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Community Relations in the Ottoman Balkans of the Suleymanic Age: The Case of Avlonya (1520–1568)

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Abstract: This study examines the relations between an exiled Jewish diaspora and the surrounding Muslim communities in the significant Ottoman Balkan city of Avlonya between 1520 and 1568. Having been expelled from Spain (1492) and Portugal (1496), numerous Sephardic Jews settled in Avlonya in the early sixteenth century, integrating into Ottoman social structures and making notable contributions to both the economic and demographic landscape of the city. This study examines the extent of the Jewish community's assimilation into Avlonya and Ottoman society in the immediate aftermath of its arrival, assessing its pathways to integration, their limitations, and the dynamics of coexistence and mutual trust. It posits that in a relatively short period, the integration of Avlonya's Sephardic Jews into both the city and society proved to be a positive success from the perspective of the state and the community itself. Evidence in support of this assertion is found in an examination of the *tahrir defters* and sharia court records (the primary sources of data for this research). The depth of the findings and the variety of research questions posed mean that this study has employed a mixed-methods approach, allowing for both quantitative and qualitative evaluations.



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1. Introduction

The end of the 15th century marked the beginning of a new phase in Sephardic Jewish history. The long and peaceful coexistence between Jews and other religious groups in Spain had come to an end, forcing these communities once again to embark on migration. The eradication of Spain's last Muslim presence further to the Reconquista movement had brought with it major transformation, with significant implications for Jewish and other non-Christian communities. The impact of Spain's establishment of religious unity in 1492 was immediate (Şeyban 2010, pp. 85–86, 128–29; Lewis 1996): the country's Christian administration sought to align its territorial integrity with religious unity (Lewis 1996), thus demanding the conversion of Jews to Christianity or their departure from Spanish territory. Sephardic Jews thus found themselves on migratory routes headed towards Ottoman lands, as they had from many other parts of Europe (Lewis 1996). Jews migrating to the Ottoman Empire settled within a geographical area as widespread as Istanbul, Thessaloniki, Bursa, Edirne, Manisa, Jerusalem (Holy Land), Gallipoli, Tokat, and Amasya, as well as Wallachia, Bogdan, Rumelia Province, Cyprus, and the Aegean and Mediterranean islands (Shaw 1999, p. 309; Braude 1991; Jennings 1993; Jennings 2011). Here, Sephardic Jews from Spain and Portugal found themselves joining Romaniot and Ashkenazi Jewish populations that had formed part of the Ottoman Empire since the first centuries, increasing the social visibility of Jews and raising their profile and influence on state and society (Ruderman 2010; Rozen 2011, pp. 314–15).

Sephardic Jewish migration to the Ottoman Empire significantly contributed to its demographic and economic structure (Güner 2007, pp. 55–56). French traveler Nicolas de Nicolay stated that Jews controlled trade and monetary affairs in the East because of their ability to bring various goods from all over the world by sea and land (Nikolay 2014, p. 286). Those emigrating from Spain served the state in various fields, including trade, medicine, and diplomacy, prominent examples including Dona Gracia Mendes and Josef Nasi (Kurt 2023; Arbel 1995). In return for such services, Jews were offered relative favor by the Ottoman authorities, thus benefitting from significant economic development in the 15th and 16th centuries, as well as being allowed to practice their crafts freely (Rozen 2002; Araz 2010; J. P. Cohen 2014; Shaw 1991, 1999; Eryılmaz 1992; Ercan 2001; Braude 1982; Basel 2004; Barkey 2008; M. R. Cohen 1994; Masters 2001; Ben-Naeh 2008).

The Ottoman Empire, with its vast territory and multicultural structure, was home to a wide variety of different ethnic and religious groups living a relatively peaceful coexistence. Within this multilayered structure of the empire, the important Balkan city of Avlonya (Today Vlorë) became a refuge for the exiled Sephardic Jews of the late 1400s. While it is difficult to determine the course of Jewish migration routes and their exact entry points to Ottoman lands, it is generally accepted that most Jewish immigration occurred through Ottoman ruled ports on the shores of the Adriatic Sea. Avlonya and Drac were two important such Adriatic entry points. Jews traveling through Italy stopped in Avlonya before going on to follow old trade routes to Thessaloniki, Edirne, Istanbul and other major cities in Western Anatolia. This rendered the city of Avlonya an important center for Jewish migration and community (Veinstein 2009, pp. 677–83; Emecen 1996, pp. 97–112). Indeed, Avlonya's existence as one of the first stops on early 16th century Jewish migration routes makes it a rare venue from which first period reflections and traces of Jewish migration can be traced—hence its selection for examination in this study. Moreover, Avlonya is important for this study as it was the military and administrative center of the sanjak, the Ottoman city administration unit in the second half of the 15th century (Veinstein 1987, p. 786).

A further reason for selecting Avlonya as the subject for this research was the desire to test the existing literature on Ottoman Jews. With a few exceptions, the literature generally focuses on Jewish communities living in large cities, thus premising its claims and theories on city-dwelling Jews (Ben-Naeh 2014, pp. 177–97; Rozen 2002; Karagedikli 2014, pp. 305–7; Hacker 2017, pp. 831–63; Emecen 1997; Molho 1993, pp. 75–89). Jews who settled and lived in small peripheral Ottoman towns like Avlonya are thus neglected in the literature. Therefore, understanding and depicting the Jewish community of Avlonya better not only helps us to test the generality of existing claims but also offers a new perspective on the Jewish presence in different regions and its relations with the Ottoman system.

