provinces and Europe for Anatolian timber as well as non-timber forest products.¹⁵ From the 1830s onwards, Greek merchants formed new commercial networks linking Anatolia, Egypt, and the islands of the Mediterranean Sea.¹⁶ One of the products that entered these networks was timber obtained from the Taurus Mountain chain, a forested region known for its strategic importance due to its proximity to trade routes and networks and for the hardness and durability of its trees.¹⁷ Forest products provided from the forests of the Taurus Mountains were floated or carried down to the river mouths, then exported to Cyprus, Beirut, Alexandria, Damietta, Syria, the Greek Islands, and Palestine via the ports of Antalya and İçil.¹⁸ As McNeill notes, Tahtacı communities in the Taurus Mountains had never been busier than in this period.¹⁹

In the second half of the century, the Ottoman government introduced extensive legal and institutional arrangements to maximize forest revenues and increase the central control over forests, forest populations, and forestry products. The Edict of 1853, the Forest Bill of 1861, the Forest Regulation of 1870, and the codes and instructions issued subsequently²⁰ aimed at “rational” exploitation of human and natural resources and the provision of a sustainable yield for the state treasury. Restriction of customary rights and traditional privileges – alongside the emergence of a forest bureaucracy, the enforcement of new monitoring techniques (such as tree removal procedures based on scientific principles), and the invention of new forest crimes

¹⁵McNeill, *Mountains of the Mediterranean World*, pp. 247–248; Dursun, “Forest and the State”, p. 96; Alan Mikhail, *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt: An Environmental History* (New York, 2011), pp. 161, 167.

¹⁶McNeill, *Mountains of the Mediterranean World*, pp. 158, 246. For information on timber exports from Anatolia to Egypt and Syria before this period, see Halil İnalçık, “The Rise of the Turcoman Maritime Principalities in Anatolia, Byzantium, and the Crusades”, *Byzantinische Forschungen*, 9 (1985), pp. 179–217; Halil İnalçık, “The Yörüks: Their Origins, Expansion and Economic Role”, *CEDRUS: The Journal of MCRI*, 2 (2014), pp. 467–495; Palmira Johnson Brummett, *Ottoman Seapower and Levantine Diplomacy in the Age of Discovery* (New York, 1994); Alan Mikhail, “Anatolian Timber and Egyptian Grain: Things that Made the Ottoman Empire”, in Paula Findlen (ed.), *Early Modern Things: Objects and Their Histories, 1500–1800* (New York, 2013), pp. 274–293; Ensar Köse, “18. Yüzyılın İlk Yarısında İçel ve Antalya Sahilleri’nde Ticaret”, *Cedrus*, 1 (2013), pp. 299–328.

¹⁷Edwin John Davis, *Anatolica; or, The Journal of a Visit to Some of the Ancient Ruined Cities of Caria, Phrygia, Lycia, and, Pisidia* (London, 1874), p. 215.

¹⁸The National Archives (hereafter TNA), FO, 424/132, 1882; BOA, HAT, 380/20540, 27 Zilhicce 1253 [24 March 1838]; BOA, A.MKT.MVL, 141/90, 23 Şaban 1278 [23 February 1862]; BOA, İ.HUS, 17/127, 29 Rebiülâhîr 1311 [9 November 1893]; BOA, BEO, 314/23519, 10 Cemâziyelevvel 1311 [19 November 1893]; William Burckhardt Barker, *Cilicia: Its Former History and Present State* (London, 1862), p. 121; Gideon Biger and Nili Liphschitz, “Foreign Tree Species as Construction Timber in Nineteenth-Century Palestine”, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 21:3 (1995), pp. 262–277, 262–263.

¹⁹McNeill, *Mountains of the Mediterranean World*, p. 246.

²⁰Etfal Şükrü Batmaz, Bekir Koç, and İsmail Çetinkaya, *Osmanlı Ormanlığı İle İlgili Belgeler*, vol. 1 (Ankara, 1999); Nurullah İşler and Yusuf Gök, *Osmanlı Ormanlığı İle İlgili Belgeler*, vol. 2 (Ankara, 2003); Bekir Koç, “1870 Orman Nizamnamesi’nin Osmanlı Ormanlığına Katkısı Üzerine Bazı Notlar”, *Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi Tarih Bölümü Tarih Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 24:37 (2005), pp. 231–257; Andrea E. Duffy, *Nomad’s Land: Pastoralism and French Environmental Policy in the Nineteenth-Century Mediterranean World* (Lincoln, NE, 2019) pp. 96–106.

and penalties – were designed to eliminate local elements and establish strict administrative control over forests.²¹

However, the Ottoman government could neither efficiently exploit the forests itself, especially due to financial problems caused mainly by the Crimean War, nor increase tax revenues from the export of forest products due to widespread smuggling. For these reasons, granting forest concessions to private companies for the mass removal of trees became the primary way to generate state income from the forests. Even though Tahtacı families could obtain cutting licences, these were issued on a retail, not wholesale, basis. Retail licences allowed them to extract only small amounts of timber.²² Deprived of the financial and political power to purchase trees via tender, Tahtacı families were left with little choice but to work on contract for those merchants who were able to win tenders, hire large ships, and bypass procedures such as counting, measuring, and marking trees due to their established connections with bureaucrats.²³ This practice continued until the promulgation of the 1937 Forest Law, which replaced concessions with state enterprises and established a General Directorate of Forestry as the ultimate manager of forests and the only contractor of forest labour.²⁴

The conditions of employment contracts imposed by the timber merchants drove many forestry labourers into a chronic debt burden. Before signing such contracts, the merchants would negotiate strict terms for the procurement and transportation of timber, which had to be delivered according to the agreed amount and by a given date. The merchants usually provided the animals used to transport the timber under a deferred payment arrangement, with the labourers required to make payment with interest for the animals once the timber was delivered. The merchants overcharged for these animals, which constituted an additional source of income for them. For their basic needs, labourers could also be paid in advance, which was a further opportunity for merchants to charge interest. After the products were transported to the ports, the cost of the animals and other provisions, advance payments, interest, and taxes were deducted from the market price of the timber. This calculation always ended with the labourer becoming indebted to the merchant.²⁵ In addition, some merchants intentionally manipulated the weight of the timber to their advantage.²⁶ Due to their debt burden,

²¹Başak Akgül, “Negotiating Nature: Ecology, Politics, and Nomadism in the Forests of Mediterranean Anatolia, 1870–1920” (Ph.D., Leiden University, Boğaziçi University, 2019), pp. 57–82.

