Coping with Extortion on a Local Level: The Case of Hilandar’s Metochion in Zdravikion (Draviskos, Strymon Region) in the Sixteenth Century

Abstract: In the Ottoman Empire extortion on a local level was a frequent practice and it took diverse forms. The Ottoman documents preserved in the archive of the Monastery of Hilandar (Mount Athos) give us a picture of the ways in which its monks struggled to preserve their privileges and protect their large metochion at Zdravikion (about 700 dönüms). Their basic tax obligation to the “master of the land” (sahib-i arz) was paid annually in a lump sum (maktu) ever since 1481, when sultan Bayezid II exempted them from paying the tithe at the express request of the Wallachian voivode Basarab II Ț epeluş. The annual lump sum of 600 akçe accounted for only a half of the total tax burden – they had been relieved of paying the other half by the sultan himself. This privilege was confirmed by all subsequent sultans, most likely until 1569. Local masters of the land (at first sipahi, then bass and finally vakıf authorities) persistently and in various ways sought to impose the payment of the tithe. This paper presents different arguments they used in the attempt to extort the payment of the tithe and the monks’ firm attitude in defending their rights before the kadı’s court and the Imperial Divan. Monks were able to prove their rights because they conscientiously kept, sometimes for centuries, all the necessary documents relating to their land possessions, producing them as evidence in court proceedings.

Keywords: Hilandar Monastery, metochion, Zdravikion, extortion, sixteenth century

The Ottoman conquest of the Balkans dealt a heavy and irreparable blow to the economy of the monasteries on Mount Athos. A shorter version of this paper was presented at Workshop II: “Does Monastic Economy Matter? Religious Patterns of Economic Behavior", organized by the Centre for Advanced Study, Sofia, and the Centre for Governance and Culture in Europe, University of St. Gallen, held in Sofia, 9–11 November 2018.

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The status of the Athonite monasteries’ landholdings beyond Mount Athos changed over the centuries. At first, during the best part of the fifteenth century, the monks held the status of “masters of the land” (sahib-i arz). And even when reduced to the status of re’aya by the end of the fifteenth century, they kept some privileges, the most important of which was the annual payment of an aggregate lump sum (maktu, kesim) instead of the tithe (öşr) and other taxes. Such privileges, enjoyed by the confirmed large estates (metochia), lasted until 1568/9 and the so-called “confiscation affair”, and in some cases and by exception even after that.2

Various questions relating to the modes of monastic land tenure and management on Mount Athos under Ottoman rule have been studied for more than two decades based on the surviving Ottoman sources.3

The history of Hilandar’s metochion in Zdravikion shows the ways in which the monks struggled to preserve their privileges, protect their possessions and put a stop to extortion. The sultan’s protection and some privileges depended on the influence of Wallachian voivodes too. On a local level, the monks were subjected to extortion mostly by “masters of the land” and in these cases usually sought protection directly from the Porte. Another source of their problems were neighbours who held the same legal status of re’aya. When the motivation was sheer self-interest: a crop field, a vineyard, a boundary, the use of water, livestock grazing... it did not matter if the claimants were Muslim or Christian. Such disputes were usually settled at the local kadi’s court in Zihne.


Hilandar was granted an estate in the village of Zdravikion in 1318 according to an agreement between Emperor Andronikos II and King Stefan Uroš II Milutin. The metochion was confirmed in 1319 and 1321, obtaining further immunity privileges. It was bounded by estates of the Bishopric of Kaisaropoli, a metochion of the Great Lavra (the village of Doxampus), a metochion of Karakallou (Dekalista), a metochion of Vatopedi (Zavarnikeia ?), estates of the Modinos family, the Angista river and Lake Strymonas. Greek documents refer to the (ζευγηλατεῖον) Zdravikion metochion as either the Old Zdravikion or the Other Zdravikion to distinguish it from the neighbouring Zdravikion, a large estate of the Modinos family. Most of the Modinos estate, about 3,000 modioi or about 281 hectares in area, extended from Hilandar’s Old Zdravikion in the south and west to the Angista river in the north, but there were fields on the other side of the river as well. Hilandar acquired their land less by gift and more by several purchases in 1320 and 1321. Its metochion in Zdravikion is mentioned two more times, in the general confirmation charters of Emperor Dušan of 1348 and Emperor John Palaiologos of 1351: in the former, still as “the village of Zdravikion both” (село Здравика в"ба), and in the latter, as a single Zdravikion.4

