

Scholarship on Ottoman Gypsies/Roma: A Historiographical Review¹

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Abstract

The Ottoman Empire, governing a diverse multi-ethnic realm for over six centuries, left a substantial archival legacy that enables a deeper, more nuanced exploration of Roma history beyond externally produced accounts. This study conducts a historiographical review of Turkish-language scholarship on Ottoman Roma, emphasising the diverse archival sources—such as tax registers, court records, and kanunnames—and methodological approaches employed by researchers. It highlights how earlier works offered general overviews, whereas later studies like Altınöz’s 2013 monograph integrate systematic primary-source analysis, particularly of Ottoman defter entries. By mapping the trajectory from marginal mentions to in-depth archival monographs and doctoral dissertations, the review illustrates both scholarly progress and persistent gaps in coverage, especially regarding chronological cohesion and Roma self-representation. The findings underline the transformative potential of Ottoman archival research in revealing the social, economic, and legal dimensions of Roma life under imperial governance. Ultimately, the study advocates for further comparative and interdisciplinary investigations that foreground marginalised voices and critically engage with source limitations.

Keywords: Ottoman archives, Roma historiography, primary sources, tax registers, archival monographs, Turkish-language scholarship

¹ This paper is a revised version of a study originally written in Hungarian, titled “*Törökországi kutatások az Oszmán Birodalom cigányságáról.*”

The Ottoman Empire, which ruled over diverse regions for more than six centuries and included peoples of various religions and cultures, left behind a wealth of archival material. Given that most of our knowledge of Roma comes from sources produced by external communities and authorities, examining different types of historical sources over a broad time frame offers a more balanced and objective basis for research. From this perspective, Ottoman archival materials provide valuable insights into the history of the Roma. This study aims to provide a general review of research conducted in Türkiye on the Ottoman Gypsies², focusing on the variety of sources and methods used by researchers.

First, I introduce the earliest publications on Ottoman Gypsies, followed by three works published as books. Then, I shift the focus to researchers whose primary area of study is the Gypsies of the Ottoman Empire, including doctoral dissertations and other works. Finally, I briefly mention the works of scholars who, in addition to their main research areas, have also published on the Roma.

Historical research related to the Ottoman Gypsies³ began to attract scholars' attention in Türkiye relatively late, starting in the early 2000s. Prior to this, Tayyip Gökbilgin and Enver Şerifgil each published a study on the subject; however, these works did not go beyond providing general information, nor did the authors pursue further research on the topic. The focus of Gökbilgin's work, which is an encyclopedia article, mainly covers the Gypsies of Rumelia, their taxation and organisation after explaining their origin and first appearance in official documents. In addition to these, he also makes brief comments on the Gypsies of Anatolia and their connections and relations to certain groups of the region; he concludes his writing by describing the customs and occupations of the Gypsies in a general sense.⁴ Şerifgil's study, similar to Gökbilgin's, centres around the Gypsies of Rumelia but focuses solely on the 16th century.⁵ While his work filled an important gap in the field and paved the way for further research, it also contains biases and stereotypes, given that it was published in 1981.

The first comprehensive work in Turkish is associated with İsmail Altınöz and was published in 2013;⁶ it is based on his doctoral thesis from 2005.⁷ In the introduction,

² Editorial note: The term *Gypsy* is used in this journal issue primarily in historical, legal, or ethnographic contexts, reflecting the terminology of the periods under discussion. Due to its negative connotations—often rooted in long-standing prejudice and stereotyping—the term is widely regarded as problematic. The authors have made a deliberate effort to use the term *Roma* wherever appropriate, in keeping with scholarly conventions and the self-identification efforts of Romani individuals and communities.

³ Throughout the study, I use *Gypsy* and *Roma* interchangeably to reflect the terminology used in the sources and existing scholarship.

⁴ Gökbilgin 1977: 420–426.

⁵ Şerifgil 1981: 117–144.

⁶ Altınöz 2013.

⁷ Altınöz 2005. For other publications of İsmail Altınöz on Ottoman Gypsies, see Altınöz 1995: 22–29; Altınöz 2010: 116–128; Altınöz 2011: 91–106; Altınöz 2015a: 80–85; Altınöz 2015b: 5702–5706; Altınöz 2015c: 21–32; Altınöz 2020: 291–294.

the scholar refers to his earlier work from 1995 as the first contemporary scientific study on the Ottoman Gypsies.⁸ He adds that some earlier research in Turkish was aimed at a general audience and primarily focused on popular topics. Furthermore, he highlights that the studies outside of Turkish scholarship mostly relied on secondary rather than primary sources, limiting the depth of insights they could provide.⁹ In fact, before Altınöz, no research had been conducted using archival materials that covered the early Ottoman period through to the empire's dissolution in such detail. Moreover, no similarly detailed volume has been published up to the present day. For this reason, I would like to give this work greater attention in my current study. First, I will briefly outline the content of the work and then closely examine it by adopting a more critical approach.