²²BOA, T.OMİ, 1698/10, 23 Mart 1326 [5 April 1910]; BOA, T.OMİ, 1698/21, 16 Mayıs 1326 [29 May 1910].

²³Başak Akgül, “Timber Smuggling and Forestry Politics in late Nineteenth-Century Western Taurus”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 56:6 (2020), pp. 784–794.

²⁴Hande Özkan, “Cultivating the Nation in Nature: Forestry and Nation-Building in Turkey” (Ph.D., Yale University, 2013), p. 187; Hande Özkan, “Remembering Zingal: State, Citizens, and Forests in Turkey”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 50:3 (2018), pp. 493–511, 494; Jean Paul Roux, K. Özbayrı, *Les Traditions nomades de la Turquie méridionale* (Paris, 1970), p. 52; Kemal Özbayrı, *Tahtacılar ve Yörükler = Tahtadş et Yöruks (matériaux pour l'étude des nomades du Taurus)* (Paris, 1972), p. 4.

²⁵Louis Adolphe Ambroise Bricogne, *Türkiye'de Ormanlık Heyeti*, transl. Fahri Bük (Ankara, 1940), p. 10.

²⁶Muharrem Öztel, “Tanzimat Dönemi ve Sonrasında İstanbul'un Temel İhtiyaçlarından Odun ve Kömürün (Mahrukut) Üretim Sürecinde ve Arz Piyasasında Yaşanan Problemler”, *Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 6:24 (2013), pp. 282–305, 297.

Tahtacı communities were trapped in an anticompetitive and exploitative relation with these local notables.

A decree of the Supreme Council dated 1857 demonstrates the dependency of the forestry labourers. This decree referred to contracts signed among peripatetic Tahtacı tribes and timber merchants in Menteşe. The terms of these contracts reveal the working conditions of the Tahtacı as well as their relations with the timber merchants. Each contract was signed between a group of Tahtacı consisting of fifteen to twenty people and an agha. These contracts were valid for three years. There was an exclusive relationship between the Tahtacı and the aghas, which meant that their timber could be sold to no one else except the agha for whom they were currently working. The food and animals provided by the aghas were valued at above-market prices, whereas the timber processed by the Tahtacı was valued at much lower than the going market rate. For instance, timber that would fetch four *kuruş* on the open market could be valued at two *kuruş* when delivered by Tahtacı labourers to the merchant. In this way, an agha could earn an income of 80,000–100,000 *kuruş* plus a twenty per cent *güzeşte zammı* (interest collected on debt). Since expenditures increased annually, it was impossible for Tahtacı families to repay their debts. In some cases, debt-ridden people were obliged to give away their products for free unless they could find another agha willing to pay their debts. Thus, according to the Supreme Council's decree, the Tahtacı had become "prisoners of a few people, with an increasing debt day by day".²⁷ For this reason, the decree ordered that the exorbitant prices be amended and the labourer's debts repaid in reasonable instalments. Finally, so that the Tahtacı could repay these instalments, they would be allowed to sell their timber to whomever they wished.²⁸

A petition submitted by a group of Tahtacı some fifteen years after this case describes a comparable situation. According to the complaint, the group had migrated from Antalya to Mersin to work in timber production. The petitioners complained that the timber merchant Nikola had overcharged them for provisions he supplied during their work and bought their products for less than the market value. Nikola claimed 33,435 *kuruş* from the labourers, whereas they stated that he forced them to pay for timber that was lost or destroyed after they had delivered it to him. An investigation committee was established following this complaint. The committee, presided by Abdulkadir, prepared a chart of accounts including the debts between the timber merchant and the community – four households consisting of some fifty people in total. The committee decided that the merchant had to pay two thirds of the price of the damaged timber. Accordingly, the debt of the community decreased to 4,182 *kuruş*.²⁹ The 1857 decree and the 1872 petition thus indicate that at least in the early period of the commodification of forests from the beginning of the 1850s to the early 1870s, the administration was prepared – in certain circumstances – to intervene in local conflicts in favour of labourers.

Another story of the arbitrary practices of merchants towards the Tahtacı comes from Biga. According to a record dated 1865, the timber merchant Ahmed mistreated

²⁷BOA, İ.MVL, 375/16468, 17 Zilhicce 1273 [8 August 1857].

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹BOA, ŞD, 2117/1, 7 Nisan 1288 [19 April 1872].

a group of Tahtacı who worked for him. This community had been living in Biga since 1845. Demanding 4,000 *kuruş* from the community, he not only seized the money of Kara Ali, Koca Mustafaoğlu Mahmud, Mehmed Ali, and Kadiroğlu Mustafa by force, but also turned them into his debtors by preparing a debt certificate for 26,000 *kuruş*. Thereafter, he brought them to Karesi in chains and sold their mules, obtaining 7,500 *kuruş* from the sale. Moreover, he beat one with his rifle and released them only after they accepted an additional debt certificate for another 2,000 *kuruş*. The man assaulted by Ahmed died three days later.³⁰

In this period, it was common among the Tahtacı to move to neighbouring regions to escape deepening debt and pressure from timber merchants. The migration routes Tahtacı groups followed were shaped by the accessibility of forest resources and the volume of labour demand in forestry. There are several petitions in the Ottoman Archives submitted by timber merchants during the 1850s and 1860s demanding the return of Tahtacı communities that had migrated due to their unpaid debts. These complaint petitions demonstrate the existence of two migration trends in the Teke region in this period (see Figure 1). The first was to move from the western to the eastern Taurus, mainly the Adana region, where, due to increasing demand from Egypt for Anatolian timber,³¹ there was a substantial need for forest labour. The second tendency was to migrate to the northwest, basically the Menteşe sub-province, known for its rich forests and proximity to the Aegean islands and Egypt.³²