This study offers an in-depth examination of the relations between the Muslim and Jewish communities in Avlonya. In doing so, it focuses on the integration of Sephardic Jews after their migration to Avlonya and the effects of this process on Jewish–Muslim relations. In this context, the contributions of the Jewish community to Ottoman society will be analyzed, together with how the social boundaries faced by this community were determined. This will facilitate both a better understanding of intercommunity relations in Avlonya, as well as the processes by which Jews integrated locally, the social boundaries set for them by the Ottoman administration, and the social and cultural structure of the Ottoman Empire more broadly.

Avlonya's Jewish community successfully integrated into state and society, with a substantial presence in the city center and an active involvement in trade. The visibility of this community in commercial networks and their inclusion as witnesses in court records, collectively highlight their assimilation as Ottoman. This study will address how this assimilation took place and how it affected Jewish–Muslim relations, arguing that Sephardic Jewish integration was overall positively reflected in such relations, a claim supported and analyzed in detail using various Ottoman sources.

Quality and diversity of sources are important factors in this research. Although Avlonya's *tahrir defters* (tax farm books) offer detailed information on the Jewish community, they are in fact the only sources to provide information on the migration and settlement of Jews to the Ottoman state. No further information on Jewish immigration can be found in other Ottoman archives or chronicles. Thus, the *tahrir defters* are the main source of information on population data, living areas, tax records, and genealogies for Avlonya's Jewish community. The second principal source of data for this study is the Avlonya sharia register—the only such registry for the city. This register offers some insight on the social, economic, legal, commercial, and intercommunity relations between the Jewish and other communities in Avlonya, as reflected in the Avlonya qadi court. This renders Avlonya's sharia registry a unique source of data. Indeed, another important aspect of Avlonya's qadi registry is that Jews are listed by the court as *shuhūd al-hāl* (testimony of witnesses at the sharia court), thus suggesting that they were recognized by Ottoman society and judicial authorities as trustworthy individuals.

The depth and diversity of these two main sources provide an important basis for supporting the main claims of this study and answering the research questions. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the sources will thus allow us to explore the socio-economic and legal aspects of Muslim–Jewish relations. This mixed-methods approach will broaden this study's scope, providing a more comprehensive understanding and enhancing the credibility of the results.

In this framework, the present study unfolds over three parts. The first part discusses the migration and settlement of Sephardic Jews in the city of Avlonya, including population changes. The second part focuses on the activities of these migrants to show their integration into the city. Finally, the becoming Ottoman (Ottomanization) of the Jewish community is examined as perhaps the most prominent indicator of integration, using examples of Jewish Hayo and the Jews of Avlonya being recorded as *shuhūd al-hāl* in court cases.

This study aims to increase the visibility of the Jews of Avlonya, located far from the Ottoman capital, and to contribute to the scant literature on this demographic. In doing so, it seeks to advance new perspectives not yet offered by other scholarly work focused on larger Jewish communities in locales such as Edirne, Thessaloniki, and Istanbul.

2. Settling in the City: Sephardic Jews in Avlonya

The first contact of Jews with the Ottoman Empire dates back to the establishment of the state itself. As the Ottoman Empire expanded, so too did the visibility of Jews as part of its population (Özdemir 2019, p. 67). The Romaniot Jewish community, for example, maintained their presence in the region following the conquest of cities like Bursa and Edirne (Tokel 2010, p. 5). After this period, Jews expelled from Hungary or fleeing persecution from King Charlemagne VI of France also settled in Edirne (Tokel 2010, p. 5). During the reign of Mehmed I (Çelebi), some Jewish communities from Europe were settled in different parts of the state, thus further increasing the Jewish population. The reign of Murad II, between 1421 and 1425, saw certain Ashkenazi Jewish groups native to Central Europe migrate to Ottoman lands (Özdemir 2019, p. 67; Oslon 1977, pp. 119–44). When Mehmed II conquered Istanbul in 1453, he made an agreement with the city's Jewish community, according Jews various privileges under the pact. This agreement was driven by Mehmed II's desire to turn Istanbul into a cosmopolitan city using the talents of Jews, amongst others, as previous sultans had done. In this context, Jews from Greece, Macedonia, Albania, and Anatolia were invited to Istanbul to secure the state's vitality in the realm of economics and other areas, thus imbuing it with the identity of an empire (Rozen 2002; İnalçık 2002, pp. 3–14).

In 1492, the fall of the Emirate of Granada saw the Kingdom of Castile–Aragon reconquer Spain with the Reconquista movement. Immediately after this, Spanish Jews were subjected to forced emigration with the exile edict of Fernando and Isabella. The center of gravity for the Jewish world in exile thus shifted eastward to the safe lands of Poland and the Ottoman Empire. During this period, Jewish communities were forced

to emigrate from Spain and Portugal to Ottoman lands, settling in Thessaloniki, Edirne, Sofia, Avlonya, and the cities of Western Anatolia (Mazower 2006, pp. 46–52; Quesada 1991, pp. 55–77; Karagedikli 2011).

Jewish Population in Avlonya Between 1506 and 1520

One of the cities in which Sephardic Jews subject to forced migration settled was the Sanjak of Avlonya, a city located in today's Albania on the northernmost part of the Adriatic. Avlonya had been notable for its commercial importance since ancient times. Since the Roman Empire to the Ottoman conquest (and its consequent designation as Turkish), Avlonya was a key location on the Via Egnatia (Zachariadou 1996; Veinstein 1996, pp. 217–25; Duka 2009, pp. 261–71; Kiel 1991, pp. 118–20). In settling Jews in this region, therefore, the Ottoman authorities could maintain the vitality of its trade, as had been the case in Thessaloniki, Sofia, and Edirne.