İsmail Altınöz's research draws extensively on archival sources, with the tax registers being among the most frequently used. These registers provide information about the number of Roma living in the empire, their places of residence, names, religion, occupations, and the taxes they paid, which Altınöz analysed extensively in his work. The book is divided into four chapters. In the first chapter, following the introduction, he provides etymological explanations and traces the origins of the Romani people, then lists legends about their migrations. The researcher presents the social role of the Roma in an interesting way through proverbs and sayings from different cultures. These are particularly important as they show how the Roma are embedded in the collective memory of the people with whom they interacted.¹⁰

In the second chapter, the researcher narrows the focus to the Ottoman Gypsies. He emphasises that the empire essentially did not differentiate its subjects based on ethnicity but instead applied religious divisions. However, Muslim Gypsies were treated differently from the rest of the Muslim subjects: Gypsies, regardless of whether they were Muslim or not, had to pay the head tax (*jizya*). According to a *kanunname* (legal regulation) from the era of Süleyman I, Muslim Gypsies paid 22 akçes, while non-Muslim Gypsies paid 25 akçes, unlike the rest of the Muslim population, who had no head tax obligations.¹¹ As stated by the author, there could be two reasons for this: one is that the officials questioned whether the Gypsies were sincere in their faith.¹² He explains the other in the fourth chapter: due to their nomadic lifestyle, the continuous collection of taxes was uncertain; thus, higher tax burdens were imposed on them from the outset.¹³ Following this topic, Altınöz explores the places where the Gypsies

⁸ Altınöz 1995: 22–29.

⁹ Altınöz 2013: 14.

¹⁰ Further reading on this topic, see Yıldız 2007: 61–82; Ergüt 2021: 85–94.

¹¹ For the English translation of this *kanunname*, see: Çelik 2004: 15–16.

¹² Altınöz 2013: 77.

¹³ Altınöz 2013: 236. For more information, discussions, and alternative approaches to the Gypsy head tax policy, see Marushiakova–Popov 2001: 28–30; Ginio 2004: 117–144; Çelik 2018: 227–230; Kasumović 2020: 95–144; Dingç 2021: 35–56.

lived and travelled, pointing out that, according to detailed tax registers, significantly fewer Roma resided in Anatolia compared to Rumelia. He also mentions an ethnic group called the *Abdal*, whose communities led a nomadic lifestyle similar to that of the Roma. The author calls attention to the fact that contemporary locals and later researchers also counted this ethnic group as Roma, which he considers incorrect.¹⁴

Through archival materials, we also gain insight into complaints filed by local residents against the Gypsies, as well as the punishments imposed on them as a result. Altınöz lists several examples in which a disruptive group was expelled from the area, or, if the severity of the crime warranted it, the offender was sent to serve as a galley slave. The chapter also touches on *kanunnames* concerning the Gypsies.¹⁵ We learn that the first *kanunname* was enacted during the reign of Mehmed II, which addressed the tax obligations of Gypsy subjects. Another important topic of the chapter concerns the Çingene Sanjak, with its administrative centre in Kırkkilise¹⁶ in Rumelia. This sanjak served as the administrative centre for the entire Roma population of Rumelia and Istanbul. Altınöz claims that this was designated in 1520 during the rule of Suleiman I.¹⁷ Furthermore, the author highlights that the *kanunnames* concerning the Gypsies restricted their areas of travel, prohibited marriage between Muslims and non-Muslims, and imposed punitive taxes in cases where a Muslim Gypsy mingled with non-Muslim groups.¹⁸

The third chapter examines the population and taxation of settled Gypsies; more specifically, it focuses on the Gypsies who settled in Istanbul, particularly in the Üsküdar town, as analysed through records from the Üsküdar Sharia court. The chapter includes a dialogue taken from Evliya Çelebi's travelogue, which is significant as it provides a glimpse into a Gypsy individual's perspective on power. After the accession of Sultan Mehmed IV to the throne, he wished to appoint one of his favoured circus wrestlers and jugglers, a Gypsy subject named Ahmet Kuli, as a Janissary agha. Ahmet Kuli declined this prestigious offer, replying, "*My sultan, we are a circus company, and since the time of the pharaohs, there have been no viziers or Janissary aghas among our ancestors. Such thoughts only come to a pharaoh who senses the end is near.*" Following this, he requested permission from the sultan to make a

¹⁴ Altınöz 2013: 87–93.

¹⁵ Altınöz 2013: 105–109.

¹⁶ Modern day Kırklareli.