A petition dated 1854 indicates that a group of Tahtacı in Teke had moved to İçil and Adana without paying their debts. The claimants from the Zenâiroğlu family thereupon demanded that the administration collect the debt from the community members who had stayed in Teke.³³ According to another document, dated 1858, a group of Tahtacı moved from Antalya to Adana, where demand for timber workers was greater. A group of merchants in Antalya sued them, claiming that they had left the province without paying their debts. Thereupon, the community members submitted a petition to defend themselves in which they stated that they had no occupation other than timber harvesting and had to migrate to Adana to work in the forests.³⁴ A similar migration from Teke was mentioned in a document issued in 1857. In the years 1854, 1855, and 1856, seventy-six Tahtacı and Abdal³⁵ families “slipped away” from Teke to the regions of İçil, Adana, and Konya without paying their debts to merchants or their taxes. The tax burden for 1855 alone was 28,000 *kuruş*. Moreover, twenty-three nomadic Tahtacı families in the Tarsus district owed debts to merchants amounting to 200,000 *kuruş*.³⁶

³⁰BOA, MVL, 704/3, 6 Muharrem 1282 [1 June 1865].

³¹McNeill, *Mountains of the Mediterranean World*, p. 246.

³²Aysun Sarıbey Haykıran, “Osmanlı Ekonomisinde Ormancılığın Yeri: XIX. Yüzyılda Aydın Vilayeti’nde Ormanlar ve Ormancılık Faaliyetleri”, in Arif Bilgin and Burhan Çağlar (eds), *Klasikten Moderne Osmanlı Ekonomisi* (Istanbul, 2019), pp. 209–222, 212, 217.

³³BOA, A.MKT.DV, 80/9, 24 Safer 1271 [16 November 1854].

³⁴BOA, A.MKT.UM, 345.87, 4 Safer 1275, [13 September 1858].

³⁵These were peripatetic communities, mostly living in central, eastern and southern Anatolia, which engaged in various arts and crafts, including musicianship, dancing, copper working, and basketry. See Yılgür, “Türkiye’de Peripatetik Topluluklar”, pp. 9–13.

³⁶BOA, A.MKT.MHM, 128 89, 7 Safer 1274 [27 September 1857].

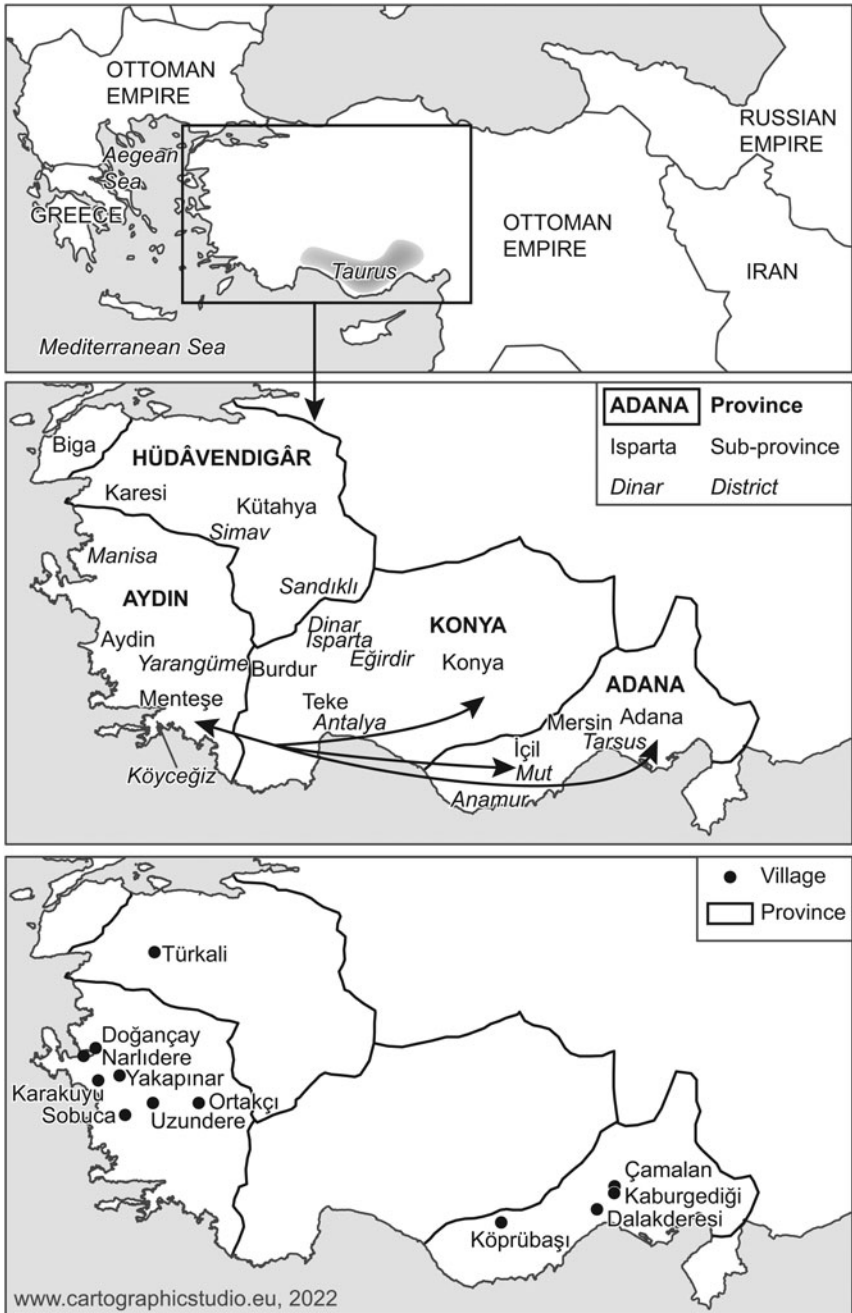


Figure 1. Major Administrative Units in Mediterranean Anatolia and the Migration Patterns of the Tahtacı.