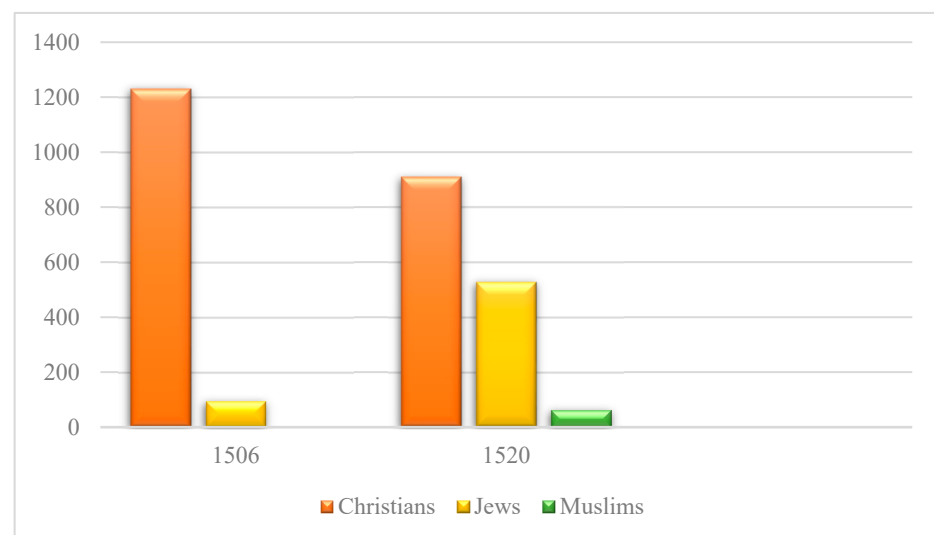
Ottoman sources do not mention whether there was a Jewish community in the city before its conquest. However, Gilles states in his study that the city was home to a small Jewish community before the Turkish conquest (Veinstein 1987, p. 783). In Avlonya's *icmal defter* (summary tax farm book) No. 34 for the year 1506, it is clear that Jews from Spain and Portugal were settled in Avlonya city center, which consisted of 665 Christian and 97 Jewish households (BOA, T.T.d. 34, Leaf: 2–3 Page: 3–5; Loker 1989, pp. 283–313). Since the defter was kept as a summary in *icmal defter* status, it does not contain any information on the quarters in which the Jews lived in 1506. However, it can be inferred that the quarters where the Jews settled between 1506 and 1520 did not undergo a radical change over time.

In 1520, Jews continued to live in their own quarters in the center of the city. Notably, records of T.T.d. 99 indicate that Jews first settled in *Eski Ipsiyonat* quarter, with all 100 households comprising that quarter being Jewish (BOA, T.T.d. 99, Leaf: 7 Page: 11). Certainly, the T.T.d. 34 and 99 defters appears to record various Jewish households' names, including Avram veled-i Musa, Şimon veled-i Havari, Manol veled-i Pal, İsak veled-i Musa, Avraham veled-i Roso, and Yahuda veled-i Behamol. The most populous Jewish quarter in Avlonya is the *Şeyamcalto* quarter. Here, approximately 128 Jewish families resided (BOA, T.T.d. 99, Leaf: 8 Page: 13), including household names like Avraham veled-i Dalya, İsak veled-i Setrika, Yahuda veled-i Musa, Mako veled-i Maçe, Slomo veled-i Yahuda, Avraham veled-i Mitami, Payer veled-i Hayim, Hayim veled-i Musa, and İsak veled-i Şinakol. Information about the origin of the Jews living in the region is also found in the defter of T.T.d. 99: Jews coming from Portugal, for example, were recorded as "*Cemaat-i Portugale Yahudiyan*". According to the *tahrir defter*, the Portuguese Jewish community, consisting of approximately 77 households, was engaged in trade and had been granted certain privileges (BOA, T.T.d. 99, Leaf: 7, Page: 12). It is understood that the Jews in the *Selmo veled-i Harun* quarter of Avlonya were composed of Jews who had been expelled from Portugal and had first taken refuge the city of Otranto in Italy. The Jewish population of this quarter was recorded as comprising 56 households (See Table 1; BOA, T.T. d. 99, Leaf: 8, Page: 13 ("*Mahalle-i Selmo veled-i Harun ann Cemaat-i Yahudiyan-ı Otranto*").

Religious demographics between 1506 and 1520 are compared in Figure 1. In 1506, approximately 86% of the city center's population was Christian and 14% was Jewish. In the 1520, the *Mufasssal Avlonya Sanjak Tahrir Defter* (detailed tax farm book) No. 99 offered comprehensive information about Portuguese and Spanish Jews. Compared to the previous defter, the Jewish population of Avlonya had increased almost six-fold. In addition to 910 Christian households, 528 Jewish households were recorded. In 1520, the population of the city reached around 7910, a 2.5-fold increase compared to 1506 (BOA, T.T.d. Defter: 34 and 99). The Jewish community—which had made up on 14% of the city center's population in 1506—had, within 14 years, increased to comprise approximately 35% of Avlonya's populace. This may evidence that the city continued to receive Jewish immigrants over the years, that these arrivals took up permanent residence to become inhabitants rather than outsiders, and that the state must therefore have provided conditions enabling such growth.

Table 1. Population of Jews in Avlonyan quarters and communities in 1520¹.

