

MIHAJLO BOŽOVIĆ  
IBN HALDUN UNIVERSITY, ISTANBUL

## CHRISTIANS IN MEDIEVAL ANATOLIAN POPULAR NARRATIVES

Islamization of Anatolia in the pre-Ottoman period that ranges from the first coming of Turkish nomads in 11<sup>th</sup> century until the rise of Ottoman state in 14<sup>th</sup> century represents one of the core aspects of transformation of Anatolia and one of the greatest changes in history. In this paper we would like to concentrate on determining ethnical, religious and social identification of Christian Anatolian population on the basis of the popular narratives of Anatolia like Battal-name, Danishmend-name and Saltuk-name. Focal point of the work would be the perception of Muslim Anatolian population of their Christian counterparts in terms of intercommunal and interreligious interactions. By comparing and contrasting the aforementioned narratives we will be closer to achieving reconstructive and multilateral insight into the world views these texts reflect on the basis of the information extracted from them. Analyses of the texts show us not only the attitude and viewpoint of the Muslims towards Christians in medieval Anatolia but are also the key sources of understanding the processes of Islamization that took place in the same time. In that sense some thoughts on allure and appeal of the mentioned narratives in the processes of Islamization will also find its place in this paper.

**Key words:** Islamization, medieval Anatolia, Christians, popular narratives, Muslims, Battal-name, Danishmend-name, Saltuk-name

### 1. Introduction

"And why are you screwing up your face like that and spitting? Because I mentioned a Turk? Well, you should think before you spit, because I may be Greek now, but I was practically a Turk then... When I came here I didn't even speak Greek... I still dreamt in Turkish some-

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\* mihajlobozovic88@gmail.com

times. I came here because the Christians had to leave, and they thought all the Christians like me were Greek, because the people who run the world never did and never will have any idea how complicated it really is..." (De Bernieres 2005, 20).

This passage from the well-known novel by English writer Louis de Bernieres entitled *Birds Without Wings* describes the situation in the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when majority of Greeks were made to leave their homes and their land and move to their new "real" home just because they were of different religion and of different ethnicity. But, as we see from the passage the woman in the book was not so happy because of the move as she should have been. She longed for the life she had back in Anatolia. When she was a Turk more than she was a Greek even though she was always a Christian. This passage sums up perfectly the complexity and the results that followed the events which originated way back in 11<sup>th</sup> century.

Since the first coming of Turks or better yet Turkic nomads to Anatolia in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century their encounters with the people of different religion was marked first of all by naming the other. This need was especially felt in the border areas or, as the academia concerned with Anatolian popular narratives terms it, frontiers where this need was intensified by constant interactions between diverse communities. All these interactions were not constantly war inclined but were actually driven by trade and peaceful coexistence for the best part of a year. As a way of explaining their reality people always tended to override its complexity and difficulties in a form that was closest to them and it almost always found its expression in a tale or a song. Realities that should have been overridden by the people of the medieval Anatolia were really complex ones. That reality included interactions between Muslims, Christians, Jews; Byzantines, Armenians, Arabs, Frenks or Crusaders, Turkmens, Persians and as we will see later on even Hungarians and Slavic people. All of these peoples lived in a place which constantly changed its rulers and so in one moment it was Byzantine Emperor, in another Seljuk amir or sultan, then a Mongol Emperor whose rule was executed by the same Seljuk sultan or another smaller emir who were his vassals, or a bey who had shifting allegiance towards his commander/s. And we must not forget that we are in a frontier region with no clear boundaries that allowed all these entities to mix, wildly.

Then, it should not come across as strange for us that the people of this region decided to express their realities in epic stories, legendary tales and warrior myths considering the well-established tradition

of such literary works found in the cultures of the surrounding regions<sup>1</sup>. There are different ways to name these narratives. In Turkish they are called *destan* or *menakı̄b name* depending on the main affiliation of the protagonist. In *destans* the protagonists' character is more inclined to the heroic undertakings or the physical, while in *menakı̄b names* the protagonists are characterized by a more spiritual or saintly attributes. English translation ranges from *epic tale* to *romance* and *hagiography*, Arabic would be *sira* (*siratun*) or *malhama* (*malhamatun*), French *chanson de geste*. I decided to focus my attention on, maybe, the three best known narratives of Anatolia and they are Battal-name, Danishmend-name and Saltuk-name. All of these stories of course have an ahistorical layer that is same for all of the tales of the genre and is represented in the elements like an unbeatable hero, with a special mount and a weapon of distinguished origin, a darling that needs his help or rescue, an enemy from whom he protects his people and whose troops he destroys with ease but never defeats completely. The importance that these narratives have in the analyses of the aforementioned social activities are obvious if we allude to the tripartite paradigm of premodern Middle Eastern Islamic cultures, that defines popular culture as a mean between elite and folk, and because of that deems that "access to popular culture is relatively open and its spread almost continuous throughout the whole of society in a specified cultural region" (Karamustafa 2015, 350). That is why it seems to us that the neglect of the analyses of the popular narratives was unjust and doing so will lead us to much needed contextualization of the historical facts.