About a decade after these cases, it was recorded that a Tahtacı community in Teke had moved to the Menteşe sub-province without paying their taxes,³⁷ exemplifying the second migration route that the Tahtacı followed. Similarly, according to the petition submitted by the merchants from the Zenâiroğlu family, a group of Tahtacı, consisting of twenty-one households that had pursued a mobile way of life within the boundaries of the Teke sub-province, migrated to Menteşe without paying a debt of 90,515 *kuruş*. The merchants demanded their return to Teke and claimed that the new customers of the Tahtacı were not allowing their return to the Teke sub-province. They were worried that Tahtacı who had stayed in Teke would escape, too, so long as the local government refused to interfere in the matter.³⁸ Due to the perpetuation of community-based taxation practices, other members of the Tahtacı community in Teke began paying the share of the taxes of Tahtacı families that had moved to Menteşe, which amounted to 15,420 *kuruş*.³⁹

In 1868, contrary to the claim that it declined to intervene, the government of Teke demanded the repatriation of Tahtacı who had moved to Menteşe to escape their debts to locals. The local governor corresponded, however, that it was not possible to return the Tahtacı. It had been about twenty years since they arrived in Aydın, and they were generally pursuing a sedentary way of life.⁴⁰ Forcing these skilled workers to leave the production area and resettle in their previous abode would be contrary to the interests of the local merchants and the local government in Menteşe, as well as the central government. Notwithstanding the growing pressure from local merchants and indebtedness, such conflicting positions among officials and merchants created room for the Tahtacı to manoeuvre, allowing them to escape taxes and obligations related to their deepening debt by moving elsewhere.

Another challenge for the Tahtacı beginning in the 1870s was that they faced a more demanding administration. The government attempted to increase control over the human and natural resources in the countryside with centralist policies concerning forestry, taxation, and conscription. Hill communities, including the Tahtacı, developed new strategies to avoid the Ottoman officials' efforts to exert administrative control. The major contested issue between the Tahtacı and the government in this period was military conscription. Losing young men to military service drained the community's labour pool, seriously undermining its subsistence livelihood.

In the 1870s, when Ottoman officials attempted to extend the requirement for compulsory military service to Tahtacı men, the latter demanded a continuation of their exemption from military duty by stating "they had been *Kıbtî* since time immemorial (*mine'l-kadîm*)".⁴¹ *Kıbtî* was a term used in the Ottoman Empire to designate peripatetic groups such as the Roma, the Poşa or the Abdal, also known as "Gypsies".⁴² These communities, Muslim or otherwise, were excluded from military

³⁷BOA, MVL, 722/20, 8 Rebiülevvel 1283 [21 July 1866].

³⁸BOA, A.MKT.DV, 219/49, 7 Ramazan 1278 [8 March 1862].

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰BOA, ŞD, 1375/1, 17 Nisan 1284 [29 April 1868].

⁴¹BOA, ŞD, 609/40, 28 Kânûn-ı Sâni 1288 [9 February 1873].

⁴²See Yilgür, "Türkiye'de Peripatetik Topluluklar".

service and paid the *cizye*, a poll tax collected from non-Muslim subjects.⁴³ Even though Tanzimat reformers abolished the *cizye* in 1856, it was replaced first with *iane-i askerî* (military assistance) and then with *bedel-i askerî* (military payment-in-lieu), taxes paid by non-Muslim subjects in place of military service.⁴⁴ In other words, the practice of *cizye* continued under the label *bedel-i askerî* for a couple more decades. In this period, both Muslim and non-Muslim *Kıbtîs* continued to pay this tax⁴⁵ until the government prepared a decree at the end of 1873, which was delivered to the provinces in early 1874, that extended the obligation of military service on Muslim *Kıbtîs*.⁴⁶ Until the obligation was extended to the *Kıbtîs*, the term was somewhat derogatory, and the label itself had functioned as a tool for exclusion. Now, the Tahtacı leveraged it as part of a shrewd counter-strategy to protect their autonomy and resist encroachment by the state.⁴⁷

When the Ottoman government introduced compulsory military service also for *Kıbtî*-registered groups, the Tahtacı communities employed another novel strategy. Through their networks, they obtained Iranian passports from the Iranian consuls in the empire and claimed exemption as foreign subjects. In 1906, a group of Tahtacı in the Burdur sub-province, for example, was found to have avoided military service because of their Iranian citizenship.⁴⁸ According to the report of the Konya Governorate, Battal Kahya, a member of a nomadic Tahtacı community in Dinar, helped thousands of Tahtacı in Isparta obtain Iranian passports from the Iranian Consulate in Konya to claim exemption from military duty and taxes.⁴⁹ In 1908, another group of Tahtacı in the Isparta sub-province, who were referred to as *Kıbtî* Tahtacı in official records, asserted their Iranian citizenship to demand the continuation of their exemption from military duty.⁵⁰ The 1918 report of Niyazi Bey also mentions 30 settled and 200 nomadic Tahtacı communities in Sandıklı and Eğridir as well as some families in Kaburgediği in the province of Adana who obtained Iranian citizenship to gain exemption from military duty.⁵¹

⁴³Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, *Gypsies in the Ottoman Empire: A Contribution to the History of the Balkans* (Hatfield, 2001), pp. 36, 70–72; Eyal Ginio, “Neither Muslims nor Zimmis: The Gypsies (Roma) in the Ottoman State”, *Romani Studies*, 14 (2004), pp. 117–144.

⁴⁴Ufuk Gülsoy, *Cizyeden Vatandaşlığa: Osmanlı'nın Gayrimüslim Askerleri* (Istanbul, 2010), pp. 81–110; Erik J. Zürcher, “The Ottoman Conscription System in Theory and Practice, 1844–1918”, in Erik J. Zürcher (ed.), *Arming the State: Military Conscription in the Middle East and Central Asia, 1775–1925* (London, 1999), pp. 79–94, 88–89.

⁴⁵Ömer Ulusoy, “Tanzimat Sonrası Osmanlı Arşiv Belgeleri Temelinde Balkanlarda Çingene/Roman Algısı” (paper presented at the Bulgaria and Turkey at the Intercultural Crossroads: Language, History and Literature, Plovdiv, 2011), pp. 126–144, 132.

⁴⁶Ceyda Yüksel, “Buçuk Millet: The Ottoman Gypsies in the Reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II (1876–1909)” (Ph.D., Boğaziçi University, 2009), pp. 340–341.

⁴⁷For a comparison with the strategies of the *Kıbtî*-registered groups in Edirne related to compulsory conscription, see Yilgür, “Son Dönem Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Devlet ve “Çingener”. Vergi, Askerlik ve Adlandırma Meseleleri”, p. 280.