From 1351 all trace of Hilandar’s metochion in Zdravikion is lost until 1481. In those hundred and thirty years that saw many clashes, conquests and the transitional period of Ottoman rule in the Balkans, there is not a single piece of information about it. It may be assumed nonetheless that it continued in existence, though, of course, in a different, adapted form and with considerably smaller incomes. It was one of the so-called “six pieces of land” (altı pare yerleri), one of Hilandar’s six most important privileged metochia from 1481.5

Even back in Byzantine times, the name of the village was recorded in several different ways, which suggests its Slavic origin.6 Ottoman documents usually refer to it as İzdrāvik, İzdrāvīk (prosthetic “I”), less frequently as İzdravnik (İzdrāvnīk) and, in the mid-sixteenth century, a few times as Big İzdravik (İzdrāvīk-i Büzürg, Büyük İzdrāvīk). The village still exists under the

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6 Živojinović, “Hilandarski metoh Zdravik”, 85.
name of Draviskos, on the left side of the former lake, on one of the tributaries of the Angista.\footnote{Topographic map of Greece, 1:50,000 (Army Geographic Service, 1949–1955); P. Bellier et al., Paysages de Macédoine, leurs caractères, leur évolution à travers les documents et les récits des voyageurs, présenté par J. Lefort (Paris: De Bocard, 1986), 260; E. Krüger, Die Siedlungsnamen Griechisch-Makedoniens nach amtlichen Verzeichnissen und Kartenwerken (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1984), 104, 170, 547, 561; Turski dokumenti za istorijata na Makedonija. Opširen popisen deftar za vakafite vo Paša sandžakot od 1568/69 godina, t. XI, vol. I, transl., ed. and comment. by D-r A. Stojanovski (Skopje: Državen arhiv na Republika Makedonija, 2008), 257; HMAT, 1/1a, 1/8a, 7/12, 7/14, 7/16, 7/17, 7/18, 11/5, 6/3, 6/7, 6/9, 7/23). There are documents in which its name is severely distorted or some letters are omitted, such as, e.g., Erzenova, which used to be the cause of misidentification (HMAT, 7/19, summary in V. Boškov and D. Bojanić, “Sultanske povelje iz manastira Hilandara. Regesta i komentar za period 1512–1601”, Hilendarski zbornik 8 (1991), 179).}

