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FAITH UNSEEN: THE CRYPTO- CHRISTIANS OF PONTUS

Part I

By George Andreadis

...Krom, he who has been born in your mountains, grown old on your peaks, and been buried in your earth, for what does he need paradise?

(Kromnean folksong)

In late 2006, *Road to Emmaus* spent a week in Thessalonica, Greece, in the company of George Andreadis, whose relatives and friends were among the last crypto-Christians of Turkey. In the first of an astonishing two-part series, George relates the history of Orthodox Greeks who, appearing outwardly as Ottoman Muslims, kept their faith alive through two centuries of catacomb existence. The founder of Interplan, an international trust company, George has published over forty books and articles on the history of the Black Sea Coast and its Greek Christian population. He still lives in Kalamaria, the Pontic Greek refugee neighborhood where he was born. *Road to Emmaus* is the first English-language journal to feature his work.

The Beginning

This story begins with the father of my grandmother's great-grandmother, who was born in Varenou, in Pontus, near the Black Sea coast, on February 2, 1760. He was the seventh child of a poor farmer's family who went on to play a dramatically important role in the lives and destinies of thousands of fellow-villagers from Varenou and the villages around Kromni. I learned of him and his descendants from my grandmother, Aphrodite Andreadou (born Grammatikopoulou), who was also born in Varenou and had heard the stories from her own grandmother, his granddaughter. Aphrodite's memory was phenomenal. For 18 years, I listened as she recited our family history, first with pleasure as a child, and later, with increasing awe and understanding. Of her great-great grandfather, she would say, "He was born in Varenou on Koundour (February) 2, the day of the Presentation in the Temple, and died of *achparagma* (fright) on the day of the Holy Spirit. When he died, he was 83 years old."

My grandmother Aphrodite never said an untrue word. When we pressed her for details or explanations, instead of adding something to make the story more interesting or giving possible reasons, she would only answer, "I don't know. That was how it was when I was born." She could neither read

Opposite: Bottom right: Aphrodite Andreadou (+ 1955), grandmother of George Andreadis and great-great-granddaughter of Mullah Molasleyman. Bottom left: Maria Eptichidou Zade, Aphrodite's mother and Gülbahar's granddaughter (in-law). Top left to right: Aphrodite's sisters, Irene and Sophia, with a young niece.

nor write, nor did she understand chronological dating. She dated as the ancient Greeks, who referred to the events of a reigning king, the number of the Olympiad, or a great catastrophe. For instance, when my father would say that a certain woman was born in 1914, my grandmother would reply, “I don’t understand what that means, but she is 40 years old.” My father would argue, “But if she is 40 years old, that means she was born in 1914.” “I don’t know about that, but she was born the second year after the Turkish invasion of Batum, during the typhus epidemic.” Where did my grandmother learn this ancient Greek system of dating? It was tradition. “It was what we have always done.”

And this is how we arrived at the year of the death of my grandmother’s great-great grandfather. We knew that he died at 83 years old, and that his daughter, my grandmother’s great-grandmother, was 59 that year. Going back, we calculated that he had died in 1843, which fit precisely with the names of the local rulers and the events that my grandmother described.

When my father and I, as well as professional historians, have worked backwards to verify the dates of the events she narrated, Aphrodite was always right. I say this to pass on my faith in the historical accuracy of everything that she told me. In the following account, although calendar dates and general historical and political events are my own research, the details of Kromnean crypto-Christian life and customs are from my grandmother and from Fr. Nicholas Economides of the Church of Metamorphosi (Transfiguration) of Kalamaria, Thessalonica, who was also of Pontian descent, and who told me much about the crypto-Christians. My grandmother did not have this larger historical view. She knew nothing about the oppression that had caused the Christians to conceal themselves. She would only reply, “We were born into this. We were thus, and we lived so...”

My family was from Pontus, a region on the Black Sea coast that had Christian inhabitants even before Emperor Constantine the Great legalized Christianity in 313. After Constantine, the Christians lived in peace for almost 200 years until the early sixth century, when Byzantine Emperors Justin I and Justinian I came into conflict with the kings of Persia, Kavad I and Khosro (Chosroes) I. There were fierce battles in the area of Trebizond (modern-day Trabzon) and many of the local people took refuge in the mountainous area of Kromni, building their homes on the tall forested cliffs (in Greek, *Kremos*), away from the Persian raids. These people were called *Kromet*, or *Kremet*, or more recently, *Kromnaioi* [Kromneans]. During the

seventh-century reign of Emperor Heraclius (610-641), the Byzantine Empire was divided into administrative units called themes and Pontus fell into the 21st theme, the prefecture of Chaldia.

Under the Byzantine Empire of the Comnenes, the Kromneans heavily fortified the area. Although rugged and isolated, Kromni was in the pathway of Mongol raiders who frequently attacked Trebizond. Later, Armenians invaded the territory, killing off whole generations until only a small remnant survived.

For centuries, Pontus was isolated by its 700-mile chain of towering peaks and river-fed chasms, threaded with narrow muddy tracks on which, even now, it is easy to lose one’s way in the dense forests of black pine and impenetrable alpine mist. As if approaching an island, visitors sailed to Pontus over the Black Sea rather than attempt the unyielding peaks from the south. Beyond the torturous summit of the Zagara pass, and several days journey by pack animals from Trebizond, the barren low-lying mining region of Kromni was an isolated refuge for crypto-Christians. Eagles and vultures, wild boar, deer, bears and wolves, all made their homes there.

The area, of course, was completely Christian, and being on the coast, Trebizond was always the largest city of the area and the episcopal seat. In 1461, eight years after the Fall of Constantinople, when the Sultan Mehmet Fathih (Mehmet the Conqueror) conquered the city, it had 25,000 Greek Christians and over seventy churches. At the conquest, 800 young Pontian Christians voluntarily went over to Islam. Through inheritances and bequests, the Pontian Church had become a huge land-owner, and it was said that some monasteries took advantage of their tenant-farmers. For some of these young people the coming of Mehmet could have seemed like a socialist movement, and they may have thought, “Now is the chance for us to get ahead.”

After the conquest, Sultan Mehmet II left his Christian subjects the right to hold religious services, perform marriages, adjudicate court cases between Christians, and educate Christian youth, overseen by the patriarch of Constantinople. But there were also many evils: churches were seized and turned into mosques and, for over 200 years, the Turks took the strongest and brightest boys from Christian families in Ottoman-occupied Europe and forcibly converted them to Islam as Janissaries – an elite military corps dedicated to the sultan.¹ Still, Christians played an important role in maintain-

¹ Janissaries: This form of human “taxation,” occurred mostly in Ottoman-occupied Europe from the fall of Constantinople in 1453 until the mid-17th century, although it was instituted earlier in the conquered Balkans.



Abandoned Church of St. Theodore, Saranda, Kromni.

ing standards of law, medicine, and academics. Often more educated than their Muslim conquerors, they were necessary to the administration of the Ottoman Empire.

In the 16th century, however, Muslim fanaticism arose. Constantinople (today's Istanbul²) was no longer so closely watched by the European Christian countries which were fighting their own wars, and the Turks divided the country into regions, each under a *terebeý* – a landlord. Each *terebeý* was a despot. If the *terebeý* was good, his subjects lived in relative peace; if not, they suffered. But whether the *terebeý* was good or bad, each one was chosen as a devout, even fanatic Muslim. The religious toleration of Sultan Mehmet II was forgotten, and oppressive taxation and violence against Christians increased.

The main square of Trabzon is still called *Gavur Meydani* (The Square of the Infidels). Why? Because it was during this difficult time in the 16th-17th centuries that the farmers around Maça attempted a revolt. Knowing that Friday was the Muslim day of prayer, they came to the city armed with scythes, axes, and other field tools, to take the city. The revolt failed and five thousand Christians were killed in this square.

Although some Greeks remained openly Christian, burdensome taxes and discrimination caused many to convert to Islam and their children today are Turkish Muslims. Another large group said, “No, we will keep our religion, but how will we survive? How can we save our lives and the honor of our daughters?” In the end, they became secret Christians.