⁴⁸BOA, DH.MKT, 2066/76, 19 Teşrin-i Sani 1322 [2 December 1906].

⁴⁹BOA, ŞD, 1759/26, 7 Muharrem 1324 [3 March 1906]; BOA, ŞD, 2761/16, 23 Şaban 1326 [20 September 1908]; Xavier de Planhol, *De la plaine pamphylienne aux lacs pisidiens. Nomadisme et vie paysanne* (Paris, 1958), p. 369.

⁵⁰BOA, DH.MKT, 1222 /1, 27 Zilkade 1325 [1 January 1908].

⁵¹BOA, DH.EUM.2.Şb, 67/54, 20 Haziran 1334 [20 June 1918].

Since male labourers of draft age were vital due to their contribution to timber production, the conscription of these labourers disrupted the industry. For this reason, timber merchants helped deserters by using their influence in local politics. For example, according to a report prepared by the Ministry of War in 1910, a group of timber merchants and their allies in the local government protected Tahtacı deserters in Anamur. The ministry's report asserted that to enlist the Tahtacı, these merchants had to be brought under control.⁵² Niyazi Bey asserts a similar claim in his report on the Tahtacı. He alleges that non-Muslim timber merchants in the Mersin region helped the Tahtacı escape military service.⁵³

One result of deepening poverty brought about by the unequal relationship between the Tahtacı and timber merchants was the increasing trend among the community toward involvement in alternative livelihood strategies. This trend coincided with an increasing demand for agricultural labour in the Adana and Aydın regions due to the rapid expansion of export-oriented agriculture. As a result of these two overlapping tendencies, a growing number of Tahtacı engaged in agriculture, which led them to a more sedentary way of living. The next part discusses the dynamics of this process.

Expansion of Export-Oriented Agriculture: From Nomadism to Permanent Settlement

In the eighteenth century, western Anatolia was one of the most export-oriented regions in the empire. This trend became even stronger in the nineteenth century. From the 1830s on, a vast area in western Anatolia was opened up to export-oriented, commercial agriculture.⁵⁴ Increasing demand for cotton, tobacco, raisins, and figs from both the domestic market and industrialized countries like Britain and France saw these crops become the core of commercial agriculture on the Aegean coast.⁵⁵ Southern Anatolia experienced this process a few decades later. Adana-Mersin region, Çukurova in particular, shifted to export-oriented agriculture from the late 1870s on, when cotton agriculture was commercialized as an outcome of the infrastructural developments, increasing credit opportunities, and the expansion of commercial networks.⁵⁶

In response to this geographical differentiation, two forms of mobility emerged in Mediterranean Anatolia. Unlike the lowlands in the Aegean, where there was an increase in demand for agricultural labour on the plains due to large-scale cultivation,

⁵²BOA, DH.MUİ, 77-1 20, 11 Rebiülevvel 1328 [23 March 1910].

⁵³BOA, DHEUM.6.Şb, 54/34, n.d.

⁵⁴Şevket Pamuk, *Uneven Centuries: Economic Development of Turkey since 1820*, (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford, 2018), pp. 125–126; Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700–1922* (New York, 2005), p. 133.

⁵⁵Özgür Teoman and Muammer Kaymak, "Commercial Agriculture and Economic Change in the Ottoman Empire during the Nineteenth Century: A Comparison of Raw Cotton Production in Western Anatolia and Egypt", *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 35:2 (2008), pp. 314–334, 321; Onur İnal, "The Making of an Eastern Mediterranean Gateway City: Izmir in the Nineteenth Century", *Journal of Urban History*, 45:5 (2019), pp. 891–907, 894; *idem*, "Fruits of Empire: Figs, Raisins, and Transformation of Western Anatolia in the Late Nineteenth Century", *Environment and History*, 25:4 (2019), pp. 549–574; Pamuk, *Uneven Centuries*, p. 125.

⁵⁶Toksöz, "The Çukurova", pp. 137–177.

the lowlands along the southern coasts remained thinly populated. To a considerable extent, the rural population occupied the middle and high altitudes of the Taurus Mountains, and the overall mobility level of the rural population was much higher than that in western Anatolia. Until the late nineteenth century, transhumance, based on the seasonal movement of shepherd tribes between summer and winter pastures, remained the most widespread subsistence strategy in the Taurus Mountains, especially in the eastern and middle ranges.⁵⁷ According to a report prepared by the British consulate in 1881, most tribes in the Adana region were purely nomadic until the mid-1860s.⁵⁸ According to another report on the human geography of the Adana Plains, in the middle of the century, the Turkmen tribes in this region lived a nomadic way of life “without recognizing the government”. Wandering with their flocks and herds, they spent five to six months in the plain and the remainder of the year in the mountains.⁵⁹

In line with this general pattern, Tahtacı communities along the western coasts of Anatolia experienced the sedentarization process differently than those along the southern coasts. As export-oriented agriculture emerged earlier in western Anatolia, the Tahtacı groups in this region became more readily involved in agriculture, while the subsistence of almost all Tahtacı households along the southern coasts of Anatolia was based on peripatetic strategies. The Ottoman *temettuat* (income) registers indicate that the subsistence strategies of the Tahtacı along the Aegean coasts were more heterogeneous, and Tahtacı settlements established before the middle of the nineteenth century were all located in Aydın and Hüdâvendigâr provinces, where the mobility level of the community was relatively low. Even though nomadic forest work continued at high altitudes in western Anatolia up until the 1950s, some Tahtacı groups had already abandoned forest work in the first half of the nineteenth century. This process constituted the first wave of the sedentarization of Tahtacı communities.

According to the *temettuat* registers, a Tahtacı village located in the Simav district of Kütahya in the sub-province of Hüdâvendigâr province, accommodated eighteen households. None was occupied with lumbering. Most were engaged in agriculture and cultivated wheat, barley, and chickpeas. The villagers earned an average of 500–600 *kuruş* annually. Each household had some twenty to thirty goats and ten sheep.⁶⁰ In Yarangüme, located in Menteşe, in the Aydın province, there were six settled Tahtacı households that had lived and paid taxes in Manisa the year before moving to this region. They earned their living by stockbreeding and lumbering. The average income was about 1,000 *kuruş*.⁶¹ There were fifty-five households in another Tahtacı village in Sobuca, Aydın. None of them was lumberers, cultivators, or stockbreeders. Most men in the village were weavers. Almost all households had one or two *dönüm* of vineyards and kept bees. The income of each household varied from 500 to 2,590 *kuruş*.⁶² Another village named Tahtacı, located in the Köyceğiz

⁵⁷McNeill, *Mountains of the Mediterranean World*, p. 292.