Quarters	Households
Şeyamcalto	128
Eski İpsiyonat	100
Aşçalı	19
Kalavres	15
Yahudi İsak	17
Mayta veled-i Musa	41
Kazleşet	9
Mezsimeztik?	27
İsak veled-i Setrika	13
Boska veled-i Musa veled-i Selmo	12
Communities	Households
Selmo veled-i Harun ann Cemaat-i Otranto	56
Cemaat-i Portugale Yahudiyan	14
Cemaat-i Portugale Yahudiyan	63
Total	528²

**Figure 1.** Religious demographics of Avlonya city center between 1506 and 1520.

The demographic graph for the years 1506–1520 shows that Muslims did not live in Avlonya's city center. In fact, in 1506, there were no Muslims in either the city center or in Avlonya's peripheral villages, though by 1520, Muslims had observably resettled in the city's periphery. Thus, relations between Jews and Muslims in urban life can be considered provincial rather than centralized. By 1520, the Muslim population in the city's provincial villages was recorded as 64 households. As shown by graph 1, the main elements of the city consisted of the Christian and Jewish populations. Proportionally, Muslims in the provinces make up only 4 per cent of the population compared to Christians and Jews. The available information on the settlement of the Jews in Avlonya after their migration reflects Ottoman settlement policies, as well as the characteristics described in the general literature. As a matter of fact, the Jews of Avlonya gained notable visibility in the city center twenty to thirty years after their migration due to their increased population. This situation appears to accord with Ottoman settlement policy as applied to Jews in Western Anatolian cities and also supports the literature on the settlement of Seferad Jews (Emecen 1996, pp. 97–112; Emecen 1997; Tokel 2010, p. 8; BOA, T.T.d. 49. 7–8/14–15; Manisa Şer'iyye Sicilleri, Leaf. 7, Page. 118–19).

3. Being Part of the City: The Economic Activities of Jews and Their Relations with Muslims

The knowledge, experience, and skills brought by Jewish migrants from Spain and Portugal saw them reach eminent positions within the Ottoman palace and economy in a very short period. During the 15th and 16th centuries, Jewish subjects could be found in all domestic, foreign, land, and maritime trade sectors across the empire (Tokel 2010). Moreover, in the regions in which they settled, Jews formed groups engaged in economic activities that revitalized the local economy through business networks in areas such as merchantry-making, small-scale craftsmanship, brokerage, and textile production. For example, in 16th century Thessaloniki, the region's Jewish community was engaged in maritime trade. This participation played an active role in reviving Thessaloniki's own maritime commerce via the city's important ports (Seferova 2022, pp. 563–80). The activities of Avlonya's Jews in the maritime trade of 1520 are also reflected in the records: during these years, a special revenue item reserved for the sultan was *Pişkeş-i Dalyan-ı Yahudiyân*. Whilst in Persian means “gift, present”, in the Ottoman Empire, it referred to the gifts presented to the sultan, grand vizier, other statesmen, or princes from lower authorities. *Pişkeş* revenue for the sultan from the activities of a sloop operated by Jews in Avlonya harbor was recorded as being 8800 *akca* (Ottoman coin) per year (BOA, T.T.d. 99, Leaf: 8, Page: 14. -Mukataat-ı Pişkeş-i Dalyan-ı Yahudiyân Fi Sene: 8800, Also see Karaca 2007). Jewish activity in the harbor was not limited to Avlonya. The Jews of Avlonya were also actively involved in the Adriatic coastal trade. The most prominent examples of these commercial activities are those with Venice. These commercial relations ranged from buying and selling goods to establishing partnerships (Veinstein 1987, p. 786). For example, a Jew named Ishak Abraham sold 323 lambskins to the Venetians. As for commercial partnerships, a Jew named Abraham was involved in the wheat trade with Venice through the network of relations between Sinan Reis, Ali Voyvoda, and Piyale Pasha. At this point, the main items of trade of the Jews of Avlonya were the sale of wheat and wine (Veinstein 1987, pp. 794–800).

A preferred occupation in the Jewish community was small-scale craftsmanship. In Avlonya, Jews were engaged in trades like weaving, butchery, and cheese-making. For example, in Avlonya's qadi registry of 9 April 1567, Abraham Jew, who worked as a butcher in Avlonya, was found to have sold meat at a lower price than Ottoman-set prices. There is no information about the sanction imposed on Abraham for doing so due to a lack of information about the outcome of the case, though it can be assumed that the penalty of reprimand or humiliation (*tāzir*) was usually imposed in such cases (İSAM, H. 974–975 Tarihli 20 Numaralı Avlonya Kadı Sicili, AKS, p. 49a/4). Indeed, Jews were also observably engaged in butchery in Istanbul, the empire's capital. Sheep brought by the *Celepkeşans* (meat contractors) from Anatolia and Rumelia were bought by Jews and sold to other groups after allocating an amount of meat to their own butchers. Butchery, which was not a lucrative profession for Christians or Muslims due to *Narh* policies (officially fixed price) implemented by the Ottoman state, turned into a business that increased Jewish welfare due to the fact that Jews were engaged in it in small numbers and were not obliged to sell at state-mandated prices (Rozen 2002).

Jews were also influential in the food sector, making a living and increasing their welfare by selling food in various cities of the empire. On 14 April 1568, for example, Avlonya's records indicate that İsak Jew, a local cheesemaker, was allowed to sell 150 *dirhams* of *Kaşkaval* cheese produced by himself for 1 *akca* (AKS, p. 57b/6). In the 16th century, Manisa Jews produced and sold wine; sold products such as *pestil* (fruit leather), molasses, and vinegar from grapes to foreign merchants; and played an important role in shipping such produce to Istanbul, contributing the palace's food provision (Emecen 1997).