Although denying Christ, even outwardly, is a sin for a Christian, during these times when many civic leaders, the educated, and wealthy turned to Islam, how could illiterate and primitive mountain people be held accountable? In many cases the Eastern Christian Church accepted the solution of crypto-Christianity so as to withstand the waves of voluntary and compulsory Islamization that were leaving churches empty of believers.

These Greeks of Asia Minor lived as concealed Christians for almost 200 years. Although this has been called a mercenary response to avoid harassment and excessive taxes, harsh periods of oppression could have meant economic

² Constantinople/Istanbul: In the Byzantine era, Constantinople (The City of Constantine) was commonly referred to as “*i Poli*,” that is, “The City.” This usage, still current in colloquial Greek, also became the source of the later Turkish name, *Istanbul*, from the Greek phrases *eis tin polis* (in the city) or *stin polis* (to the city). Istanbul was the common name for the city in normal Turkish speech even before the conquest of 1453, although Ottoman authorities preferred other variants, such as *Kostantiniyye*, in some official contexts and on coins until the 19th century. The various alternative forms (Constantinople, Kostantiniyye, Tsarigrad) only became obsolete after the creation of the Turkish republic in 1923, and the refusal of Turkish postal authorities to deliver any letter or parcel with a non-Turkish address.

ruin and starvation. Without knowing the individual circumstances, it is impossible to judge the motives of those who chose this way of life. Maintaining a secret Christian life was always difficult and dangerous. By strict Islamic law, faithful Muslims tolerate Christians and Jews, but the conversion of a Muslim to another religion is punishable by death. Thus, the choice to become crypto-Christian affected not only those who made the initial decision, but their descendants for many generations, who, even if they desired, could not reveal their faith. In public they were Ottoman Muslims.

Not only were they obliged to appear Muslim, but crypto-Christians were often isolated from fellow-Christians who openly professed their Christianity, and in some areas it would have been a great mistake to tell other Christians of their existence. If a private dispute later arose between them or their families, the professed Christians could simply go to the Ottoman authorities and give them away.

In Kromni, however, relations were good, and the professed Christians, who began moving into the area in the 1700s to work in the mines, lived in peace with the crypto-Christians. The crypto-Christians, who had secreted themselves fifty years before, knew, of course, who the professed Christians were and as “Muslims” quietly helped them when any problem arose with the Ottoman authorities. The professed Christians who knew about their neighbors never betrayed them. The fear of God possessed them all. Often, the only person who had extensive knowledge of which villages and families were crypto-Christian was a local hierarch, such as the metropolitan of Trebizond, who ordained priests for them from among their own people. In each case, the professed Christian bishop of the area was aware of their hidden existence, as the sacraments could not be served without his blessing, and in Pontus there were no crypto-Christian bishops.

As I said, throughout these two hundred years, the crypto-Christians of Kromni protected the openly professed Christians. For example, at the beginning of the 19th century, when the Greeks of the Peloponnese rose up against Ottoman rule and destroyed Muslim villages, a group of fanatic Muslim young people took to the streets of Trebizond to “kill the infidels,” rounding up and imprisoning all of the professed Greek Christian men. They were rescued by Osman Bey, the governor of the Trabzon region, who was himself of crypto-Christian origin.

Real Ottomans rarely lived in the Kromni mining villages, so their administration almost always fell to the lot of Muslims who were crypto-Christian.



George Andreadis

Many of these crypto-Christian *aghas* and elders were coarse and wicked, yet both the crypto-Christians and the professed Christians preferred them because they knew that their lives and their honour were safe.

The crypto-Christians had no written contracts between themselves. Any business agreements, purchases, rentals, or marriage settlements began with the set phrase: “In the name of the Holy Trinity and the 318 God-Bearing Fathers...”³ Such an agreement was never known to have been disputed, nor did anyone ever threaten to inform the authorities. These agreements were kept because people pledged on their faith in Christ and the Virgin Mary; it was impossible to break such a contract. Now, they break even written ones.

Kromni Under the Ottomans

Kromni began to prosper around the time of Sultan Murad IV (1623-1640), after the sultans decided to mine the mineral wealth of the area. The mines quickly multiplied and so did the workers, who at first were mostly crypto-Christians seeking places away from the large coastal towns and Ottoman administrators, where they could more easily maintain their manners, customs, language, and religion. As the mines were the property of the Sultan and those who worked them were classified as public servants, miners and their families were exempt from serving in the Ottoman army, which was otherwise compulsory for all Muslims (and crypto-Christians who appeared to be Muslim).

The general supervisor, who advised the Sultan, and the mines’ chief managers, could only be Muslim Turks, but many crypto-Christians who were believed to be Muslims reached these positions. Because the Turks looked down on this work, the miners were almost exclusively Greek, and this was the goal of the crypto-Christian administrators, who wanted to maintain an ethnic homogeneity without spies or traitors. At the time of its greatest prosperity, the area was inhabited by 6,000–10,000 people in the area of Kromni, and 60,000 in nearby Argyroupoli, all of whom spoke a Greek dialect called *Roméika*, as do many of the Black Sea Turks today.⁴ The Turks had no inter-

³ 318 God-bearing Fathers: Referring to the 318 bishops present at the First Ecumenical Council in Nicea in 325.

⁴ Even as late as 1914, the Ecumenical Patriarchate estimated the number of Greek-speaking Muslims in the Black Sea area of Pontus at 190,000. These were from formerly Christian families, who had been Islamicized after the Ottoman conquest.

est in whether the miners spoke Greek or Turkish, as long as the mines were properly run and taxes were paid. Over time, the isolated Kromneans became relatively secure and, once the *Hatti Humayun* decree of 1856 granted a margin of tolerance, they were quick to establish Greek-speaking schools.

Kromni was comprised of the following districts: Alithinos, Frangandon, Glouvena, Kodonandon, Loria, Mohora, Mantzandon, Nanak, Rakan, Roustandon, Sarandon, Samanandon, Sainandon, Tsahmanandon, Zeberekia, and several smaller villages. In the 1700s, despite a small openly-professed Christian population and the secure life and stable income of the mines, there were no churches in Kromni. The ruins of a monastery that had been destroyed at the time of the Persian invaders still stood on Mount St. Zacharias, and the remains of an ancient church could be seen in the center of Kromni, but under Turkish law, neither new churches could be built nor old ones repaired. Strange to outward eyes, however, neither did this entire region of “Muslims” have a single mosque, as if they were infidels.

Yet there was no place that had as many secret churches as Kromni. Every house had a tiny catacomb chapel in which the crypto-Christians secretly fulfilled their Christian duties, concealed from visiting Muslims and the few Ottomans who lived with them as public servants and administrators. There were also other places of worship. For instance, near the village of Sarandon was a bush-covered hill with a secret entrance leading to a cave-church, *Krymentsa Panayia* which they called “The Hidden Virgin.” The church persevered there, undiscovered for centuries, inside the little hill.

The crypto-Christian house churches were normally underground and one entered through a trap-door, from which steps led down into the chapel. The trap-doors were hidden from view under fodder, or behind furniture or provisions. After dark, with curtains drawn and shutters closed, the floor covering or furniture could be pulled back, and people would descend to pray. The icon-covered walls were lit by small oil lamps and beeswax candles, heavy with the scent of resin incense. It was here, in their own tiny catacomb churches, that Christians gathered at night for services, prayers, and sacraments.

The Pontian houses, called *saray*, were decorated outside with simple blue geometrical designs or flowers. The crypto-Christian houses were no different from the *seraya* of real Ottomans. They generally had two floors, the ground floor being the stable, on one side of which the animals were kept, while the other was generally used for storage. Inside this storeroom was the trap-door with steps leading to the secret chapel.

In those days, the dress of both men and women was noble, the clothing of the Ottoman Orient. Men wore long, loose breeches that flowed out on either side as they walked. A belt at the waist tied the long shirt to the breeches, and a vest added dignity. During the winter, the men wore magnificent overcoats and their heads were covered with fez or turbans. Women’s clothing varied from region to region, some rather European, others more eastern, and as one can see from old pictures, it was both beautiful and graceful. Even at the end of the 19th century, when the Kromneans were able to publicly proclaim their Christianity and many of the men threw off their Ottoman dress for the Greek Pontian *zipkes* (trousers), others continued to wear their Ottoman clothes, seeing in them a mark of dignity.