⁵⁸TNA, FO, 424/132, 1881.

⁵⁹TNA, FO, 222/8/3, 1882.

⁶⁰BOA, ML.VRD.TMT.d, 9251, 29 Zilhicce 1261 [29 December 1845].

⁶¹BOA, ML.VRD.TMT.d, 2606, 29 Zilhicce 1261 [29 December 1845].

⁶²BOA, ML.VRD.TMT.d, 2552, 29 Zilhicce 1261 [29 December 1845].

district in Menteşe in the Aydın province, consisted of fifty-six households. All were peasants who cultivated wheat, barley, and millet on between ten and fifty *dönüm* of land. They were also engaged in subsistence husbandry. The income of the villagers varied from 125 to 1,500 *куруş*. The richest household, which earned 3,525 *куруş* per annum, was engaged in trade and possessed sixty goats, five mares, five cows, a mill, and seventy-five *dönüm* of land that they rented out to others.⁶³

There was a clear differentiation and social stratification in these two villages that distinguished them from traditional Tahtacı communities that could only survive by adopting certain communal practices. Another remarkable difference was that lumbering was no longer an occupation in which all members of a specific community or village were engaged, beyond the fact that none were left mass-producing timber to meet the demands of distant populations via timber merchants involved in cross-continental trade. Instead, timber was produced mainly for the local population and used as a construction material.

Türkali, Narlıdere, Gögdelen (also known as Alurca or Doğançay), Tolaz (also known as Uladi or Yakapınar), Karakuyu, Bademler, and Uzundere were further Tahtacı villages established before the middle of the nineteenth century.⁶⁴ These villages were all located in the west of the Antalya Plain.

From the 1870s onwards, owing to the escalation of demand for cotton and wheat under the Pax Britannica, the plains in the eastern Mediterranean were also opened for cultivation, and pastures, forests, and wastelands began to be converted into cropland.⁶⁵ Since this region re-emerged as a prominent commercial centre and croplands in the plains gained importance, the rural population tended to leave the highlands and pursue a less mobile life at lower altitudes.⁶⁶ The efforts of the Ottoman government to sedentarize nomadic groups showed results only when the forced attempts of the government were combined with the commercialization of agriculture, the rise of landowners, and the reclamation of land.⁶⁷ In this period, with the help of the high land-to-labour ratio and the availability of forests for clearing, many nomadic groups obtained land by sharecropping, outright purchase, and intermarriage with sedentary families.⁶⁸

Another factor that contributed to the sedentarization process was the retreat of the Little Ice Age (1300/1650–1850), a period of declining temperatures marked by extreme weather conditions, including increased glaciation, intense drought, and

⁶³BOA, ML.VRD.TMT.d, 2240, 29 Zilhicce 1261 [29 December 1845].

⁶⁴Ayten Kaplan, “Balıkesir Tahtacı Köyleri Kongurca ve Türkali’de Halk Bilimi Açısından Müzik Yapısının Araştırılması” (Ph.D., Ankara University, 1998), p. 28; Rıza Yetişen, *Tahtacı Aşiretleri. Adet, Gelenek ve Göreneklere* (İzmir, 1986), pp. 10–14.

⁶⁵See Şevket Pamuk, *The Ottoman Empire and European Capitalism, 1820–1913: Trade, Investment and Production* (New York, 1987), pp. 18–40, 82–107; Reşat Kasaba, *The Ottoman Empire and the World Economy: The Nineteenth Century* (Albany, NY, 1988); Faruk Tabak, *The Waning of the Mediterranean, 1550–1870: A Geohistorical Approach* (Baltimore, MD, 2010), pp. 238–241, 282–297; Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (London, 2014).

⁶⁶Faruk Tabak, “The Ottoman Countryside in the Age of the Autumn of the Mediterranean, c.1560–1870” (Ph.D., Binghamton University, 2000), p. 157.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, p. 19; Toksöz, “The Çukurova”, pp. 14, 36.

⁶⁸See Leyla Neyzi, “Beyond ‘Tradition’ and ‘Resistance’: Kinship and Economic Development in Mediterranean Turkey” (Ph.D., Cornell University, 1991).

erratic precipitation. This climate change brought freezing cold and dry winters, crop failures, and famine to Ottoman Anatolia.⁶⁹ The overall warming trend following the end of the Little Ice Age had a distinct effect on regional economies and livelihood strategies. Duffy contends that changing climate patterns in the nineteenth century contributed to the decline of pastoral nomadism and the rise of commercial agriculture in the Mediterranean.⁷⁰ This was a period when warmer climate conditions coincided with technical advancements, including drainage of lowlands through reclamation projects,⁷¹ which resulted in higher agricultural productivity in the coastal plains of southern Anatolia.

Notwithstanding the relatively mild weather conditions, the inhabitants of Anatolia continued in the nineteenth century to face periodic extreme weather patterns, especially severe droughts, caused by either regional or global climate trends.⁷² Moreover, due to the greater vulnerability of animals to extreme weather events, it was more challenging for nomadic populations than agriculturalists to recover from these environmental crises.⁷³ In short, both the increased agricultural productivity and the vulnerability of nomadic populations triggered the tendency toward sedentarization.

This transformation heavily influenced the migration patterns of the Tahtacı communities. As an outcome of increasing productivity and the reopening of the plains for cultivation, the Tahtacı gradually descended to lower altitudes of the Taurus Mountains,⁷⁴ and some became involved in agriculture. In this period, Tahtacı communities developed more complex subsistence practices – a mix of peripatetic and pastoral strategies. From the 1870s onwards, the degree of mobility among the Tahtacı lessened and new villages were established, signifying a second wave of sedentarization. This trend became more evident in the early Republican period and continued over the entire twentieth century. Eventually, some Tahtacı families moved to the suburbs, where they transformed into wage-labourers.⁷⁵ Crafts related to their traditional occupation, such as carpentry and burning lime, became prominent among these groups.⁷⁶

The results of the fieldwork conducted by Niyazi Bey, whom the Ministry of Internal Affairs charged with investigating the Tahtacı living in the Adana province

⁶⁹Sam White, *The Climate of Rebellion in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge and New York, 2011), pp. 130–137.