In Ottoman times Zdravikion was situated in the Edirne (Pasha) sancak. In the fifteenth century it belonged territorially and administratively to the vilayet of Keşişlik. Towards the end of the century, and from 1491 certainly, it was in the nabiye and kaza of Zihne until the end of the sixteenth century and probably even for some time afterwards.\footnote{Turski dokumenti za istorijata na makedonskiot narod. Opširen popisen deftar od XV vek, IV, transl., ed. and comment. by D-r A. Stojanovski (Skopje: Arhiv na Makedonija, 1978), 304–306, 308, 337, 339; H. Lowry, “Changes in Fifteenth-Century Ottoman Peasant Taxation: the Case Study of Radilofo”, in Continuity and Change in Late Byzantine and Early Ottoman Society, Papers given at a Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks in May 1982, eds. A. Bryer and H. Lowry (Birmingham, England – Washington, USA: Univ. of Birmingham – Dumbarton Oaks, 1986), 36; H. Lowry, “The Fifteenth Century Ottoman Vilayet-i Keşişlik: its Location, Population and Taxation”, in Humanist and Scholar. Essays in Honor of Andreas Tietze, eds. H. W. Lowry and D. Quataert (Istanbul – Washington: The Isis Press – The Institute of Turkish Studies, 1993), 15–26; HMAT, 1/1a, 7/7a, 7/12, 7/15, 6/2, 6/14, 11/5, 12/7/7 etc.} According to the imperial survey registers of 1454/5 and 1478/9, Zdravikion was the largest village in the area with more than 150 almost exclusively Christian households. Even though the metochion of Hilandar almost certainly existed even then, the imperial registers make no mention of it. In 1454/5 the revenue of the village was divided among four timars. The village belonged to timars for much longer afterwards. About 1535 it formed part of the timar of Mustafa, nişancı of the Sublime Porte. In early 1539 the estate was still referred to as the hâss of the nişancı. Then it became an imperial hâss, judging by the firman of 1552. It was at that time (1549–1557) that a large charitable complex, the vakif of sultan Süleyman the Magnificent, was being built in Istanbul. Zdravikion was one of the villages the revenue from which was intended for the maintenance of the famous Süleymaniye mosque and the imperial imaret. In the
Ottoman documents from Hilandar it is referred to as part of Süleyman’s vakıf in 1560, 1575 and 1576.9

The core estate was termed çiftlik and it encompassed three çifts. It was an area of land which could be ploughed by three pairs of oxen (üç çiftleri yürürimus). If the average size of a çiftlik was between 60 and 150 dönüms, its area should not have exceeded 450 dönüms, but a hüccet of 1492 is clear that the estate in Zdravikion was much larger, about 700 dönüms, or a little more than 64 hectares.10

In 1492 the çiftlik was bounded as follows: on the east – by the mülk (private property owned in freehold) of Yaso, son of Belumi (if the reading is correct?) and a ruined church; on the north – by papa Yani’s flourmill and the public road; on the west – by the field of Filato (?), son of Sotir, a boundary stone and the fields of Kosta and Dimo; and on the south – by the public road and the Zdravikion village boundary. The vakıfname of 1569 describes the boundary in less detail: “on one side, the said village [Zdravikion], on one side, the stream (mesil-ma), on one side, the mountain, and on one side, the public road.”11

Literally speaking, the term çiftlik denoted agricultural land. As on the other çiftlikts in the Strymon river valley, the most common crop was wheat. The monks of Hilandar, however, did not grow grain crops only. In early 1490, the large metochion also included vineyards. Between 1542 and 1567 certainly, and probably even before, there were a vineyard (one or more), a flourmill (at least one) and beehives. At the time of the confiscation and redemption of monastic estates in 1568/9, and from then on until 1596, only vineyards and vegetable gardens (bağat ve zemin-i bostan) were recorded in connection with the çiftlik. Unlike the imperial survey registers, the vakıfname of March 1569 makes no mention of vegetable gardens, and records only one two-dönüm vineyard.12

In 1569 there were on the çiftlik a house (ev), a stable, a barn and a hay barn. At least this is what the vakıfname tells us. Information about livestock is scarce, but there must have been some, as suggested by the stable and the barn. As early as 1504 there was a shelter for (water) buffalos (su sıgır), and it is also

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10 HMAT, 7/12, 7/14, 7/15, 7/16, 7/17, 12/7/7, 1/13. Hüccet HMAT 1/1a was partially used in Boškov, “Dokumenti Bajazita II”, 139, 142, 143, 145. Instead of 700 dönüms, as recorded in the hüccet, V. Boškov gave the wrong size of 100 dönüms (!?) (p. 142), which was later quoted in the literature (Živojinović, “Hilandarski metoh Zdravik”, 96).