Mullah Molasleyman

This was the time in which my grandmother’s great-great-grandfather lived. He was born in Ottoman Varenou on February 2, 1760, left Varenou when he was sixteen and returned six years later, when he married and had a family. Of those six years, my grandmother Aphrodite only knew that he went first to Trebizond and then to Constantinople. When he returned to Varenou, however, he could read and write Turkish and Arabic, and could recite Arabic texts from the Koran with an ease unknown to the peasants in those years of ignorance and illiteracy. In a short time he became the *hodja* for the Muslims of Varenou and the villages around Kromni. Although young, he was serious and clever, and after a few years was the only person trusted to advise and adjudicate between the peasants of his area. He was known as Mullah Molasleyman, and everyone respected him as a cleric and as a *kadi* (a judge).⁵ He was their native son, their own *hodja*. His knowledge of Turkish was a great help to the villages, as he could communicate with the Turkish-speaking public officials sent to Kromni by the Ottoman rulers of Argyroupoli (today’s Gümüşhane), the district to which the villages of Kromni belong.

Even in the 1700s, the Muslims of Kromni did not speak Turkish, but the so-called Greek *Roméika*, and the few Turkish families who settled there afterwards forgot their Turkish within two or three generations. My grandmother was unable to explain how such things had happened, but answered negatively when I asked her if these Muslims were Greeks (*Romioi*) who had become Muslim by force. Although she was letter-perfect in our family his-

⁵ Although like all crypto-Christians he had a secret Christian name from baptism, we do not know what it was.



Old aerial view of Kromni, early 20th century.

tory, this simple woman had no way of knowing the historical events of the six generations from “the change” around 1650, when the Pontic crypto-Christians first appeared, until they were able to declare themselves 200 years later. Even now, in the areas of Ofi (Of) and Thoania (Tonya), the Muslims speak *Roméika* as their mother tongue, and they call the period of Ramadan *Triod* (i.e. *Triódion*, the Greek for the three-ode canons sung during Great Lent).

An absolute majority of Kromeans were crypto-Christian. Among them were local people of distant Persian descent who had also become Christian, and a few foreign technical specialists for the mines. We know of these foreigners because of the area called Frangandon (Europeans were called “Frangos” in the local language, and surnamed after their nationality, such as “Germanides.”)

Mullah Molasleyman was ordained an Orthodox priest by Dorotheos III, Archbishop of Trebizond (1764-1790), after his return to Varenou in 1782.⁶ Although the area of Kromni belonged to the Metropolis of Chaldia, the crypto-Christians of Kromni were under the Metropolis of Trebizond for security. The Chaldian diocesan headquarters in Argyroupoli was too small and close for frequent contact to go unnoticed, but Trebizond was a large city, 120 kilometers away.

It was not uncommon for an Orthodox crypto-Christian priest to also act as the local mullah in crypto-Christian communities. He was often the only educated person who could speak and read Turkish, Arabic, and ecclesiastical Greek (enough for the services), as well as *Roméika*. If the village was all crypto-Christian and very isolated, the crypto-Christian priest did not have to pretend to be a Muslim mullah, he was simply known to the outside world as a simple Muslim. But if the village was larger or had enough of a Muslim population to have a Turkish gendarme, the priest was also often the mullah, which added to the security of the crypto-Christians. If a crypto-Christian acted as mullah, he was also the defacto leader of the Muslim community, and would know immediately if there was a threat against the Christians. This had to be, because what explanation could a village give for not having Muslim religious services? Even if they had no real Muslims in the village,

⁶ Ed. Note: It is tempting to speculate that Mullah Molasleyman may not only have been ordained by Archbishop Dorotheos III, but was perhaps sent by him to Constantinople/Istanbul as a youth for training as a mullah, foreseeing that the well-being of Kromni's crypto-Christians depended on his fulfilling the dual roles of mullah and priest. If not sent, he certainly took on the outward role of a Muslim clergyman with the archbishop's blessing.

they had to have someone official to show when the authorities came around, because outwardly they were Muslim. If there was no local mullah, who was also one of them, it would have been a terrible problem.

In Mullah Molasleyman's village of Varenou, surprisingly, there was no mosque or even a simple *camii*, the open-air platform set aside for Muslim prayers in villages that could not afford to build a mosque. The villagers of Varenou always told visiting Turkish officials, “We are too poor to build a mosque, but we will try to gather the money to build a *camii*.” The *camii* was never built.

Festal Customs: Theophany Eve and the Church New Year

My grandmother used to say, “As secret Christians, we were more strict than the open Christians. We kept every feast and every tradition.” The feasts were celebrated with absolute secrecy, the fasts kept with great solemnity, and liturgy and Holy Communion took place with the fear of God. Great church feasts were celebrated much as they are now, but I will mention some customs that have disappeared in our times.

A deeply moving tradition took place on the eve of Theophany. The family gathered in the underground chapel where, on a small table, they placed a bowl of wheat and corn into which they put lit candles, each candle dedicated to a dearly deceased member of the family. The last candle was lit for the unknown dead, for those who had no one to commemorate them. The small dark church was lit only by these candles, and the family remained there, with the priest or head of the family offering the prescribed prayers and chants until the last candle melted.

Each year on the 1st of September, the Church New Year, from before dawn the priest visited the homes of all of the crypto-Christians, sprinkling each house and its residents with holy water. This was a very old custom, older than Christianity itself, as the ancient Greeks also considered September 1st the first day of the new year.

Another very moving custom was the quiet walk of a secret priest through the village streets to the house of a dying Christian. Under his clothes, he held the chalice with Holy Communion. If someone saw the priest and greeted him, he would not answer, but continued on his way in silence. No one misunderstood. The priest's silence always meant that he was visiting the dying.



Crypto-Christian Baptisms

For baptisms, family members, godparents, and perhaps a few others gathered at the child's house. Babies were usually baptized after forty days, unless a close member of the family had recently died, then the baptism was held only after the first year memorial service for the departed. The child was then given his Christian name, although he also had a "Muslim" name to use in public. Children of crypto-Christians who were not old enough to keep the community's secret were not present at any of the sacraments; only when they grew old enough to be trusted, could they attend and be catechized. As was traditional throughout Greece and Asia Minor, the mother of the child was never present at the baptism (signifying that the child belonged to God), but waited in another room or even in another house. The godfather rarely knew the whole creed, but only said, "I believe in One God, Jesus Christ..." yet he meant it deeply. When the baptism finished, a child ran to where the mother was staying, congratulated her and announced the child's baptismal name, which had been given by the godfather or godmother. There was often a race among the village children to reach the mother first, as the one who did so received a present which the mother had especially prepared for his coming.

Even during my childhood here in Greece, most of the baptisms were done at home because of the lack of heat. The mother waited in her room, and as soon as the name was pronounced, all of us young ones went running to be the first to tell.

Kromnean Betrothals and Marriages

In those years, Christians and Muslims all married early, the girls as young as twelve to fourteen. By sixteen, they were in danger of spinsterhood, and after twenty, there would be no more offers. The boys also married young, although most were older than their brides.

All weddings took place between January until Great Lent, and after Dormition until the Christmas Fast. As is usual in Orthodoxy, there were no weddings during the four great fasts, nor, by local tradition, in May or in leap years. Kromnean folk custom considered leap years to be ill-omened, a break in the normal cycle, and May was the month in which donkeys were bred; Christians waited for a more suitable time to celebrate the sacrament with dignity.