¹⁷ Altınöz 2013: 116. However, Emine Dinger points out that there is no clear evidence regarding the exact date of this sanjak's establishment, with the earliest indirect reference appearing during the reign of Bayezid II (1481–1512). Dinger 2009: 35.

¹⁸ Altınöz 2013: 130–137.

pilgrimage to Mecca.¹⁹ The chapter concludes with the number of Roma recorded in the first census of 1831: 29,530 in Rumelia and 7,143 in Anatolia.²⁰

In the final, fourth chapter, the scholar sheds light on the socio-economic situation of the Ottoman Gypsies. He begins by describing the tax burdens imposed on the Roma, as well as their occupations and roles within Ottoman entertainment culture. The work reveals that the Ottoman Empire did not persecute the Roma who wandered within its territory; instead, it sought to regulate their lives through *kanunnames* and aimed to integrate their communities into society by mandating settlement.²¹

İsmail Altınöz's book fills an important gap in the field. Although some critiques exist, only one review by Tuğrul Özcan has been published to date.²² Özcan's review primarily offers descriptive commentary rather than critical analysis, with his main critique noting the absence of maps illustrating areas with high Roma populations and their distribution. In my current study, I intend to take the opportunity to analyse the book in greater depth and offer a new review that approaches it from a different perspective than Özcan's. I would like to emphasise that this research holds a unique position due to its extensive use of archival materials and the substantial amount of statistical information it provides. In this regard, my critiques do not pertain to the value of the study itself. Nevertheless, the author does not take into account that such a complex topic cannot be adequately explored solely from a historical perspective. The book covers an overly broad time span, utilising documents from the entire duration of the Ottoman Empire, but does not organise these chronologically. Although society changed significantly over the centuries under study, the book combines sources from different centuries within the same analysis. The work mainly focuses on the economic situation of the Gypsies in the 16th and 17th centuries, drawing on primary sources for this period; however, for sections concerning the 18th, 19th, and the first quarter of the 20th century, it relies mostly on secondary sources.

As previously mentioned, the scholar examines archival sources in detail and provides useful statistical data. In contrast, he takes a less critical approach to secondary sources containing qualitative information on social, cultural, and linguistic aspects and does not analyse them thoroughly. The evaluation of these topics is left to the reader's judgment. Another methodological deficiency of the work is that it presents the Ottoman Roma only from a one-sided perspective, primarily through the documents of officials and non-Roma subjects who filed complaints against them. The voices of the Roma themselves appear only in a few instances. This representation could have been broadened if the author had adopted a more critical approach and applied source criticism.

¹⁹ Altınöz 2013: 182.

²⁰ Altınöz 2013: 224.

²¹ Altınöz 2013: 301–307.

²² Özcan 2014: 803–805.

In the same year, 2013, Sinan Şanlıer's book on the Ottoman Gypsies was also published.²³ This work presents the position of the Roma within the empire in the context of legal regulations. Following a brief introduction, the book details a total of eight *kanunnames* aimed at regulating the lives of the Gypsy population. The first of these, as mentioned earlier, was issued during the reign of Sultan Mehmed II,²⁴ and the last came into effect in 1870. Alongside photographs and transcriptions of the manuscripts, the author includes simplified Turkish versions and interpretations to reach a broader audience.

The other source edition, dated 2015, belongs to İbrahim Sezgin²⁵ and is the first publication of the Institute of Roman Language and Culture Studies, established in 2014 at Trakya University, the first and only institute of its kind in Turkish universities.²⁶ Sezgin presents 83 documents organised chronologically rather than thematically; the earliest manuscript dates from 1495, and the latest from 1911. The book includes photographs and transcriptions of the documents. However, apart from the brief introductory section and summaries, it offers no commentary on the documents or the situation of Ottoman Gypsies. Therefore, readers are expected to have knowledge of Ottoman Turkish and experience in reading different types of manuscripts.

In the following section, the focus will be on scholars whose research centres on the Ottoman Gypsies, including those with significant publications in the field. I would like to emphasise that my main aim is to briefly introduce the foundations of their work, rather than to provide a detailed examination or comparisons with other studies in the field.

Emine Dineç, whose 2004 doctoral dissertation²⁷ focused on the role of the Çingene Sanjak in centralising the administration of all Roma in Rumelia and Istanbul, has conducted several studies in this field. Another focus of her research is the Çingene Müsellem Sanjak, to which Muslim Gypsies settled in Rumelian towns belonged, providing various supply services within different units of the army. These services, for example, included shipbuilding, mining, blacksmithing, transporting food supplies, and repairing fortresses. In her other works, the scholar examines different aspects of the Ottoman Gypsies, including their migration, socio-economic status, and the empire's policy toward them.²⁸

²³ Şanlıer 2013.