11 HMAT, 1/13, 11/5.

12 HMAT, 7/44a, 1/2, 1/29a, 6/2, 6/3, 6/7, 6/9a, 6/14, 7/22, 7/23, 7/34, 12/37/57, 6/8, 6/10, 6/11, 6/12, 11/5; T. C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Devlet Arşivleri Başkanı’sı Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı, Osmanlı Arşivi, Tahrir Defteleri 723, 1053; Fotić, Sveta Gora i Hilandar, 390.
known that in 1537 the monks gave up oxes (kara sigir oğuz) in order to restore possession of a vineyard. They raised sheep without having to pay taxes, at least not until 1505.\textsuperscript{13}

All the above concerns the large çiftlik and whatever came with it. Apart from it, Hilandar owned some other real property within the village boundaries of Zdravikion. First of all, a 40-dönüm crop field known as Şahin-oglu’s field. In early January 1496 the monks of Hilandar exchanged their 50-dönüm field in the village of Patos for it. Before the exchange it had been a freehold property (mülk) of the zaim Mahmud Bey, son of Osman Bey. If it had a common border with Hilandar’s large çiftlik at all, they were separated by the public road. The road bounded it on three sides, and the boundary marker on the fourth side was a fig tree.\textsuperscript{14}

Hilandar did not enlarge the estate further until November 1575. The monks purchased a 12-dönüm field, whose boundary was “known to the neighbours”, from a certain papa Drämetõn (?) for 400 akçes. Of course, they also had to pay the title deed tax (resm-i ğapu) to the cabi of the vakıf, Mustafa Çelebi.\textsuperscript{15} The following year the usufruct of a 3-dönüm vegetable garden and the flourmill built by the monk Mardarije was transferred to the monks of Hilandar. The only condition set for them to fulfil by the mütevelli Mehmed and Mustafa Çelebi, emin of the mukata’a of Zihne, in this case probably acting in his capacity as cabi of the vakıf, was the regular annual payment of a 60-akçe for the rent (mukata’a) to the vakıf.\textsuperscript{16}

The obligations of the monks residing on the core metochion in Zdravikion to the “master of the land”, be it the sipahi, the bass emini or the mütevelli of the vakıf, remained unchanged until 1569: instead of the tithe (bedel-i őşür), they paid the fixed annual lump sum of 600 akçes (ber vech-i maktu’). The amount had probably been set as early as 1481 when Wallachian voivode Bassarab III Tepeluş procured some privileges for Hilandar. At his express request, Bayezid II exempted six major Hilandar’s metochia (çiftlikts) from paying the tithe. And that was not all. He cut by half the maktu’ (annual lump sum) set for those estates. This was a precious privilege because the maktu’ for most estates had not changed for at least half a century. Hilandar was the first Athonite monastery on behalf of which a Wallachian voivode requested that its metochia, and all of them, be exempted from paying the tithe (‘őşr). As for the maktu’ being cut by half, no source can confirm such a privilege having been granted to any other Athonite

\textsuperscript{13} HMAT, 12/37/57, 6/8, 6/10, 6/11, 6/12, 11/5, 1/8a, 1/25, 7/9; Fotić, Sveta Gora i Hilandar, 390–391.

\textsuperscript{14} HMAT, 1/4. The document was mentioned in Boškov, “Dokumenti Bajazita II”, 142, 145, where the village name Pato was read as Panik.

\textsuperscript{15} HMAT, 1/58.

\textsuperscript{16} HMAT, 1/60a.
monastery! By the way, tax payment in a fixed lump sum was first mentioned only in a firman of 1503, which is explicit that the amount of 600 akçe is only one half of the due amount, the other half being fully written off. All subsequent sultans, Selim I, Süleyman the Magnificent, at first Selim II as well, confirmed this privilege and did not raise the fixed tax despite a heavy decrease in the value of the akçe. After the “confiscation and redemption affair”, in January 1569, the payment of taxes in a lump sum was supposed to be abolished and the monks subject to paying the tithe, the salariye and all other taxes like the rest of the re’aya. Other examples show, however, that this measure was not strictly implemented and that lump-sum tax payment was kept here and there. As far as the metochion in Zdravikion is concerned, documents cannot confirm either.