There were several steps to arranging a marriage in Kromni. The first was the *Aaeman*, the “Finding,” when a young man’s parents looked for the right girl, or rather, for the right family from which they wished to take a bride. Once the prospective bride was found, the family sent the local matchmakers, who were expert in these affairs, to the family of the girl with a *Psalapheman* (the Proposal or Request). If the girl’s parents were in favor of the match, then negotiations for the dowry would proceed. If they were unfavorably disposed to the proposal, the boy’s parents would almost always abandon their suit immediately to save face. If there was a very strong reason to acquire this particular girl as a bride, she could be abducted (the *Syrsimo*), and then the marriage would have to take place, but this was rare. The dowry was usually money, land, or household gifts given to the groom’s family by the family of the bride, as the bride would go to live with her husband’s parents. (The Turks did the opposite, where the dowry was “paid” by the groom’s family to the bride’s father, depending on her social status and accomplishments.)

There were rare cases when a young man fell in love with a girl whom he managed to see with her face uncovered, usually at the spring where the girls drew water. Seeing her unveiled demanded a proposal. Because of the strict social traditions, if the young man’s parents were against the match, the following happened: respected older village women took the girl to visit the groom’s house. After some time they left, leaving the girl there, and said, *I níphe ekatsen ka* (“The bride has sat there”). This was an extreme attempt to change the mind of the groom’s parents, and there was not a single case of parents-in-law sending away a bride who had “sat” in their house. It would have been considered a great sin, completely socially unacceptable, and might even have been dangerous if their son decided to do something rash because he couldn’t live without this girl. When the *níphe ekatsen ka*, the wedding soon followed.

After the girl’s parents accepted the proposal, the *Soumademan*⁷ (Betrothal or Engagement) followed. The *Soumademan* always took place at night in the girl’s house. The young man, the parents of both couples, perhaps a few other relatives, and the priest gathered together – everyone except the bride, who waited in another room. The young man, his parents, and the priest took the gold or silver rings (depending on the prosperity of the family) and said three times: “In the name of God and with the blessing

of the parents, we have come to engage (the groom’s name) with (the bride’s name), what do you say?” The groom responded, “Let it happen with the blessing of the God and by the wish of the parents.” The girl’s relatives then went with the priest to the girl, so that the priest could hear her answer as well. The girl’s response was, “As my parents wish,” and she kissed the priest’s hand. The priest blessed her and, rejoining the groom’s family, “gave them” the bride, wishing them *ogourlia* and *gatemia* (good fortune and happiness) according to God’s Will. The family then gave the wrapped wedding rings to the priest, who blessed them and finished the betrothal service vested in his epitrachelion. In those years, the betrothal or engagement was done separately, not as part of the wedding service as it is in our time.

During the period of engagement, the groom never met the bride on his own. He rarely visited her home, but when he did, he was accompanied by his family. It was considered a shame for him to come on his own. About this period there is a Turkish saying: *Eniste tatli tatli gel*, “the groom comes sweetly,” (that is, hardly at all). Visits were much more common between the parents of the betrothed than the couple themselves.

The wedding, called the *Stephanoma* (the Crowning) was the most sacred moment. Preparations for the wedding lasted several days and were a time of great joy. The groom underwent a ceremonial shaving, and in his yard they decorated a goat, which would escort his friends and relatives to the wedding. The bridal bath always took place on a Saturday, as marriages were only held on Sunday. After the bath, the bride was enclosed in the bridal room (the *bas oda*), where the following day she was dressed in her wedding finery, including the pink *zoupouna*, a close-fitting sleeveless jacket, like a jerkin.

The Crowning was performed by the priest, together with the *koumbaros*, the best man. In our days, after the reading of the Epistle and the Gospel, the priest offers a cup of blessed (but unconsecrated) wine for the couple to drink from. In those years, the crypto-Christian priest offered *meligala* instead of wine, milk mixed with honey, which the priest mixed and blessed on the spot saying three times: “change this to that.” Those looking on would chant, “I will receive from this redeeming cup and I will call on the name of the Lord.” After the bride and groom drank from the common cup, the cup was broken underfoot by the priest.

As the couple circled the analogion with the icons and Gospel during the “Dance of Isaiah,” the priest held the hand of the best man, the *koumbaros* held the hand of the *négamon* (groom) and the *négamon* held the hand of

⁷ *Soumademan*: from a Pontian Greek word used by foresters to mark trees they had selected to harvest.



St. Gregory of Nyssa Church, 1930, Trabzon.

the *négamsa* (bride). If there was a *koumbara* (bridesmaid), she held the bride's free hand, and in that order they circled the analogion, while the guests scattered a mixture of candy, raisins, nuts and small coins called *korkorta* over the newlyweds. At each corner of the analogion they stopped, and the couple kissed the corresponding side of the Gospel.

In those years the wedding crowns were not simple wreaths, but made in the shape of a bishop's mitre. When the ceremony ended, the priest took the crowns and wrapped them in a special cloth, reciting wishes for the newly-wedded couple's health and welfare. The bride's face was covered by a veil throughout the wedding, and only when the priest finished wrapping the crowns did he lift the veil of the bride. This was called the *Apokamároman* (the Unveiling), and was often the first time that members of the groom's family (and sometimes even the groom himself) saw the bride.

After the unveiling came the *Chárisma* (the Giving). With wishes for a happy life, the relatives of the groom gave presents to the bride, after which local musicians played traditional wedding music on folk instruments while the couple danced the *Omal*.

The *Charisma* was followed by the *Thymisma* (the Remembering), in which the dancers held lit candles, bound together on a single wreath, and accompanied by the musicians, danced in slow rhythmic steps to a song of benediction, beginning in Greek with the letter A and ending with Ω.

Father Nicholas (Papa Nikolas) Economides, whom I served with for twelve years in the altar of the Church of the Transfiguration (*Metamorphisi*) in Thessalonica, told me much of the customs of Kromni, including this wedding poem.

- A It began when the Lord our God blessed the first honorable marriage in the town of Cana.
- B It comes to me to say to the newlyweds: "Above all, may your marriage be worthy and honorable."
- Γ You come of a noble and greatly honored lineage, and by God the Creator are you blessed.
- Δ My Christ, endow me with strength, give me good heart, since I have begun as a stranger, to finish all.
- E So it must be, since I began, to bring all to completion: "Oh Lord, keep safe these newlyweds."

- Z They became a couple by the wishes of the parents, as God prescribed and as is written in the law.
- H The Virgin in heaven rejoices with the angels: "May this marriage be blessed," she says.
- Θ As God has granted us abundant grace, "Lord God protect these newlyweds."
- I Let the priests put on their stoles, while we who are present cry, "Kyrie Eleison."
- K Lord God, protect these newlyweds. Give them peace and life, child-bearing and children.
- Λ With luminous voices raise these hymns to the Lord, "Oh, Almighty, guard these newlyweds."
- M A paradox and a mystery for humankind: A stranger meets stranger with the blessing of the parents.
- N Let them grow, rejoice, and bring forth children, thanking both God and man.
- Ξ Strangers who find yourself here, relatives and neighbors, bestow your wishes on them.
- O Together, we all offer hymns to Christ, "Our Lord, protect these newlyweds."
- Π Graceful bride, honor your in-laws, and you, the groom, take care with her for their blessing.
- P All ask God for strength and health, for the blessing and joy of children.
- Σ Today there is joy in heaven and on earth; all blessing has come down upon this house.
- T What has God made us worthy of? What miracle is this? A stranger meets a stranger and becomes his own.
- Υ O Brothers, who are strangers here, do not stand by unmoved, bless and wish for these newlyweds.



- Φ O Bride, keep your husband's bed worthily with him, so that you may live and prosper with everyone's blessing.
- X May you rejoice and be delighted, may you live like royalty and receive Paradise, that we all may rejoice.
- Ψ My soul, look upon such a well-armed daughter, and by God the Creator, as much begraced.
- Ω Oh Virgin Mary, Mother of our Saviour, bless your servants and do not reject them.

Mas

Mas (Silence) was the duty of the bride, and she had to keep it for one or two years, sometimes for her whole life. This meant that the bride was not allowed to speak in the presence of her mother- and father-in-law. When they asked her a question, she could only answer with nods and signs. This custom was very strict and in our days it might seem barbarous, but in a society in which many people lived under the same roof, it was a way to avoid the quarrels and upsets that might be caused by a newly-arrived bride. *Mas* accustomed a bride to respect her in-laws and would only end when they gave her permission to speak.

