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**TOWARDS HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS IN ARCHAEOLOGY:
A CASE FROM AN ISOLATED COMMUNITY**

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Abstract. Vakıflı is the only remaining ethnic Armenian village in Turkey and the last officially recognized Western Armenian speaking settlement in the world. From this point of view it is an isolated community, the investigation of which is of primary importance as a case in common historical and social processes. When in 1939 the Sanjak of Alexandretta was handed over to Turkey, the inhabitants of Vakıflı did not leave the Mount Musa, they still live there (ca. 150 Armenians). Considering Vakıflı from various cultural perspectives (geography, name, history, population, settlement, cemetery, temple, material culture, language, script, economy, communication, myth, feast, value system) an attempt is made to pass from ethnography to archaeology and to check the possibilities of archaeological reconstructions. In the meanwhile, the question is touched upon, to what extent archaeology is able to speak about the problems of cultural and ethnic identity. The observations demonstrate the diversity of cultural phenomena, as well as the complexity of their interpretation, thus emphasizing the importance of interdisciplinary research for understanding the historical and social processes in early societies.

Keywords: Vakıflı, Armenian community, ethnology, archaeology, identity, social and historical interpretations.

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Научная статья

К ВОПРОСУ ОБ ИСТОРИЧЕСКИХ ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИЯХ В АРХЕОЛОГИИ: НА ПРИМЕРЕ ОДНОЙ ИЗОЛИРОВАННОЙ ОБЩИНЫ

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Аннотация. Вакифли - единственная оставшаяся армянская деревня в Турции, которая является последним официально признанным западноармяноязычным поселением в мире. С этой точки зрения мы имеем дело с изолированной общиной, исследование которого имеет первостепенное значение для понимания исторических и социальных процессов вообще. Когда в 1939 году Александретский санджак был передан Турции, жители Вакифли не покинули гору Муса, они живут там до сих пор (около 150 армян). Рассматривая Вакифли с разных культурных точек зрения (география, имя, история, население, поселение, кладбище, храм, материальная культура, язык, письмо, экономика, коммуникация, миф, праздник, система ценностей), делается попытка перехода от этнографии к археологии и проверки возможности археологических реконструкций. Параллельно затрагивается принципиальный вопрос о том, насколько археология способна говорить о проблемах культурной и этнической идентичности. Наши наблюдения демонстрируют разнообразие культурных явлений, сложность их интерпретации, тем самым подчеркивая важность междисциплинарных исследований для понимания исторических процессов в ранних обществах.

Ключевые слова: Вакифли, армянская община, этнология, археология, идентичность, социальная и историческая интерпретации.

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Introduction

In an important article J. Evans correctly defines the island-societies as very important for the study of culture process, because they seem to be more conservative in keeping own traditions and identities: "...islands offer us the possibility of in some sense conducting 'experiments'. In this sense, then, it is valid to regard every island which has at some time the home of a human group as a laboratory for the archaeologists" [1, p. 520; cf. also 2, p. 223].

This contribution aims at presenting an example of an island-community Vakıflı. This is the only remaining ethnic Armenian village in Turkey, which is the last officially recognized Western Armenian speaking settlement in the world [3-12].

Below, based on a visit to Vakıflı in September 2003, I shall try to go from ethnology to archaeology testing the probabilities of historical and social reconstructions in archaeology.

Description of a modern isolated community

In *geographic* point of view Vakıflı is located on the Mountain of Moses (Arabic Jebel Musa, Turkish Musa Dağ, Armenian Musa Ler, 1355 m a.s.l.) in the Samandağ district of Hatay Province (formerly the Sanjak of Alexandretta), Turkey [5; 12]. It overlooks the Mediterranean Sea and is within eyesight of the Syrian border. Among the six former Armenian villages with ca. 6000 population on the slopes of this mountain (Vakıf = Vakıflı, Kebusiye = Kapısuyu, Hacı Habibli = Erikliköyü, Khdrbek = Hıdırbey, Bitias = Batıyaz = Teknepınar and Yoğunoluk), Vakıflı is the only one currently populated by the Armenian community of about 150 persons.