One of the most important of Jewish professions of the era under examination was textile management. Jews played an active role in this sector, especially in raw material terminating, processing, and selling. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the Jewish community of Edirne was part of the Thessaloniki-centered textile industry. Approximately 60,000 woolen

fabrics were produced and woven in Edirne (Tokel 2010, p. 78). At this time, Jews who came to Manisa from Thessaloniki established a weaving industry and continued their economic activities there by producing relatively high-quality fabrics (though not as high quality as Thessaloniki's) (Emecen 1997, p. 80). The situation was no different in the empire's capital: in Istanbul, Jews brought soft dense *angora* wool, purchased from the Jews of Ankara and European operators, and processed it in the capital (Rozen 2002). Looking to Avlonya, 16th century records indicate that Jews were engaged in silk weaving and trade: for example, on 27 June 1567, Yakov Jew brought silk to the city and agreed with Kiro veled-i Petko to make fine silk for a fee of 2000 *akca* (AKS, p. 85b/3).

The 16th century saw intensive commercial exchange between Muslims and Jews living in Avlonya. Borrowing, lending, and real estate sales records offer important examples of such activity. Avlonya Muslims borrowed money from the city's Jews and Jews likewise borrowed money from their Muslim neighbors. Community members from each side also bought and sold real estate from one another. For example, in a document dated 13 March 1545, a woman named Döne bint Benovite, an Avalonyan Jew, sold both her own shop in the Jewish Bazaar and the shops of Grabolad veled-i Londar and Papa Vasil (whose borders were demarcated by a public right of way) to Zaim Sinan Çelebi for 2100 *akca* in cash. This sum was to be annexed to the Mustafa Paşa Foundation in Avlonya (BOA, TSMA, No: 4985/1, 706-22). In another example, Yako, guardian to the children of Niko Jew, who died in Avlonya on 5 March 1567, reported that his deceased brother had borrowed 4000 *akca* from Zaim Sinan Çelebi during his lifetime. The records indicate that the family pledged their houses in Kasım Paşa Quarter as security for payment of their debts (AKS, p. 26b/4). Finally, in a record dated 1 January 1568, Hızır from the village of Plaşe in Avlonya came to court to declare that Yasef Jew had paid his debt of 4750 *akca* (AKS, p. 127b/22).

There are also records of various commercial exchanges between the Muslim and Jewish populations, including the lease and sale of real estate. For example, records dated 6 March 1567 indicate that Mustafa bin Hasan and his business partner, Dimo veled-i Giz, had borrowed 21 *keyl* (Ottoman weight unit) of wheat from Yasef Jew. After Yasef's death, the two men had come to court to make a declaration to Yasef's guardian, Yakop, that they would pay their debts within 5 months (AKS, p. 32b/4). Further, on 6 April 1567, Sefer bin Abdullah came to court and sold his house to Musa Jew for 450 *akca* (AKS, p. 49a/5). In another example, on 8 April 1567, Abdülkerim bin Durmuş came to court to declare that he had sold his 64 acres of land in Panaya Karyesi to Ismael, Zoti, Yani, Yorgi Jews for 1030 *akca* (AKS, p. 51b/5, Figure A2).

The above records suggest that there was always trade between Muslims and Jews and, notably, that such activities appear to have passed smoothly. This indicates that Jewish and Muslim residents in Avlonya lived together harmoniously, with Jews living as they wished within the social and economic boundaries set by the state in Islamic lands. Ottoman lands thus appear to have offered a safe harbor for Jews, with the state utilizing their talents in every field whilst protecting and caring for Jewish inhabitants of the empire by creating space for them, to the benefit of the Muslim population. For example, on 24 March 1566, a *ferman* (edict) was sent to the *sancakbeys* (banner commander) of the cities of Ohrid, Ilbasan, and Avlonya, stating that the state needed saltpeter but could not deliver it due to the severe winter. A suitable place for saltpeter processing was found in Avlonya and two masters were sent by the state to immediately begin saltpeter processing, though this work was left unfinished due to their inability to complete it. A letter was thus sent from Avlonya stating that there was a Jewish master in the city who could also process saltpeter, and a decree made that saltpeter should be purchased for 280 *akca* per kg and processed by the Jewish master (BOA, A.{DVNSMHM.d..., Bâb-ı Asafî/Divan-ı Hümayun Sicilleri/Mühimme Defterleri, 5-1299).

Jews and Muslims in the city of Avlonya were active in quite different professions. While the Jews, hailing from a more urban-centered society, concentrated more on finance, trade, and (partly) crafts, the city's Muslims focused on other trades, like animal husbandry, barbering, and shoemaking (Table 2).

Table 2. Professions of Jewish and Muslim residents of Avlonya in 1567–1568.

Craftmanship	
Jewish	Muslims
Butcher	Butcher
Merchant	Merchant
Real Estate Buying and Selling	Farrier
Saltpeter Master	Culinary
Textile Weaving	Saddlemaker
Usury	Barber
Fishery Management	Candlestick Maker
	Calligrapher
	Clockmaker
	Rug Weaver
	Cotton Fluffer
	Bath Attendant
	Stallholder
	Shoemaker
	Shepherd

Reference: İSAM, Avlonya Kadi Registry No. 20 dated 974–975 AH.