The “masters of the land”, ever dissatisfied with such low taxes, kept trying to introduce the tithe, sometimes asking permission from the Porte or from the kadi of Zihne, but usually without asking anyone, but instead acting wilfully and enforcing coercion. Owing to firmans and other official documents that the monks of Hilandar kept with care and produced as evidence in court, they always won their case. Sometimes without any difficulty, sometimes only after years of haggling and fighting against intrigues. At least, that is what the surviving documents are telling us.

The earliest surviving document pertaining to one such case is a hüccet of 1490. Sipahis complained to the sultan, and he ordered that the case be looked into and that both parties submit evidence. The kadıs of Serres and Zihne confirmed the monks’ privileges. Two years later the sipahıs Köçi and 'Ali worked out a clever way to extort the tithe if not from all then from most of Hilandar’s crop fields. In the fundamental and one of the most important fifteenth-century orders of the sultan, the one issued in 1481, privileges had been granted to “six pieces of their land” (altı pare yerleri), among which the estate in Zdravikion figured as one piece. The timar-holders chose to bypass the facts by interpreting the phrase “one piece of land” as meaning one field. Although well aware that according to the imperial survey register the phrase referred to the whole çiftlik, they manipulated the factual situation and wilfully collected the tithe from all fields but one. The case was brought before the Imperial Divan but the interested parties kept interpreting the sultan’s decree in their own favour. When the monk Grigorije, son of Sava, submitted to the kadi court of Zihne evidence for the exact boundary of the çiftlik subject to the privileges, the sipahıs defended themselves by claiming that they had not known its exact size. A commission composed of the kadi of Zihne, mevlana Emir Ishak, and four sipahıs from near-

17 HMAT, 1/1a, 1/2, 1/24, 1/26, 1/29a, 6/1, 6/2, 6/3, 6/7, 6/9a, 6/14, 7/2, 7/12, 7/14, 7/15, 7/16, 7/19, 7/22, 7/23, 7/25, 7/27, 7/34, 12/7/7, 12/7/18. The amount of 604 akçe occurs two times, most probably by scribal error (HMAT, 1/26a, 7/17).

18 HMAT, 1/2; Fotić, Sveta Gora i Hilandar, 392.
by villages made an on-site inspection. They finally established that the monks of Hilandar were in the right, and the kadi ruled that the timar-holders must return the unlawfully collected tithe.\textsuperscript{19}

When, in 1506, the monks turned some of their crop fields into vineyards, vegetable gardens and gardens, the sipahis tried to collect the tenth of the produce at least from that land. However, the sultan ruled that the change of land use within the çiftlik of Hilandar did not interfere with the prescribed lump sum in any way, and banned the sipahis from extracting more than the amount laid down in the imperial survey register. It seems that the sipahis, motivated by the planting of new vineyards and vegetable gardens, were not ready to give up their intention easily. Thus, in 1513, upon the accession of Selim I, the monks renewed their right to lump sum payment and procured the order forbidding the sipahis to disturb them on that account. They did the same in 1520. In 1529 they managed to obtain a general decree forbidding the sipahis to demand more than prescribed, but it is not clear whether the reason for their action was the metochion in Zdravikion or some other of the remaining five metochia that enjoyed the same privileges.\textsuperscript{20}