⁷⁰Andrea Duffy, “Some Like It Hot: Mediterranean Societies at the End of the Little Ice Age”, *Agricultural History*, 94:2, (2020), pp. 176–204, 176.

⁷¹See Özkan Akpınar, “Making Property of a Marsh: Environment, Property, and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Ioannina”, *Middle Eastern Studies* (2021), DOI: [10.1080/00263206.2021.1996359](https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2021.1996359).

⁷²Zozan Pehlivan, “El Niño and the Nomads: Global Climate, Local Environment, and the Crisis of Pastoralism in Late Ottoman Kurdistan”, *The Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 63:3 (2020), pp. 316–356; Semih Çelik, “‘No Work for Anyone in this Country of Misery’: Famine and Labour Relations in Mid-Nineteenth Century Anatolia”, in Erdem Kabadayı and Leda Papastefanaki (eds), *Working in Greece and Turkey: A Comparative Labour History from Empires to Nation States 1840–1940*, (Oxford and New York, 2020), pp. 148–173.

⁷³Duffy, *Nomad’s Land*, p. 189; Pehlivan, “El Niño and the Nomads”, pp. 318–319.

⁷⁴Tabak, “The Ottoman Countryside”, p. 322.

⁷⁵X. de Planhol, “Les nomades, la steppe et la forêt en Anatolie”, *Geographische Zeitschrift*, 53 (1965), pp. 101–116, 112.

⁷⁶Yetişen, *Tahtacı Aşiretleri*, p. 264; Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, *Kızılbaşlar-Aleviler* (Istanbul, 2012), p. 68.

in 1918, affirm the tendency toward sedentarization. He witnessed these communities following a semi-nomadic lifestyle, moving to the high plateaus and forests from spring to winter. In recent years, he noted, the Tahtacı groups had been living a less mobile way of life based on nomadism between fixed winter quarters at lower altitudes and changeable forested lands close to their winter quarters.⁷⁷ Roux states that at the beginning of the twentieth century, ten to thirty related Tahtacı families constituted an *oba*, the most important unit of social organization among the Tahtacı. Several *obas* shared a summer territory and a winter territory.⁷⁸ In winter, they lived in their villages down in the valleys. Shortly before spring, they left their villages to inhabit the forests in the highlands until the following winter.⁷⁹ They built temporary sheds over several days from materials they collected from the forests. Almost all Tahtacı houses were made of wood. At the beginning of winter, these houses were dismantled, and the materials were sold on the market. The winter villages of the Tahtacı functioned as storage for the timber they had cut and processed during spring and summer.

Niyazi Bey underlines that the Tahtacı villages at the highest altitude in the province of Adana were at 800–900 metres. Families spent their summers in forests that were located much closer to their winter quarters compared to the forests they had inhabited in previous decades. For instance, the Tahtacı communities in Dalakderesi began to spend summers in Ayvagediği, four hours from their village. As of 1908, the Tahtacı in Kaburgediği were climbing to Kalecik, which was three hours from their village. Before that, they used to spend their summers at higher elevations in the Tanzit region. Just like the Tahtacı of Belenkişlek, except for five to ten families, they engaged in agriculture and lived at lower altitudes.⁸⁰

Even though most Tahtacı families were piece-rate wage earners employed by timber merchants, there were still a few self-employed kin producers among them in this period.⁸¹ In his report on the Tahtacı in the Adana region, for example, Niyazi Bey mentions Tahtacı families wandering on the streets of the Tarsus district every Monday and Thursday, their mules loaded with timber and firewood to be sold in the local market in exchange for grain, sugar, coffee, and fabric.⁸²

The establishment of most Tahtacı villages in the last decades of the nineteenth century resulted from the availability of empty land and forests to clear. The inhabitants of Çamalan and Kaburgediği, two current-day Tahtacı settlements in Mersin

⁷⁷BOA, DH.EUM.2.Şb, 67/54, 20 Haziran 1334 [20 June 1918].

⁷⁸Jean-Paul Roux, "The Tahtacı of Anatolia", in Aparna Rao (ed.), *The Other Nomads: Peripatetic Minorities in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Cologne, 1987), pp. 229–245, 234.

⁷⁹Roux and Özbayrı, *Les Traditions nomads*, p. 40; de Planhol, *De la plaine pamphlyienne*, p. 370.

⁸⁰BOA, DH.EUM.2.Şb, 67/54, 20 Haziran 1334 [20 June 1918].

⁸¹Based on the taxonomy of labour relations developed within the "The Global Collaboratory on the History of Labour Relations, 1500–2000" project of the International Institute of Social History. See Karin Hofmeester *et al.*, "The Global Collaboratory on the History of Labour Relations, 1500–2000: Background, Set-Up, Taxonomy, and Applications", *IISH Dataverse* (2015); Leo Lucassen, "Working Together: New Directions in Global Labour History", *Journal of Global History*, 11:1 (2016), pp. 66–87, 68–72; Jan Lucassen, "Outlines of a History of Labour", *IISH Research Papers*, 51 (2013), pp. 8–11; Karin Hofmeester and Jan Lucassen, "Shifting Labor Relations in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey 1500–2000: An Introduction", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 97 (2020), pp. 6–27, 9–16.