4. Becoming Ottoman: Jews of Avlonya as Reliable Subjects of the Sultan

Sephardic Jews who came to Ottoman lands encountered a new legal order and status here. Their acceptance and settlement saw them assigned the status of *dhimmi* or *dhimma*³ under the Ottoman state's Islamic laws (Cahen 1991, pp. 227–31). Although this status allowed Jews to operate visibly in many fields, such as politics, social life, and trade, it also required them adhere to the social and legal boundaries set by Islamic law. The fact of their inclusion in the economic, social, commercial, and intercommunity life of the city under Ottoman law so soon after their arrival indicates that Avlonya's Jews quickly adopted this new order, built their lives accordingly and acquired a new Ottoman sense of belonging. The scope, implementation, and flexibility of the social and legal boundaries of this belonging can be traced through Avlonya's sharia register. Here, the lists of *shuhūd al-hāl*, especially, show that the Jews of Avlonya eschewed a migration mindset, joining the Ottoman system by adopting an Ottoman sense of belonging. In this respect, the Ottoman system had the capacity to accommodate people from different cultures, religions, and legal orders and to maximize the benefits these people offered the Empire whilst ensuring that they conducted their lives in the most appropriate way.

A clear example of this can be found in the *Arvanid Sanjak Tahrir Defter*, dated 1431/1432 (İnalçık 2008, pp. 69–72). These *defter* records that the village of Male-Harsili in the Kanina District of Avlonya was held as a *timar* (benefice) by “Hayo Jew”. In particular, the phrase *Kadimden berü yeyügelir*⁴ suggests that Hayo had held this place as a *timar* since before the Ottoman conquest. Hayo's status was declared with the annotation that he had *Elinde Padişah Beratı* (İnalçık 1987, p. 43).⁵ A Jew's possession and cultivation of land in accordance with the phrase *yeyügelmek*, and his entrustment with ensuring the security of the region during wartime or as an escort is quite different from the above-mentioned issue and constitutes a rare example in the literature. Whilst Jews undertook various vocations, Hayo was notably a military officer, ready for duty whenever the state needed him. Within the Ottoman Empire and beyond, the granting of land to Jews and their employment as military personnel appears to have been rarely, if ever, chronicled in the 15th century.

The example of Hayo, who belonged to the military class and held a privileged position in the Ottoman system, is a rare and striking example of a Jew's adoption of Ottoman belonging. So, how else did the concept of Ottoman belonging, i.e., becoming Ottoman, manifest itself among Sephardic Jews who immigrated to Avlonya?

Avlonya's Jewry led active commercial and social lives. The Jewish community obeyed the rules of the empire and lived in peace and harmony with other communities in the city. Avlonya's qadi register not only offers insights into this harmony and stability, but also shows that the Jewish community, whilst retaining its religious identity, was not resistant

to the Ottoman order, thus becoming Ottoman and counting itself among Ottoman subjects. The best examples of this can be seen in the *shuhūd al-hāl* sections in court records.

In Ottoman courts, witnesses on the subject matter of a case were called *udûl-ı musulimîn/shuhūd al-'udûl*, whereas witnesses who testified in a case were called *shuhūd al-hāl* (Erünsal 2018, pp. 1–49). *Shuhūd al-hāl* were crucial to the publicity of cases and their number varied depending on the nature and needs of the case at hand. Since Ottoman society was composed largely of Muslims, most cases in qadi courts related to Muslims, who usually therefore comprised the *shuhūd al-hāl* for such cases. Other religious communities were generally expected to turn to their own authorities for the resolution of disputes. However, Ottoman legal understanding also allowed non-Muslims to apply to the Qadi courts (Aydin 2007; Aydin 2003; Ortaylı 2001, pp. 69–73). As such, whilst *shuhūd al-hāl* usually consisted of Muslims, in cases where a plaintiff or defendant was Jewish or non-Muslim, it was possible to see names from these non-Muslim communities in the *shuhūd al-hāl* for those cases (Taş 2008, pp. 25–44).

Accordingly, non-Muslims, including Jews, can also be found in the *shuhūd al-hāl* section of cases in Avlonya's qadi register. This highlights that different religious groups resident in Avlonya were prepared to appear before the court as *shuhūd al-hāl* in each other's cases. Whilst in cases between Muslims and non-Muslims no Jewish or non-Muslim name would be included as *shuhūd al-hāl*, where no Muslim was involved in a case, only a non-Muslim could appear in the *shuhūd al-hāl* section (Figure A1).

Those qadi register cases disclosing Jewish names as *shuhūd al-hāl* concerned commercial activities, inheritance, debt, receivables, and payables, in accordance with the position and socio-economic status of the city's Jewry. Such relations saw those Jews engaged in intensive economic and commercial activities with Muslims and non-Muslims in the city apply to the qadi court on relevant issues (AKS, p. 2b /4; 7b/5; 9b/5; 11b/1; 20b/5; 21a/3; 26a/3; 31b/5; 34a/3; 39b/4; 45a/1; 49a/5; 51a/2; 51b/5; 134b/3; 139b/2; 158b/2; 168b/2; 127b/2).

One example of a case between Jews themselves that had led to an application for remedy before the qadi court is the following: in a case dated 17 February 1567, Paskal Jew had sold his house to Shaho Jew with two Jewish witnesses, named Çaçari veled-i Vadir and Abraham veled-i Komasi. *Shuhūd al-hāl* in the case consisted of both Jews and Muslims, including Ömer Hoca El-İmam, Ali bin Bayram, Sinan bin Safer, İshak veled-i Elyano Jew, and Eyamo Baytar (Figure A1). Other cases involving Jews reflected in the qadi register mainly concerned issues like debt, receivables, payables, and the appointment of guardians. These cases list both Muslims and Jews in their *shuhūd al-hāl* sections.