The *name* “vakıf” is the Turkish version of the Arabic “waqf” which means religious foundation or endowment. According to oral tradition, the original settlers of Vakıflı were a few families from the Armenian villages of Yoğunoluk and Khdrbek who used to cultivate religious properties adjoining the Alevi village of Kurtderesi. As those households reestablished themselves in Musa Dağ permanently, they named their new habitat Vakıflı.

As to the *history* of the village, until the beginning of the 19th century Vakıflı belonged to Yoğunoluk [3; 7; 11]. During the reign of Sultan Mehmed II (1808-1839), however, its ownership was transferred to a Christian Arab by the name of Muhayyile (Mukhayel). This story does not explain why Vakıflı changed hands, nor does it say how it was reverted to the Armenians. In any case, it can be maintained with relative certainty that Vakıflı emerged as a viable village in the 1880s. As such, it was the smallest of the six Armenian villages of Musa Dağ. After the World War I, Musa Dağ and the surrounding province of Hatay became part of French-administered Syria. The end of Turkish administration in the area enabled the Armenian inhabitants to resettle their six villages on the slopes of Musa Dağ. So, Vakıflı with other five villages, was under the rule of France for 20 years (1918-1938). Following an agreement between France and Turkey and a plebiscite, the district reverted to Turkey on June 29, 1939. After this move the main Armenian villages immigrated out of Hatay settling in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley, especially in Anjar where they built the town of Anjar, naming its six wards after the six villages of Musa Dağ. Some of them migrated to Soviet Armenia, establishing here the village Musa Ler, by Ejmiatsin. The reason why Musa Dağians of Vakıflı refused to leave is they believed that they could live peacefully in republican Turkey, which, according to them, undertook a new course.

The *population* of Hatay was and is one of the most cosmopolitan provinces of Turkey, home to communities of various background and religions including Turks, Arabs and Armenians, Sunni and Alevi Muslims as well as Christians of many denominations [6; 8; 9; 10]. The districts and the villages of Alevs, Sunnis and Christians were at different places. The Sunni Turks, who had huge amount of land, were the notables of the city. The Christians were involved in commerce and handicraft. The Alevs were suppressed by the government; they were patient and hardworking and generally worked with landowners. Recent estimates of Armenians found in Vakıflı vary between 25 and 38 families or between 135 and 150 individuals, mostly middle-aged and old. Young people move away. During the summer season, thanks to families returning to visit relatives, the numbers rise to 250-300 persons. An estimated

500 former residents of Vakıflı live in Istanbul. In addition to the Armenians, Vakıflı is home to one Kurd and one Turk(men) Muslim families.

The *settlement* is built on the slopes of the mountain in terraces. The houses are constructed by stone architecture typical for the Armenians, which is totally different from the mud-brick architecture of other peoples inhabiting Musa Dağ. This Armenian architecture is present also in other villages, where now Alevis and orthodox Muslims live. It goes about 2-3 stored well-preserved houses made by stone-bricks.

The *cemetery* is situated across the main road of Vakıflı. Here we can meet graves of Armenian Christians buried mainly during the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. The type of the main graves can be considered on the whole as Armenian, characteristic especially for the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries. Also new fashioned graves of white marble are present, however not typical for traditional Armenian tombs. All of them bear inscriptions in Armenian and Turkish.

The *temple* Surb Astvatsatsin (Holy Mother of God, Meryem Ana) was established in 1910. The structure consists of two long rooms and is not very typical for Armenian church architecture. A visiting priest celebrates mass in Vakıflı only occasionally. The church and community are run by a parish council, a council of elders, and the *Church-Loving Women's Guild*. Despite the problem's urgency, the government failed to grant permission for repairs for the next seventeen years, that is, until 1996, when the church, then almost in ruins, was restored.

The *material culture* of the people of Vakıflı is characterized by the same principles as in nearby villages of Musa Dağ and other Turkish villages, with no distinctive peculiarities. Only in the church and in some houses which still bear old Armenian artefacts, are supposed to be found special objects helping to define the identity of its bearers.