⁸²BOA, DH.EUM.2.Şb, 67/54, 20 Haziran 1334 [20 June 1918].

province, say that their villages were established in the 1860s on empty fields at altitudes above 700 metres in Tarsus.⁸³ Some Tahtacı groups of Tarsus migrated west in the 1870s and established the village of Dalakderesi by clearing a forest. A further factor contributing to this area's settlement process was sharecropping. The pioneers of Dalakderesi continued lumbering but also worked for landowners.⁸⁴ Some three decades later, a group of Tahtacı in Mut descended to lower elevations where large landowners were increasingly searching for labourers to work in their fields. They began to work for the Kravgas, a notable, influential family, as sharecroppers, thus adopting a mixed subsistence strategy based on forest work and cultivation. In this process, their mobility gradually decreased. The forests they worked in spring and summer grew closer to their winter quarters, which then became their permanent settlements. Köprübaşı village, located in the current province of Mersin, was formed as a result of this process.⁸⁵

Living at lower altitudes and logging in forests that were closer to towns and villages brought not only new opportunities but also new challenges. Tahtacı communities were considered both by nomadic herding communities and sedentary agriculturalist villagers as distinct and therefore unmarriageable.⁸⁶ Unlike the nomadic pastoral groups known as Yörük, who used the opportunity to obtain land by intermarriage with sedentary agricultural groups in the late Ottoman and early Republican periods, the peripatetic Tahtacı had no such opportunity.⁸⁷ Furthermore, the presence of the Tahtacı groups in the valleys produced social tensions. The locals of Ortakçı village of Aydın, for example, sued the Tahtacı communities that the government settled on their plateau.⁸⁸ Another example is the complaint of several villagers from Antalya dated 1909. Their petition indicates that a timber merchant named Lülüzade Ömer Efendi hired a group of Tahtacı to harvest timber. The villagers asserted that, by allowing the animals of the Tahtacı onto their land, Ömer Efendi and the Tahtacı prevented them from cultivating it and caused the destruction of olive groves.⁸⁹ It was evidently not exceptional that closer interaction of the Tahtacı with sedentary communities caused disputes at the local level.⁹⁰

⁸³Interviews by the author in Çamalan/Mersin (15 August 2015) and Kaburgediği/Mersin (16 August 2015).

⁸⁴Interviews by the author in Dalakderesi/Mersin (11 August 2015).

⁸⁵Interviews by the author in Köprübaşı/Mersin (12 August 2015).

⁸⁶Neyzi, "Beyond 'Tradition' and 'Resistance'", p. 73.

⁸⁷*Idem*, pp. 64–128; Atabeyli, "Türkmen Yörük ve Tahtacılar Arasında Tetkikler Görüşler. Tahtacı Türklerinde Manevi Kültür", p. 175.

⁸⁸BOA, DH.MKT, 1359/75, 10 Zilkade 1303 [10 August 1886]; Interviews by the author in Kızılcapınar/Aydın (10 May 2016).

⁸⁹BOA, DH.MKT, 2767/58, 1327 Safer 22 [15 Mart 1909].

⁹⁰For a dispute between the Tahtacı and other local groups in the early Republican era, which saw a group of Tahtacı being forcibly evicted, see Neyzi, "Beyond 'Tradition' and 'Resistance'", p. 101. For further examples of conflictual relations between peripatetics and pastoral groups, decided in favour of the latter, see Fredrik Barth, *Nomads of South Persia: The Basseri Tribe of the Khamsey Confederacy* (Boston, MA, 1961), p. 92; Rao, "The Concept of Peripatetics: An Introduction", p. 21.

Conclusion

Regarding Simmel, Berland emphasizes that, like the “inner enemies of Sirius”, peripatetics are not seen as organically connected members of communities, even though they are constitutive elements of every society.⁹¹ From this starting point, this article has tried to see the peripatetic Tahtacı communities from a perspective that considers them connected components of the Ottoman countryside. Exploring the intersection of nomadism, forestry, and labour relations, the article has problematized the conventional wisdom on lowland–upland relations and offered a historical representation of the Tahtacı in dialogue with their social, economic, and political environment.

The main question addressed in this article is what sort of strategies the Tahtacı developed in order to cope with commercialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of the main differences from previous centuries in terms of the working environment of the Tahtacı was that they rarely confronted their clients. The most common way Tahtacı communities earned a living in the late Ottoman era, especially given the increasing commercialization of forestry in the middle of the century, was to provide forest products to timber merchants embedded in regional trade networks and – owing to their relations with officials – could lease state forests for long-term use. This transformation marked a significant shift in labour relations in Ottoman forestry. Even though self-employment did not completely disappear, there was a significant shift to wage labour. The central tendency among the Tahtacı households involved in forest work was piece-rate wage labour.

Moreover, it was not an exception that wage labour evolved into debt bondage, indicating “the grey area between the poles of chattel slavery and ‘free’ wage labour”.⁹² In the mid-nineteenth century, many Tahtacı households were contracted by timber merchants to work as bonded labourers to repay their debts. As a result of their peonage, Tahtacı communities became more impoverished and dependent on these merchants. As forest work was a challenging, labour-intensive occupation, which required geographically localized knowledge that could not be replaced by any contemporaneous technology or expertise of scientific foresters, timber merchants and officials were also dependent on the Tahtacı. With their cheap, valuable labour and knowledge of mountains, forests, and trees – based on their sustained experience in timber harvesting – Tahtacı communities were indispensable for the continued provision and transportation of substantial amounts of forest products. The bonded labour and specialized expertise of the Tahtacı made the Taurus region a prominent centre for timber production.

This was also a period when the Ottoman Empire was incorporated into the global economy through export-oriented agriculture. The level and form of involvement in agricultural production among the Tahtacı in this process varied depending on economic, climatic, and geographical conditions. Some depended on crops produced by villagers, some practised subsistence farming, others worked as sharecroppers or

⁹¹Berland, “Paryatan”, p. 191.

⁹²Oliver Tappe and Ulrike Lindner, “Introduction: Global Variants of Bonded Labour”, in Sabine Damir-Geilsdorf *et al.* (eds), *Bonded Labour: Global and Comparative Perspectives (18th–21st Century)* (Bielefeld, 2016), pp. 9–34, 10.

wage-labourers, and a minority of self-employed producers cultivated for commercial purposes. The varying levels of integration into the world system created a differentiation among the Tahtacı. Along the Aegean coasts, where commercial agriculture emerged earlier, increasing export-oriented agriculture created an opportunity for some Tahtacı families to obtain land from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards, while others worked as agricultural wage-labourers or sharecroppers, signalling an important shift in labour relations. The subsistence strategies of the Tahtacı on the southern coasts, on the other hand, substantially changed in the 1870s, once the Little Ice Age had ended and commercial agriculture began expanding. For many Tahtacı groups, spatial mobility remained the main component of their survival strategies, but in a narrower area and at lower altitudes and occasionally based on both peripatetic lumbering and sharecropping.

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