The status of relations between Jews and other non-Muslim communities can also be traced in the register. Data from the register indicates that Avlonya's Jewish and non-Muslim subjects had intensive relations with one another and consequently developed strong ties of mutual trust. In one record, dated 24 January 1567, a Jew called Nishan veled-i Terigene came to the qadi court stating that he had previously vouched for Pavlo veled-i Kizine but now wished to renounce that support. This case shows that the *kefalet* (bail) system applied in Ottoman cities was applied between a Jew and a non-Muslim in Avlonya (AKS, p. 7b/6; also see Ertuğ 2015, pp. 31–44). Two further cases founded on mutual trust stand out: in the first, a little boy named Konto from Trebola township is recorded to have been left in the care of a Jew named Slomo until his father's arrival. In the second, a Jew by the name of Niko is recorded to have borrowed 400 *akca* from Zaim Sinan Bey and, via his guardian Yako, had pledged his houses in payment of this debt following his demise (AKS, p. 8b/4; 26b/4). In another case, three of Avlonya's different religious groups intersect: here, a non-Muslim, named Dimo, and a Muslim, named Mustafa bin Hasan, owed 21 *keyl* of wheat to a deceased Jew named Yasef. It is recorded that Dimo and Mustafa vouched for each other to pay the debt within 5 months (AKS, p. 32b/4). In many of the cases mentioned above, both Muslims and Jews are listed in the *shuhūd al-hāl* section.

Based on the examples given above, it is clear that relations between Muslim, Jewish and non-Muslim groups living in Avlonya were based on a solid economic and social

base requiring intensive co-operation in these fields. The fact that three different religious groups can be found together in the *shuhūd al-hāl* section of various cases shows that in Avlonya, where Ottoman sovereignty and the rules of law applied, the court was open and fair to all. Here, the city's religious groups readily brought all kinds of issues to the court with witnesses from their own communities, evincing that they trusted both the court and those from other religious groups named as *shuhūd al-hāl* in such cases.

5. Conclusions

Within the vast and multicultural structure of the Ottoman Empire, the city of Avlonya is an important example of peaceful and co-operative relations between Muslims and Jews. The settlement of Sephardic Jews in Avlonya after their expulsion from Spain and Portugal in 1492 and 1496 changed the city's demographic structure and contributed to its economic vitality. The rapid integration of this Jewish diaspora, which came to constitute 35% of Avlonya's population by 1520, into Ottoman society was made possible by their competence in areas such as trade, crafts, and medicine.

Avlonya's Jews positively affected the local economy: their activities in trade and various crafts increased the city's prosperity. For example, a fishpond operated by Jews in the local harbor became an important source of income. In addition, small-scale Jewish tradesmanship strengthened the community's relations with locals. Such contributions helped ensure that immigrant Jews were accepted in society and could live in harmony with Muslims. The rapid growth of the city's Jewish quarters and the prominence of Jews in butchery, cheese-making, weaving, saltpeter craftsmanship, and especially financial and commercial affairs show how successful this integration process was.

Muslim–Jewish relations in Avlonya evidence the success of the Ottoman Empire's policies of tolerance and multiculturalism. Primary sources such as *tahrir defters* and sharia court registers document in detail the distribution of the city's Jewish population, their economic activities, and their social integration, highlighting that their intercommunity relations developed positively. The Ottoman administration, which allowed Jews to live in their quarters in Avlonya, facilitated such assimilation. Clear indicators of Jews consequently becoming Ottoman can be found in examples such as the inclusion of the Jew Hayo in the military caste and his ownership of a fief, as well as the participation of Sephardic Jews as *shuhūd al-hāl* in the qadi court. In conclusion, the case of Avlonya offers a glimpse into the Ottoman experience of one of the empire's ethnic and religious minorities. The contributions of the Jews to economic and social life and their co-operation and mutual trust with Muslims contributed to the peace and prosperity in the city.

Information from the sources under examination suggest that Avlonya's Jewish community maintained a regional character in its commercial, social, and intercommunity relations. The Jews of Avlonya were not only active in the local commercial life of the city but also spread their trade to a wider area. Thus, despite their businesses in the port of Avlonya and their active participation in the Adriatic trade, the community does not seem to have developed wider international commercial and legal ties as in other port cities such as Amsterdam, London, Istanbul, and the Levant (Cesarani 2014; Keyder et al. 1993; Fuhrmann 2020). Rather, the sphere of influence of Avlonya's Jewish community was limited to the city and its immediate surroundings.

The sources used for this research offer no detailed information on the religious and cultural structure of Avlonya's Jewish community, though they do provide insight on its population, occupations and identities. The latter data allow us to conclude that the Jewish community of Avlonya grew following the arrival of Jewish expeditionaries seeking to emigrate from Spain, Portugal, and Italy. In addition, the sources suggest that the community lived their lives within the framework of Islamic law and respected the social boundaries established under Ottoman rule. Nevertheless, additional studies on the religious and cultural structure of the community using different sources would be helpful in closing the data gap still left in the literature on Avlonya's Jews.

It is hoped that this study will encourage further research into Jewish communities based in small cities like Avlonya. Certainly, this study itself has helped to offer a more complete picture on the existence and experiences of Jewish groups scattered in different geographies of the Ottoman Empire, thus enriching and augmenting the existing literature on the topic.