The monks had much more trouble coping with the nişancı Mustafa after their land within the village boundaries of Zdravikion became his hass. In 1535 this prominent court official managed to have the privileges enjoyed by the metochion revoked by the Porte and the tithe imposed. But the monks did not give up. A year later, despite the fact that the nişancı had the sultan’s decree, the monks Nikifor and Zaharije proved the monastery’s rights at the kadi’s court of Zihne by submitting as evidence the earlier orders (hükm)s issued by Bayezid, Selim and Süleyman. Based on the kadi’s hüccet, they sent representatives to Istanbul together with those of the well-known monastery of Kosaniçe (Panagia Ikosifinissa), whose property rights in Zdravikion had also been injured. Namely, the monastery of Kosaniçe had a çiftlik, a vineyard and a church in Zdravikion. The result of their joint efforts was the restoration of the earlier privileges. But the nişancı’s men did not give up either: they demanded the tithe again, in 1538 and 1539, but, as it turned out, both times without success.\textsuperscript{21}

The troubles with the “masters of the land” extracting more than the prescribed lump sum were the reason that the monks of Hilandar turned to the Porte in 1542, to the kadi of Zihne in 1545, and again to the sultan in 1551, 1552, 1560, 1562 and 1567. In all these cases their privileges were confirmed,
even when Zdravikion became an imperial hass, and then a vakıf village of Süleyman the Magnificent’s great imperial vakıf in Istanbul.22

It was not only sipahi that caused the monks troubles. As in any other metochion of Hilandar’s, it was immediate neighbours that sometimes attempted to grab some of its land. The earliest such case was an encroachment upon the public road that the monks of Hilandar used to fetch water. In 1491 the neighbouring timar-holder Tatar Mahmud turned the public road and, as it seems, a part of Hilandar’s crop field into his yard. It was only a sultan’s order that enabled the monks to reclaim their land and the right to use the road as the common good.23

Much later, in 1533, a certain Grdan and a few other Christians cast a covetous eye on some of Hilandar’s land. To prevent damage and disturbance, the monks were forced to seek protection from the sultan.24

Only a few months later, another dispute arose, this time with the Zdravikion villagers Yani, son of Paraskevo, Paraskevo, son of Dimo, and Kosta, son of Paraskevo. They had planted a 100-dönüm vineyard on a crop field of Hilandar’s without permission, using the land unlawfully until January 1534 when the monks forced them to pull out of their land based on the imperial order and the resulting kadi’s büccet.25

In 1537 the monks were in a dispute with a certain Todor, a villager of Zdravikion, who had been using the monastery’s vineyard for twenty years. They were restored to the possession of their vineyard, but as a result of a settlement. They had to give Todor two oxen as compensation for the effort he had put into embedding the poles.26

There were also cases of power abuse by specially assigned imperial officials. Thus, in 1589 they demanded, contrary to custom, that the monks hand over grain surpluses, claiming that they were selling them, which was forbidden. The monks kept proving that they used the grain for their own needs only.27

The Ottoman documents preserved in the archive of the Hilandar Monastery give us a picture of the ways in which its monks struggled to preserve their privileges and protect their large metochion at Zdravikion. This paper presented different arguments they used in the attempt to extort the payment of the tithe and the monks’ firm attitude in defending their rights before the kadi’s court and the Imperial Divan. Monks were able to prove their rights because they consci-

22 HMAT, 7/22, 1/29a, 7/25, 7/23, 7/27, 12/7/18, 7/34.
23 HMAT, 7/5; Fotić, Sveta Gora i Hilandar, 393.
24 HMAT, 7/18.
26 HMAT, 1/25; Fotić, Sveta Gora i Hilandar, 393.
27 HMAT, 7/44a.
entiously kept, sometimes for centuries, all the necessary documents relating to
their land possessions, producing them as evidence in court proceedings.

The history of Hilandar’s metochion in Zdravikion can be followed in Ot-
toman documents continuously from 1481 to 1589. After that year there is no
further news about it. It does not figure in an extract from the 1598 imperial
survey register and neither do the other Hilandar’s metochia in the Strymon
region, except the one for Serres. The answer to the question as to what hap-
pened to Hilandar’s metochia in the Strymon region will have to wait until new
sources come to light.

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28 HMAT, 12/12/15.


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