Because of their outward Muslim appearance, there were some wealthy crypto-Christians with more than one house and more than one wife and family. Even so, the Church did not react, so as not to force them to become Muslim, and often both of their families continued as secret Christians. There was only one known case in Kromni; the case of Uzun Memetoglu.

Uzun Memetoglu and His Two Wives

Uzun Memetoglu was a wealthy crypto-Christian with many people under him, but was nevertheless just and generous. He and his wife had six children: Yiannis, Polychronos, Papastathios, Isaak, Abraham, and Agapi. In 1835, an Ottoman *hodja* who respected him very much, offered his daughter as a second wife. Memetoglu was forced to accept her as the girl was brought to his home when he was away in Trebizond, and sending her back was inconceivable once she had "sat there." Refusing to father her children would also have been very dangerous for the crypto-Christian community if

she had complained to her relatives, so he created a second home and had a son, Husein, and a daughter, Aise, by the hodja's daughter. His wife never realized that he was a crypto-Christian, nor did Memetoglu try to convert her to Christianity, fearing that she might tell her Muslim cleric father. They lived like this until the official revelation of the crypto-Christians. When Memetoglu revealed his Christianity, the Turkish girl could not bear the thought of becoming a Christian and went back to her father, taking the children with her. Fifteen days later, the children returned to Memetoglu and became Christian.

The number of people in Kromni related by marriage or through a spiritual relationship was remarkable. Every baptism gave the child's parents a dozen new relatives from the godparents' families. This spiritual kinship was considered sacred and was added to exponentially when the same godparent stood as godparent to another child. With weddings, also, one made an "army" of relations by marriage, not to mention the families of one's *koumbaros* and *koumbara* (best man and bridesmaid). In the crypto-Christian community, all of this was managed discretely and with such order that it is a wonder how so many people managed to conceal such a great secret for over 200 years, taking into account human weakness, jealousy, and the reprisals that are part of everyday life. The fact that so many thousands of people guarded this secret as the apple of their eye, in the fear of God, is astonishing.

The crypto-Christians made up various ruses and pretexts to avoid match-making Ottomans who might ask for their daughters. Even one girl given to an Ottoman family was considered a tragedy, as the girl then belonged to the family of the groom and would become a Turkish Muslim. On the other hand, the crypto-Christians never rejected an Ottoman bride for their sons. In cases where the matchmakers brought an Ottoman bride into the house of a crypto-Christian family, the girl would be isolated by the bridegroom's sisters and her mother-in-law, and not allowed to share her husband's bed until she was catechized and had agreed to become a Christian. Only after her baptism could she be married in a Christian service and come together with her husband.

Traditionally, girls only returned to visit their parents after a year of marriage, and there were virtually no cases of Ottoman brides betraying the secret to their parents. Compared to her Muslim home, the new Christian family was usually less strict and the girl would keep quiet about the new family's Christianity out of love for her husband and respect (or fear) of her

parents-in-law. Also, she knew the penalty of conversion: her husband's family would be arrested and executed, and she would be a social outcast, humiliated for the rest of her life.

In only one case did an Ottoman girl married to a Kromnean reveal the secret. Aziz Agha, the son of Mourteze Effendi, married a Muslim bride from Keleverik of Ispir, near Kars. After she was catechized, Aziz Agha took her to the Monastery of Panagia Soumela to be baptized, where she was christened Sophia. After some time, Sophia visited her family and was foolish enough to tell her parents everything that had happened. The case was taken to Argyroupoli, and the Christian family was saved only by the testimony of an old Armenian woman named Afitap, who claimed that Mourteze Effendi was such a pious Muslim that he had forced her to become Muslim. With her accusation a very different picture appeared: that of a Muslim so faithful that he had forced an Armenian to become Muslim herself. It was a lie, of course, and it was also likely that Mourteze Effendi's family bribed the Ottoman judges, who finally ruled that this was a family squabble and outside of their jurisdiction. The secret of the crypto-Christians was saved. However, the Islamic clergy must have suspected something because during Ramadan they sent a high-ranking muezzin to guide the Kromneans on how to keep the fast and say their prayers. To protect themselves from suspicion, the Kromneans decided to build a mosque, which was finished in 1815.

Mullah Molasleyman's Daughter

During his years as priest, Mullah Molasleyman baptized an army of children and performed an uncountable number of weddings. He served as a priest for over sixty years and was present at any argument between Ottomans and Christians, calming the one with the Koran and the other with the Gospel. He was loved and respected by all.

One of his greatest trials, however, was his own daughter, Gülbahar. Truly, he lived through an adventure with her. Gülbahar was born in Varenou in 1784, baptized with the name Maria, and died in Trebizond in 1864. At the time of this story she was twelve years old.

Throughout his life, Mullah Molasleyman had had an Ottoman friend, Said Agha, a very good and wealthy man from Loria of Kromni, who deeply loved and respected the mullah. Each time the mullah went to Loria, he stayed at Said Agha's house, and after dinner, the agha would listen as he



Panagia Soumela Monastery, where many Pontic crypto-Christians secretly wed.

read the words of the Prophet from the Koran. When the *namaz* (prayer) was finished, Said Agha would ask for an explanation of the scriptures, which the mullah gave in Pontian because Said Agha did not speak Turkish. His grandfather's grandfather had come to Kromni and put down roots, and now they were Greek-speaking Kromneans.

Likewise, when Said Agha came to Varenou he was a guest of the mullah, but in either case, eating with a Muslim presented a problem, for how could the priest eat without praying, or at least making the sign of the Cross over his food? Mullah Molasleyman, however, had devised his own solution. Before beginning he would say: "My head will think, my stomach will eat, my right and left side will be satisfied," and, as he spoke, he made the sign of the Cross. At the end of the meal he would again cross himself saying, *Yedim basim icin, kizdim kanim icin, hem saga, hem sola, hem nihahyet canima*. "My head ate, it reached my stomach, my right and left side, and also my soul."

In February 1796, Said Agha came to Varenou and, as usual, visited his friend the mullah, planning to ride back to Loria in the evening. A sudden snow-storm arose, however, and the mullah could not allow his friend to leave in such bad weather. Said Agha would, of course, stay the night.

The timing, however, was deplorable. The mullah loved Said Agha and respected him as a fair and God-fearing man, but how unfortunate that he had to stay in the middle of Great Lent! He was obliged to honour Said Agha in the same way that the mullah was hosted in Loria, but what food could he offer him? His household kept the fast with great austerity and no deviation could be justified. Nevertheless, they cooked for Said Agha, and the pans that had been thoroughly cleaned on Clean Monday for the fast were spoiled by cooking non-Lenten food. Fortunately, the guest would dine alone with the mullah, for in an "Ottoman" household, other family members, particularly women, had no place at the table with male guests. The mullah pretended that he had a stomach ache and only drank tea.

When guests arrived, only the older women were allowed to appear with their faces veiled. The children remained in another room, unseen. Despite these injunctions, twelve year-old Gülbahar could not help glancing in as she passed the door, and Said Agha, noticing her poised, statuesque air, reflected on what a wonderful bride she would be for his 18 year-old son, Husein. A beautiful girl, and her father the mullah, a dear friend. In the morning, when the weather cleared, he left for Loria.

At the end of April, as the snow began to melt, Said Agha sent his men on

horseback for an old and respected matchmaker, Fatme of Mohore, who had arranged many of the Kromnean marriages. (She was also a crypto-Christian, baptized with the name Paresa.) When she arrived with the agha's escort, Fatme was welcomed with great honor. Used to such receptions, she was nonetheless curious as to what match this was leading to, and when she understood that Said Agha wanted the mullah's daughter as a bride for his son, she was horrified. It was impossible for Mullah Molasleyman to give his daughter to an Ottoman. "His daughter is young," Fatme protested. "It does not matter," said the Agha. "She is twelve years old. We can have the betrothal now and the wedding in one or two years." Forced to agree so as not to arouse suspicion, the distressed matchmaker could only think of one thing to gain time, "Said Agha, I will not be able to go to the mullah right away because my mother-in-law is dying, but I will go when I can and will bring you the answer." Said Agha filled her bags with gifts and money, and his men escorted her home.