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Appendix A

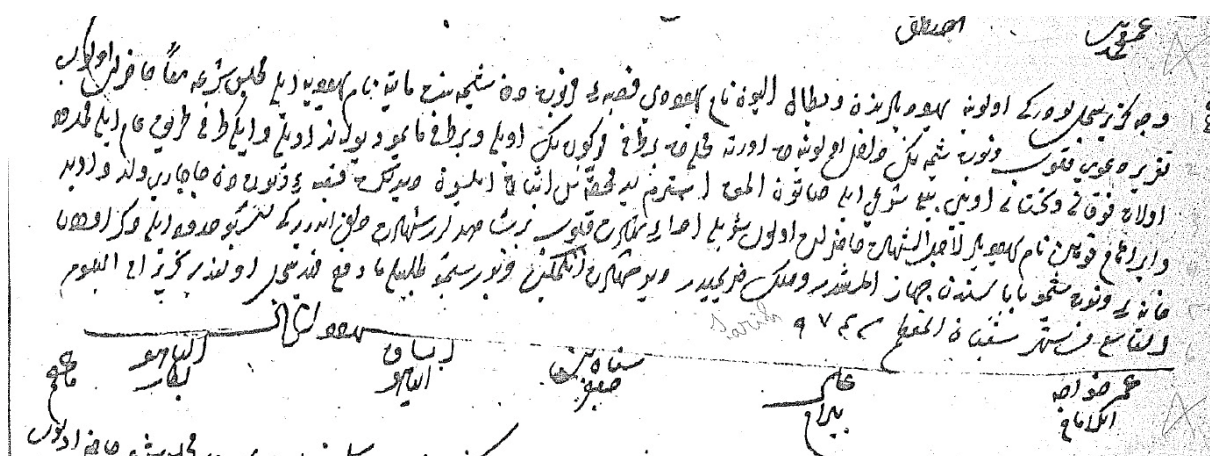


Figure A1. Isak veled-i Elyahu and Baytar Elyahu Jews recorded as shuhûd al-hâl. Reference: AKS, p. 21a/3, 17 February 1567.

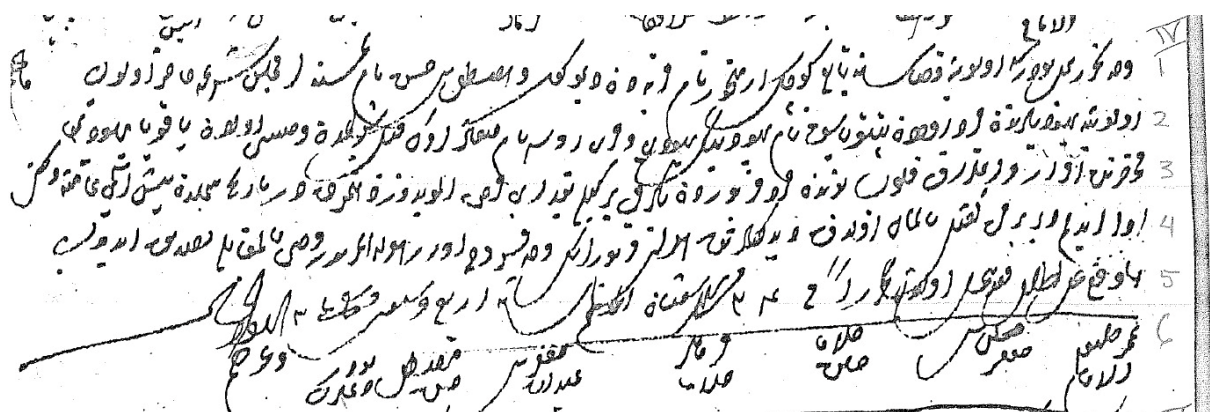


Figure A2. A document on Muslim–Jewish co-operation. Reference: AKS, p. 32b/4, 6 March 1567.

Notes

- ¹ The settlement areas of Avlonya's Jewish communities are expressed in *tahrir defters* in different two ways: the first is quarter-based and recorded as the names of the quarters where the Jews lived. The second is recorded as an assignation based on the place from which the community had migrated. There is no explanation in the documents as to why the Ottoman administrators made this distinction. However, when comparing the records of Avlonya with those of other cities, it seems that the state customarily recorded large communities with an assignation based on the place they came from. Thus, while in Avlonya, the Jewish community was recorded as coming from Portugal and Otranto, in Thessaloniki and other cities like Edirne and Manisa, they were recorded with assignations such as Toledo, Lorka, German, Catalan, Geruz, etc. (Tokel 2010; BOA, T.T.d. 34. 2–3/3–5. and BOA, T.T.d. 99. 7/11–12, 8–13; Karagedikli 2018).
- ² While the total number of households of Jews living in the neighborhoods is 514 in the table, this figure is recorded as 528 in the *tahrir defter*. The reason for the difference in the number of households may be that the registrar took a wrong record or miscalculated. Examples similar to this situation are frequently encountered in Ottoman Tahrir documents. The information used in the article is based on 528 households, which is the total number of records in the book.
- ³ The term “dhimma” is used to denote an indefinitely renewable type of contract, according to which members of other Abrahamic religions are granted hospitality and protection by the Muslim community, provided they accept the supremacy of Islam. Those who benefit from dhimma are called dhimmis, collectively known as “ahl al-dhimma” or simply dhimmis.
- ⁴ *Kadinden berü yeyügelir* means to use the income of this *timar* (benefice) from the past.
- ⁵ *Elinde Padişah Beratı* means that he was given an edict by the sultan to use the income of this *timar* (benefice).

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