The *language and script* used by Vakıflı Armenians is local dialect of Armenian (*kistinik*) [cf. 3]. The villagers use Turkish in public and Armenian at home and in the village. Not all of them are fluent in Armenian. While the older generation can read and write in Armenian, most of the younger generation can not. While all school instructions, news media, and public signs are in Turkish, Vakıflı's Armenians are undergoing gradual linguistic assimilation. Those who want to learn Armenian have to go to an Armenian boarding school in Istanbul.

As regards the *economy* the villagers are generally involved in agriculture, bee-keeping and production of citrus fruits which they have during 12 months of the year from the trees of terraces constructed by their ancestors.

Concerning *communication* the Armenians of Vakıflı have good relationships with population of other villages and districts of the region. They have virtually no contact with the Musa Dağ Armenian diaspora, which, in addition to Lebanon, is spread all over the world. The communications are just with those villagers who work in Europe and come home on vacation, as well as with the Armenians in Istanbul.

For existence of any community, and especially for an insular one, is especially important to have *myths* justifying own existence. Among such myths first of all the story on the heroic fight in 1915 is worth mentioning. The Viennese writer Franz Werfel wrote a novel in 1933 based on this resistance: "The Forty Days of Musa Dağ". Werfel took the liberty of changing certain details to give the story biblical dimensions - 53 days became 40 days, and six villages became seven. This was the first step in mythologizing of a real story which was told to me once again by the oldest inhabitant of Vakıflı Avedis Demirci (Avetis Demircyan, 90 years old in 2003) who was baptized on the mountain during the resistance as he was "40 days old". In this sense, another myth is circulating

among the Armenian population of Vakıflı historically justifying their presence in that region. During the interview with me (30.09.2003) Avetis Demircyan told: "Our king Tigran reigned Antioch four years".

Festivals are the most important precondition uniting the Vakıflı people [cf. 6]. No matter where they are, if festival, they visit their village. The church of Vakıflı celebrates the Holy Mother of God feast in mid-August of each year. This also coincides with the traditional blessing of grapes. On these occasions, a ritual food called *harisa* is cooked and served to the numerous visitors.

These all traits define the *value system* of the Armenians of Vakıflı. Both at the beginning of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century the Armenians try to be isolated from Moslem communities of surroundings trying to keep own identity and keeping their unique value system. However, this is right only from the first sight. Samandağ still keeps its importance as a region where many people of different ethnic groups live and get on well with each other. The people of various religions sometimes celebrate the same festivals which are usually at the same day. Many religious places (e.g. tombs) are accepted as sacred by the people of different religions. All of these peoples have their own symbols, however, they share the state symbol reflected e.g. in Atatürk's statue in all villages of Musa Dağ. A symbiosis of architectural traditions and symbols is also present as it is the case in the nearby village Yoğunoluk, where within the old Armenian church St. Apostle Thomas we see the new Turkish wall and the new state symbol. So, we can insist in that the people inhabiting Musa Dağ, independent on their religious and ethnic belonging, act within the same cultural system and have similar, however not the same value systems. The differences in this system and intolerance of mutual values appear with politics such as it was in 1915 by the games of imperialistic states in this region.

Digging up the community in future

Now let us go some thousand years ahead, when the archaeologists are supposed to excavate the ruins of Vakıflı. Without finding the archive of Vakıflı, where the history of the village is told, they should rely mainly upon the data of material culture. What kind of evidence they could gain on social setting and identity of the villagers?

The *geography* itself hints nothing on the presence of the Armenians in this settlement because it is far from Armenia. Also the *name* (of course if it is known) will be misleading by clarification of the problem of ethnic belonging of the villagers, because it is Arabic. Investigating data on the *population* of the region, the archaeologists will see that Hatay was one of the most cosmopolitan provinces of Turkey, home to communities of various ethnic and religious background. However, these data will not allow speaking about ethnic composition of the settlement.

During the excavations of the *settlement* the archaeologists will discover houses constructed by stone architecture typical for the peoples inhabiting the region between the rivers Kura, Araxes and Euphrates. This architecture is totally different from the mud-brick architecture of Turkic and Arabic people of Musa Dağ and surroundings. First supposition is that the houses of the village could belong to such groups as e.g. the Armenians, who were one of the ethnic elements in the region some thousands years ago.