When she arrived home, Fatme slipped off the horse, dismissed Said Agha's men and prepared to leave immediately for Varenou. Her son said, "Mother, you've just come and now you are going again?" "It's big trouble, my son," said Fatme, as she rode away.

In Varenou she went straight to the mullah's house where she was welcomed by his wife and daughters, excited at the prospect of a marriage offer. The mullah was not at home and Fatme told them to run and bring him quickly. When the mullah arrived, she exclaimed: "Father, a great calamity has come upon our heads! How did you let that dog, Said Agha, see your Gülbahar? He has asked me to mediate so that she will marry his son. I couldn't tell him it was impossible, all I could do was to lie to gain a little time. I told him that my mother-in-law was dying." "You did very well," said Mullah Molasleyman. "Go back to Mohore and I will find a solution."

That night, Mullah Molasleyman could not sleep. He loved and respected the agha. He could not give him his daughter, yet how would he justify his denial without offending his friend? By dawn he knew. It was an unorthodox solution, but a saving one.

After drinking his morning coffee, the mullah told his wife to send one of their boys to find Murat Yiazitsi Zade, a distant relative and poor farmer with many children, to whom Mullah Molasleyman had always extended timely help. The snow had already melted and Murat, in the fields since dawn, arrived embarrassed and dirty from his work. The mullah, however, welcomed him warmly and led him upstairs. He explained his dilemma and



said, “What I am telling you is a shame for me, but this shame is nothing compared to the sin of my daughter becoming a Turk. Nevertheless, we are relatives, and if you do not agree to my proposal, everything we say will remain only between us. “Curious and embarrassed, Murat wondered how he, poor and illiterate, could be of assistance to the mullah and priest.

The Mullah said, “Murat, you have a son named Tursun, the one we baptized as Kyriakos. Will you take my daughter Maria as a bride for Kyriakos? The extraordinary offer struck Murat like a thunderclap, but the mullah continued, “I know that grooms propose to brides and not brides to grooms, but in the face of such danger to my daughter, I don’t believe this deviation is wrong.”

Murat was astonished at being asked to accept the mullah’s daughter into his house, and with joy replied, “What shame are you talking about, Father? It is a great honour for us to accept your daughter as our bride.” “Since you agree,” the mullah said, “come and make the offer, and on Sunday we will have the *Soumadema* (the Betrothal). No one must ever know what we have talked about today.” The same evening Murat and his wife visited the mullah’s family and asked for Gülbahar. This is how the match-making of Gülbahar (Maria) and Tursun (Kyriakos) Yazitzi Zade came about in April of 1796.

Fatme sent the news of the engagement to Said Agha, that unfortunately someone else had asked for Gülbahar first. The agha was sad, but what could he do? He blamed himself for not having arranged the matter earlier.

Tursun and Gülbahar married in Varenou when he was seventeen, and she, thirteen. They had many children, one of whom was Hadjimurat Yiazitzi Zade, born in 1807, who later became a merchant. (Their Greek family name afterwards was Grammatikopolous, but they went by the Turkish family name, Tursunand.) Hadjimurat married Sophia Koukou in Tapezounta, and one of their many children was Tursun (Kyriakos) Yiazitzi Zade (named after his grandfather), who was born in 1844, and was 13 years old at the time of the Hatti Humayun, which guaranteed Turkish citizens freedom of religion. Kyriakos married Maria Ephtichidou, with whom he had three boys and four girls. One of the girls was my grandmother Aphrodite.

Folk Beliefs: Comets and *Hortlaks*

On August 16, 1769, a seeming catastrophe rocked the quiet life of the Pontians. A comet appeared, and all that month blazing clouds appeared across the sky. The simple villagers, no matter what religion, were deeply

shaken. Daily life was disrupted and rumors and theories were rife. Everyone, though, agreed that this was a sign from God, and not a good one. Metropolitan Dionysios (Kazanos) of Chaldia (1757-1783), a well-educated man, managed to calm his flock with a short and simple treatise explaining the natural phenomenon, which was distributed to all the churches of his diocese, and then throughout Pontus. Impressed that the Christian population had ceased to be troubled, the Turkish authorities asked that the treatise be translated and read in all the villages and town squares. The Muslims also were pacified, and life went back to normal.

Another tradition of the area was the *Hortlak*, which means “ghost.” The people of Kromni believed that anyone who died without paying his debts could not rest in peace, and at night would arise from the grave, crying and shouting, until his family paid what he owed. After the debts were settled, the priest would do a small service or read prayers over the grave.

Hearing these stories from Aphrodite, it seemed peculiar to me that the most common *Hortlak* were Ottomans, and at night everyone could hear their deceased Turkish neighbor shouting as a *Hortlak*. The Ottoman relatives listened to these stories and after some time they themselves began hearing the voice of their dead, after which they quickly settled the debts. I believe that this was a clever trick of the Christians to make the Turks repay their debts, but when I asked Aphrodite, she emphatically answered in the negative. She insisted that the *Hortlak* existed and they could be either Christian or Turk. Christians, also, who left unsettled debts to either Christians or Turks could not rest until they were settled. It was divine justice demanding recompense, she believed, not a trick.

Another peculiarity was that even the Turkish Muslim families took an Orthodox priest with them to the Muslim cemeteries for a short prayer service over the grave after the debts were paid. Pontians believed these stories and if an Ottoman consulted his Muslim mullah about it, he was assured that the *Hortlak* really did exist. People not only heard, but saw them, and for this reason no one ventured out after dark without good reason. And no one ever went near a cemetery at night.

Crypto-Christian Burial Practices

There was also, for us, the humorous and long-standing belief of the Turkish Muslims in the surrounding areas that the air of Kromni was very

good because no one ever died there! This was because the crypto-Christians held their funerals after dark in their house chapels. In the countryside, people had (and still have) the legal right to bury the dead on their own property, so in Kromni, the crypto-Christians were buried with Orthodox rites in their own gardens. Muslim outsiders never saw the burial services.

In larger towns or cities, however, this wasn't allowed, so they had to bury the supposed Muslims in the Muslim graveyard. In the Muslim community were specialists who prepared the body for burial, and it would have been suspicious if a family did not call them or refused to follow Muslim burial practices. As part of the burial service, Muslims wash their dead in extremely hot water, hotter than anyone living could bear.

This presented a problem for crypto-Christian men because of the tradition among Muslims of circumcising their young boys.⁸ Muslim attendants preparing the body of an uncircumcised crypto-Christian man for burial would immediately understand that this man had been a Christian. Instead, the crypto-Christians in the cities often used an alternative Muslim funeral custom called *aptest*, when, immediately after death, they sewed the body into a white shroud which was not opened again. Instead of a funeral casket, there was a wooden bier. The dead person was placed upon the bier and taken to the porch of the mosque, where he was positioned with only his feet in the entryway – his head pointed outwards. They recited the prayers and verses from the Koran and then buried the shrouded body directly in the earth.

Kromni's Churches Restored

Although, as I mentioned, the first mosque was erected in Kromni in 1815, the first church was only built sixteen years later by professed Christians who had begun moving to the area in the 1700s to work in the mines. This church came about during the reign of Sultan Mahmud Han II (1808-1839), who decreed that ruined Christian churches might be restored. As the remains of a 13th-century church could still be seen in the Kromnean village of Samanandon, the crypto-Christians encouraged the professed Christians to petition the Sultan to allow them to rebuild.

The Sultan sent his approval in a *firman* (decree) in 1830, stating that, “those who petitioned and begged for the restoration of the ruined church at

⁸ Crypto-Christian men were not always uncircumcised. In communities where it was impossible to escape the scrutiny of Muslim neighbors, a male crypto-Christian child would be secretly baptized and chrismated, and at the proper age also undergo Muslim circumcision, so as not to arouse suspicion.



Greek hunting party with visiting Russian guest, c. 1910.