²⁴ Although this *kanun* is undated, researchers agree that it was enacted under Mehmed II's rule. For more information, see Akgündüz 1990: 397.

²⁵ Sezgin 2015.

²⁶ Institute of Roman Language and Culture Studies (Roman Dili ve Kültürü Araştırmaları Enstitüsü). (n.d.). Retrieved June 20, 2025, from <https://rae-en.trakya.edu.tr/>

²⁷ Dineç 2004.

²⁸ Dineç 2007: 211–229; Dineç 2009: 33–46; Dineç 2015: 547–554; Dineç 2016a: 68–76; Dineç 2016b: 1211–1223; Dineç 2017a: 89–95; Dineç 2017: 137–154; Dineç 2019: 587–604; Dineç 2020: 155–166; Dineç 2021a: 95–108; Dineç 2021b: 35–56.

The Sharia court records are among the most important and reliable sources for understanding various layers of Ottoman society.²⁹ Faika Çelik's 2013 doctoral dissertation focuses on cases involving Gypsies found in the Üsküdar Sharia court records between 1530 and 1585.³⁰ In her studies on Ottoman Gypsies, Çelik addresses various questions across different periods and perspectives of Ottoman history, from the early fifteenth century onward.³¹

Similar to the works of the researchers mentioned above, Hasan Ali Cengiz publishes on the Gypsies of the 16th and 17th centuries, focusing particularly on those in Rumelia. His studies primarily use tax registers to examine the demographic and socio-economic conditions of the Ottoman Gypsies in specific Rumelian settlements.³² Another key source for exploring the socio-economic conditions of the Gypsies is the *temettuat* registers, which form the foundation of Muhammed Tağ's research on the 19th century.³³

Egemen Yılğür's research contributes to understanding the situation of the Roma in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, offering valuable insights into shifting perceptions of the Roma, identity formations within their communities, changes in tax policies, their evolving role in the military, and the implications for their Muslim identity.³⁴

Ömer Ulusoy is also among the scholars publishing on the 19th-century Roma. In his initial study, he explores the situation of Muslim Roma in the Balkans, particularly in Bulgaria, and their relationship with the Ottoman Empire and its policies.³⁵ In the subsequent work, Ulusoy focuses on Roma identity in the Ottoman Empire, analysing the image of the Roma through Ahmet Mithat Efendi's 1887 literary novel *Çingene* (Gypsy), the "Gypsy" entry in Şemseddin Sami's 1891 encyclopedia *Kāmûsü'l-a'lâm*, and a report on the living conditions and situation of the Roma, written in 1891 by Sadi Efendi, a teacher in Siroz (Serres).³⁶

In this study, I reviewed the major works on Ottoman Gypsies written by scholars in Türkiye. Rather than listing all publications in the field, my goal was to select studies that used different sources and covered different topics. I focused primarily

²⁹ A total of one hundred *sicils* from the Istanbul Sharia court records were digitised and transcribed. These records are now accessible to readers and researchers through an online database titled İstanbul Kadı Sicilleri. (n.d.). Retrieved June 20, 2025, from <https://kadisicilleri.istanbul/>

³⁰ Çelik 2013.

³¹ Çelik 2003: 161–182; Çelik 2004: 1–21; Çelik 2007: 173–199; Çelik 2013: 577–597; Çelik 2018a: 215–243; Çelik 2018b: 249–266; Çelik 2020: 189–219.

³² Cengiz 2022a: 1–21; Cengiz 2022b: 21–34; Cengiz 2023: 206–224.

³³ Tağ 2017a: 285–293; Tağ 2017b: 523–529; Tağ 2018: 303–319; Tağ 2021: 173–190.

³⁴ Yılğür 2018: 264–302. For Yılğür's other work on Gypsy groups in the 18th-century Rumelia, see Yılğür 2021: 93–119.

³⁵ Ulusoy 2012: 126–144.

³⁶ Ulusoy 2013: 245–256. Regarding the transcription of Sadi Efendi's report, see Uçar 2009: 128–141. For further discussion on this report, see Çelik 2013: 577–597; Dingaç 2021: 95–108.

on studies written in Turkish language, as these are often inaccessible to non-Turkish readers. This was also a reason for giving particular attention to the book by İsmail Altınöz, considering that it is not widely heard of outside of Türkiye. As mentioned at the beginning, research on the Roma began notably late, and to date, only a single monograph attempting to cover the Roma throughout the entire history of the Ottoman Empire has been produced. While this work has methodological deficiencies, it fills an important gap. Most researchers rely on sources from the 16th and 17th centuries, with relatively few publications addressing later periods. The majority of studies focus on the Gypsies of Rumelia and Istanbul, with a significant lack of research on Gypsy groups in other parts of the empire.

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