More clearness will appear after the excavations of the *cemetery*. The archaeologists will discover tombs buried in Christian rite. The type of the main tombs is very similar to Armenian one, especially from the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries AD. Some of the grave-stones bear inscriptions in Armenian and Turkish demonstrating Ar-

menian names and life dates. So, now it is clear that we deal with Armenian graves. However, some inscriptions are not in Armenian but in Turkish and the names do not have the ending “-y/ian”. The question is who are they?

Another group of archaeologists will work on a construction which is supposed to be the *temple*. The structure consists of two long rooms and is not very typical for Christian architecture. May be it is a Moslem mosque? However, soon the archaeologists find a metallic cross and Armenian inscriptions telling the name of the church and now it is clear that they deal with an Armenian temple.

The *material culture* of the settlement is the same as in other Musa Dağ villages without any distinctive peculiarities. Only in the temple and in some houses artefacts speaking on identity of its bearers have been found. These are mainly objects of service such as round copper plates which bear Armenian inscriptions.

The excavations will be visited by philologists who are interested in the *language and script* of the settlement population. Investigating the epigraphic materials they will find out that these are written in classical Armenian. However, the linguists will never know that the Armenians of the settlement speak a (Musa Ler) dialect of Armenian language and that they speak Turkish in public and Armenian at home and in the village.

In the same time, a group of archaeologists will excavate a two layer building. In the first layer they will find some stationery objects in another layer some metallic forks. There will be different suggestions on the function of this building. However, if not an inscription found, they will never know, that they deal with a house which was earlier a school building and later it was restored into a bed-and-breakfast house.

Excavations will demonstrate some aspects of the *economy*. It turns out that the villagers are generally involved in agriculture, bee-keeping and production of citrus fruits. The community is purely agricultural and not cattle-breeding. The animal rests have been found only in the garbages. The finds of pig bones confirm once more the presence of non-Muslim population in the village which was supposed earlier by the chemical analysis of a shard of a glass bottle on which traces of alcohol have been detected.

Only some foreign objects have been found from the site demonstrating the *communication* system of the site. It is clear that the village was integrated in the common cultural sphere of Musa Dağ and Antioch region. Some artefacts will hint on close connections to “Istanbul culture”.

No texts or artefacts will be found telling about the *myths* and mythological perceptions of the people inhabiting the settlement. Some specialists will suggest that the myth of “The Forty Days of Musa Dağ”, well known at the period of existence of the village, should be very important for them.

Some objects found from the church will tell that it was the place, where the *festivals* should take place. However, only written documents will help to reconstruct that the Holy Mother of God feast was celebrated here, which coincided with the traditional blessing of grapes and that on these occasions a ritual food called *harisa* was cooked.

After having a common image towards the site, the archaeologists will think over the *value system* of its population. The excavations demonstrate that this and also other sites of the region were integrated and various ethnic groups lived and got on well with each other. Though belonging to different religious and ethnic groups they have the same sacral places. All of these peoples have their own symbols, however, all of them share the common state symbol. An interesting case demonstrates the cultural

symbiosis: in the nearby village Yoğunoluk, within the Armenian church, the archaeologists find the Turkish state symbol of star and crescent, however they do not know if the church and the symbol chronologically belong to the same layer.

Conclusions

While creating a link between ethno-sociological and archaeological reconstructions we notice that many details, especially of behavioural nature, which we had in the first part have been lost in the second part. We see also that if not written sources we could not identify many of archaeological contexts as such. This observations uncover the relativity of social and historical reconstructions in archaeology, especially if we deal with problems of cultural and ethnic identity. Archaeologists used to define cultures in broad regions looking for a common (ethnic or religious) element. The case of Musa Dağ clearly shows that on a single mountain could exist in the same time more than three ethnic and religious groups which could be united within the same traits of material assemblage which the archaeologists used to call "archaeological culture". The case of Vakıflı can serve as a model for reconstruction of lost realities of the past by demonstrating that a distinctive ethnic group can continue its existence in other location as an "island", whereas in the main area of development of this culture it has already disappeared (I mean here Western Armenia).

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