Siamanli (Samanandon) diocese... after examination and inspection by officials of my office, this truth has been proven and established that the dimensions of the church are twenty-seven by thirteen... In answer to whether it is possible to allow for its restoration, the answer is yes, but without the right to exceed even an [inch] of the initial limits of the building, and to restore it without receiving one [penny] or grain of wheat as compensation.”⁹

The Church of St. George was finished and dedicated in 1831. The crypto-Christians could admire it, but none could go inside; such a deed would have jeopardized their secret.

As the century progressed and the laws were further relaxed, the professed Christians of Kromni built more new churches, each time at the instigation and support of the crypto-Christians, who aided them by minimizing Ottoman reaction. In this way, by the end of the century, every hill and mountain peak had its Christian church. It was as if our centuries-old underground crypto-Christian chapels had taken root, germinated, and sprouted forth on the surface of the earth.

The Greek Revolution

During the reign of Sultan Mahmut B (1808-1839), the first of several great “earthquakes” occurred in the lives of the crypto-Christians. The first was the news in March of 1821 that the Greeks of the Peloponnese, led by Metropolitan Germanos of Patras and joined by others on the Greek mainland, had risen in revolt against Ottoman rule. When the news reached the Sublime Port, and the sleeping Sultan was awakened with the news, he allegedly rolled on the floor screaming in rage, “*Rum ismi ile kulum yoktur, kesin kafalarini.*” “I do not recognize any Greek subjects, off with their heads.” The first Greek executed in retaliation was Patriarch Gregory V of Constantinople, who was held responsible for the uprising and hung from the middle gate of the courtyard of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. In memory of his tragic death, this gate has remained closed until now. Another twelve hierarchs lost their lives for the same reason.

When the Ottomans of Asia Minor heard of the Greek insurrection, there was a fierce backlash and Trebizond’s governor, Hesref Pasha, gathered the

city’s professed Christians into the Ottoman citadel, the Leontokastro, intending to execute them. They were saved only through the efforts of the Ottoman Muslim military commander, Pasha Satir Zade, who warded off the unjust slaughter. Although the news of the Peloponnese revolt was welcomed in the crypto-Christian community, the initial joy was overshadowed by the death of the patriarch, and Kromni’s crypto-Christians worked quickly to counter attempts to fanaticize Kromni’s Muslim neighbors against the professed Christians.

The second great upheaval was the Russian-Turkish war of 1828, when the Russians conquered Kars and Ezerum in the East, occupying territory all the way to Trebizond and Argyroupoli. The metropolitans of Trebizond and Chaldia advised their crypto-Christian flock to wait, and Mullah Molasleyman himself went from house to house through the villages of Kromni, warning the crypto-Christians not to reveal themselves. Yet quite a number did not heed his advice, and assuming that the Russians were there to stay, openly proclaimed themselves Christian.

When the war ended a year later, by the terms of settlement, the Russian troops left Pontus. They were followed to southern Russia by more than two thousand of these newly-revealed Christian families, now liable to Islamic penalties for apostasy.

The *Hatti Sherif of Gulhane* and the Death of Mullah Molasleyman

Upon ascending the throne in 1839, Sultan Abdul Medjit I signed a decree, the *Hatti Sherif*, formulated by his Foreign Minister and Grand Vizier, Reshid Pasha, that Ottoman Christian subjects were now free to practice their faith and to build new churches, schools, and other foundations. It is not known if this was initiated in order to follow in the relatively tolerant footsteps of Mehmet the Conqueror, or whether he simply wanted the Ottoman Empire to appear more civilized in the eyes of the West. In either case, the proclamation was jubilantly welcomed and new churches were raised in every Christian neighborhood.

Again, the Church authorities counseled the crypto-Christians to wait and not reveal themselves. This decree concerned only the freedom of the professed Christians; nowhere did it say that Muslims could abandon their faith and follow another religion. In theory, the traditional edict of Malik Ibn

⁹ The original firman is quoted in full in the original Greek version, and in English in Andreadis, Georgios, *The Crypto-Christians*, Kyriakidis Brothers, Thessalonica, 1995, pp. 61-2, (privately printed in Greece).



Pontic embroidery of Resurrection, 1910.

Anas of 795 AD still held: Mohammed the Prophet had decreed that apostasy from Islam was punishable by death.

The uncertainty lasted for five years, the hierarchs justifiably uneasy over the arrest and imprisonment of several Armenian crypto-Christians resident in Turkey, who had openly declared their religion at the time of the decree. This also occurred in Trebizond, where, in 1843, an Armenian Christian still awaited trial.

In Kromni and other crypto-Christian areas, however, the mullah-priests were under pressure to clarify the situation. Kromni was now filled with beautiful churches built by the professed Christians but the crypto-Christians could not visit them, and reluctantly continued to pray in their underground chapels. In 1843, the Kromneans insisted that Mullah Molasleyman, now 83 years old, but still active, in good health, and the acknowledged spokesman for the crypto-Christians of Kromni, go to Trebizond to meet secretly with Metropolitan Konstantinos III to discuss the matter.

At this time the governor of Trebizond was another Osman Pasha (1839-1843) – not the one who had saved the Christians in 1921. Mullah Molasleyman arrived in the city around Pentecost, staying with his brother in the Trebizondan neighborhood of Molos. The metropolitan was notified of his arrival, and at their meeting the mullah explained that the crypto-Christians were becoming impatient, and he could not answer for their secrecy much longer. The metropolitan and the mullah agreed to wait for the verdict in the approaching trial of the Armenian; in any case, the Kromneans would do nothing until the mullah's return. On Pentecost, the mullah served liturgy in the secret chapel of the house in Molos, attended by the families of his two brothers and crypto-Christian relatives from Trebizond. He gave them Holy Communion and advised everyone to go to sleep early, because, according to custom, on the following day, the Monday of the Holy Spirit, it was forbidden to sleep the entire day in honor of the descent of the Holy Spirit.

On Monday morning, the mullah, who intended to serve liturgy at the home of his other brother in Kemer kaya, was awakened, as was the rest of Trebizond, by town criers calling out the news that the poor Armenian had been condemned to death the night before. Osman Pasha, it was said, had tried to forestall the verdict, but was pressured (or blackmailed) by the Mufti members of the Islamic court, and had finally yielded. At dawn, on the Feast of the Holy Spirit, the Armenian was hung.

After years of expectation, the tragic conclusion of the trial and the collapse of all their hopes was more than Mullah Molasleyman could bear. Crying “Water, water!” he dropped to the floor dead. He died without seeing the fulfillment of his life’s dream – to serve openly in a church before God and man.

The metropolitan, who was immediately notified, sent a priest to perform the Christian funeral in the home of the mullah’s brother in Kemer kaya, in the presence of his relatives. Meanwhile, the public “Muslim” funeral was being prepared in Molos, with the hot water bath administered by those especially appointed in the Muslim community. Because he was publicly known as a Muslim mullah, they held the Muslim service in the mosque, which was attended by many Muslims and officiated over by a mullah. He was buried in the Muslim cemetery.

With the news of the Armenian’s hanging and the sudden death of Mullah Molasleyman, the Christian community froze. Even the enthusiasts no longer spoke of revealing themselves. Late in the same summer, Osman Pasha himself reposed, and it was generally believed that his signature condemning the Armenian was too heavy for his soul and had killed him. With the Armenian’s death, Turkish extremism declined and even the Muslim community began criticizing the lack of religious freedom.

The crypto-Christians visited the Muslim cemetery for many years, quietly whispering memorial services and praying at the graves of Mullah Molasleyman and their other relatives. Later, after they revealed their Christianity, this was no longer allowed, as the Muslims did not want them to pray Christian prayers over the graves of their “Muslim” ancestors.

If you go to Turkey now, you may enter a Mohammedan cemetery even if you are not Muslim. At that time, however, if you were openly Christian (or later, when it was safe for the crypto-Christians to reveal themselves) you were not allowed to pray at the graves where your “Muslim” ancestors were buried, or even to enter the cemetery. It happened, however, that some very poor Trebizond families had built their houses onto the city wall overlooking the cemetery because this saved them the expense of one wall. My grandmother Aphrodite remembers that one of these two-storey houses was owned by an Armenian Christian widow and my grandmother’s family would pay a little money to the widow to allow them to serve an Orthodox memorial service for Mullah Molasleyman through the window overlooking his grave. These women, who came especially on the Saturday of All Souls,

were in truth new myrrh-bearers, faithfully fulfilling their duties to God and their beloved dead.

Unfortunately, this cemetery was destroyed by the Russian army in 1916 when they occupied Turkish Trabzon and extended the medieval road running through the city, so that the new neighborhoods outside could be reached directly without having to walk all the way around the city wall. The old cemetery was covered by what is now Maras Street, from the main square to the new gate.

The Closing of the Mines

After 1843, when new deposits of gold and silver were discovered in South Africa, the price of gold fell to one-tenth of its former value on the international market. The Sultan was able to obtain these precious metals for less than the cost of mining the ore in Turkey, and the Kromni mines began to close. By 1854, many Kromneans had emigrated to Batum and other cities on the Russian Black Sea Coast, where they could freely practice their Christianity. Others went to work in the Armenian mines, in a village called Alahkverdi (“God gives”) where Greeks still reside today, while the majority who stayed changed their livelihood to producing and selling metal-work objects.

Some of those who elected to stay within the Ottoman Empire left for other mines in Asia Minor – Cilicia and Ak Dag Magen, while other Kromneans changed professions completely, and in Trebizond or surrounding villages worked as builders, carpenters, shoe-makers, tailors, blacksmiths, bakers, coppersmiths, millers, and so on. Being crypto-Christian in the larger cities was more dangerous, because of the greater chance of discovery.

Faith Revealed: The *Hatti Humayun*

Under international pressure from Christian Europe, on February 17, 1856, seventeen years after authorizing the *Hatti Sherif of Gulhane*, Sultan Abdul Medjit I signed into effect the *Hatti Humayun*, an edict granting every Ottoman citizen freedom of religion and safeguarding the ability to change religions.¹⁰ However, he signed in complete ignorance of the great number of crypto-Christians waiting to reveal their faith.

¹⁰ Europe’s motives for exerting this pressure were only partially altruistic. By forcing the Sultan’s hand, they also sought to minimize Russian influence on the Christian minorities of Turkey with its offers of emigration and resettlement.



Trebizond (Trabzon) city walls.

Judiciously cautious, as they needed to be, the Pontic crypto-Christians were slow to declare their belief. The first was the “Muslim” doorkeeper of the Italian Consulate, Pehlil Tekiroglu. Basing his revelation on the *Hatti Humayun*, he disclosed his Christianity to his chief, the Italian Consul Fabri, who initially did not believe him, but once convinced, encouraged Pehlil to reveal his faith, pledging his support. Pehlil went to Hairedin Pasha, the governor of Trebizond, and subsequently appeared before a full quorum of the Idare-i-Meclisi, the Muslim court, on May 14, 1856. Three times, Hairedin Pasha asked him what he believed, and each time Pehlil confessed that he was baptized a Christian with the name Petros. Without any other formalities, Hairedin Pasha accepted him as a Christian with the name Petros Savva Sidiropoulos. One such person probably seemed an anomaly, an opportunity to show widespread toleration. Little did Hairedin Pasha guess that this was the breach in the dike.

At this time, Konstantinos III was still enthroned as the Greek Metropolitan of Trebizond, and in March 1857, a year after the revelation of Petros Sidiropoulos, 150 crypto-Christian village leaders went to the Monastery of Theodkepastos in Trebizond and inside the church took an oath to reveal their Christianity and to remain faithful in the face of exile or death. They signed a written oath, gathered a collection, and appointed two representatives, one of which was Petros Sidiropoulos and the other Dimitrios Voskopoulos, whose Muslim name was Suleyman. Sidiropoulos and Voskopoulos made the rounds of Constantinople’s European consulates presenting their resolution. With only one exception, they found the consuls deeply moved, accepting of the resolution, and promising to help. Their single rejection was by the English consul, A. Stevens, who saw them as liars and opportunists seeking to escape Turkish military service after the closure of the mines, and declared as much in a report to the British embassy in Istanbul.¹¹

The massive revelation fell like a bomb at the Ottoman Court, and the state renamed the crypto-Christians, *Tenesur Rum* (Those Who Rejected). Initially, the Turks accepted this incident with irony. In Trebizond they had a saying about Uzun Sokak, the city’s large commercial street, *Uzun Sokak*

camur oldu, Krumillar giavur oldu. (“Uzan Sokak filled with mud, and the Kromneans became infidels.”) After the revelation, the Turks called Kromni, *Küçük Yunistan* (Small Greece).

Then the reaction began: Ottoman authorities began registering the revealed crypto-Christians under both their Muslim and Christian names, and, as the mines closed, called them up for conscription. Non-Muslims had never been allowed to serve in the Ottoman army, paying a special tax instead, but if the former crypto-Christians were registered under their Muslim names, and no longer exempt from conscription by their work in the mines, they would be taking up arms against neighboring Christians, while serving in a Muslim army that considered them traitors and apostates. Further, revealed crypto-Christian children were not allowed to inherit property, goods, or money that had belonged to their “Muslim” parents.

To forestall these penalties, revealed crypto-Christian families began sending their young newly-married couples to southern Russia or Georgia to establish their families in a free Christian state. Others later left for Russian-controlled Batum and Kars, and by 1910 there were few former crypto-Christian families remaining in Pontus, although the number of professed Christians had actually increased.

Stavrin, the last Kromnean crypto-Christian village to reveal itself, did not do so until 1911, by which time Turkey had a constitutional government. The angry Turkish authorities demanded, “Where have you been for so long?” and the revelation seemed on the verge of backfiring until, bowing to European pressure, the Turkish National Assembly passed a resolution accepting the village as Christian.

Now, I have a story to close this period. At the first wave of crypto-Christian revelations, Ottoman administrative committees were set up in every area where crypto-Christians had begun declaring themselves. The committees were headed by a Turkish Muslim administrator representing the Ottoman government, a policeman, and a representative of the Greek Church. Each villager appeared in turn before his local committee, declared his faith, his real name, and was registered as a Christian.

One such committee operated in Tzevisluk, 27 kilometers from Trebizond, where, on a certain day, crypto-Christians from the surrounding villages were to come and register. Towards afternoon the lines had dwindled, and by night-fall the last villager had been heard. “So, we are finished,” said the policeman, closing the book. “Let us wait a bit longer,” replied Mullah Vaizoglu, the

¹¹ In his 1857 report, Stevens quoted the current census figures of 55 villages in the Kromni District: 9,535 Muslims, 17,260 newly revealed crypto-Christians, and 26,960 professed Christians. The Moslem figures may well include crypto-Christian villages and families who had not yet revealed their Christianity. A year later, Bishop Gervasios of Sebaste gives a figure of 25,000 revealed crypto-Christians throughout Asia Minor. The final number would be much higher as revelations of crypto-Christian villages went on until 1911. There are no figures for the many generations of crypto-Christians who preceded the *Hatti Humayun*.



Ruins of the great Trabzon monastery, Panagia Theoskepastos.

Ottoman administrator, “to be sure that there is no one else.” When some time had passed and no one else came, the mullah himself stood and said: “Register me as well. I am Georgios Kirittopoulos, the priest of Kapikioy.” Today this man’s descendants live in Kavala and Kozani in northern Greece; their name comes from the Greek word *Kyrix*, “the one who prays.”

We cannot overestimate the importance of these mullah-priests, who outwardly led their communities as devout Muslims, while keeping their secret Christian beliefs and traditions alive. Tonya and Of, the two originally crypto-Christian Greek-speaking areas that did not have a line of secret priests, surrendered their Christianity for Islam long before the 1856 revelation. In the illiteracy and darkness of the times, only Christ through His priesthood could sustain the spirit and souls of these simple peasants and keep the faith, like a bright flame, burning in their hearts. ✚

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Church of Hagia Sophia, Trabzon, now a museum.