## 2. The Narratives

Using these narratives, we acquire an overview of a continual chronotop that starts with SayyidHuseynBattal, a legendary warrior of Arab descent, who starts his Anatolian exploits just 200 years after emergence of Islam in the area concentrated around today's Malatya. The narrative was recorded for the first time during the rule of Alaedin Keykubad (1220–1237), but the oldest remaining manuscript is dated back to 1436–7 or the Ottoman period. The storyline continues with Danishmed-name in which MalikDanishmand, the founder of the Danishmendid dynasty, expands the area of the narrative from Malatya to Sivas and surrounding towns like Tokat, Niksar, Amasya and Kayseri. Also the timeline shifts to the end of 11<sup>th</sup> until the end of 12<sup>th</sup> century (1080–1177/8) when Dan-

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<sup>1</sup> Such works are represented by the Greek Digenis Akritas, Arabic Sirat Antara or Dhul-Himma, among many others, and Armenian Sasuntsi David.

ishmend principality was incorporated into Seljuk state. The narrative was first recorded for Izzeddin Keykavus II around 1279, but the oldest existing manuscript is not older than 1360–1 because there is still no mention of the Ottomans in it (Aydođan 2012, 107). Lastly, the longest narrative of the three Sarý Saltuk-name, follows the life of 13<sup>th</sup> century dervish warrior who traveled around Anatolia and later on the Balkans and Europe reaching as far as Rome. Because of its narration of the first waves of Rumelia's conquest it has great importance attached to it. This narrative was actually written down for Shehzade Cem in 1470's by Ebu'l Hayr Rumi who traveled around the Ottoman Empire for 7 years collecting the stories (Akalın 1988, III 365–366). As we can see in these narratives chronological order is followed by a spatial order that starts in the south-east Anatolia and gradually moves towards the west whereas the end of the frontier region is in the Balkans, the space which was concordant with the line of conquest.

All of these narratives have the same topic and it is *ghaza* or the war/jihad (spiritual and physical) against the infidels. In the narratives we find tendencies of gathering around a great warrior of *ghaza* like Battal, Melik Danishmend and Sari Saltuk, similarly to the gathering around the *beys* which formed *beyliks* after the fall of the Seljuk state. The narratives follow the framework of Heroic Cycle that constitutes four phases: The Rise of the Hero, The Love Story, Heroic Service and The Death of the Hero. Nevertheless, the main focus is on the Heroic Service while the Love Story is put on the sidelines and sometimes even excluded (Karamustafa 2015, 353). The difference between these narratives and the European ones is that Anatolian narratives are religious-heroic cycle whereas the European ones are amorous-heroic cycle. Still, the present classification of the narratives was not viable for the earliest European narratives in which the Love story sections were reduced to several lines, while some of the Arabic narratives had it as main topic (Bozovic 2015, 140).

### 3. Elements of Otherness

When considering the naming of the Other in the narratives, we must differentiate between the period when Islamic presence was concentrated only in Anatolia and the period of expansion to the Balkans because there was a naming shift evident at the time.

First of all, Anatolia or the Asian part of the Byzantine Empire was called *Rūm* or *Bilād u-Rūm* coming from the name of the city Rome, implying in that way the essence of Roman Empire which the Byzan-

tines constantly deemed as their predecessor and which continuation they were<sup>2</sup>. In this region according to the narratives the main enemy or the infidels were *Rumis*, but some *Franks/Frenks* could be found coming from *Fengistan* or Europe governed by *Pap* or the Pope. Later on when Islam spread to the Balkans it became Rum or *Rumeli* while Anatolia became *Yunan* and its ruler was seated in Kayseri. *Frengistan* became *Latin diyarı* (Aydoğan 2012, 109). Accordingly, in *Battal-name* the only infidels are *Rumis*, but in *Danishmend-name* we find three new ethnicities added: *Ermens*, *Gürcis* and *Çerkes*. Same is true for *Sarı Saltuk-name* in which we can find *Eflaks*, *Üngürüs*, *Almans*, *Lehs*, *Çehs* and *Rus* inhabiting Rum(eli), while Franks were divided into *Gedlan* (Catalonia), *Frence*, *Milan*, *Cinevis*, *Espan...* (Aydoğan 2012, 110).

Christian were usually called *kafir/kufar*, but words like *gebr*, *la'in*, *bi-din*, *din duşman* were also utilized to name the non-believers. Sometimes term *nasrani* was used or they were associated with other Christian-specific cultural markers such as church or monastery (*deyr*, *kilise*), clergy (*ruhban*, *rahib*, *papaz*, *patrik*, *keşiş*) or political elite (*tekfür*, *tefür*, *mihal*, *ban*, *kiral*, *kaysar-i rum*, *padişah*, *filyon*, *pap*). Common thing for the infidels was to be described as stupid, weak, corrupt, foolish and reduced to stereotypes. It can also happen that the narrator gives us a Christian character who describes a Muslim usually as a witch or a warlock (*cadu*), but these scenes are really rare. The same happens to the female Christians, whereas these scenes are narrated without any mysticism about it, as it refers to quite a usual thing. As we already mentioned, infidels or Christians were described as arrogant, ridiculous, amoral and because of these characteristics every attack of Muslims or every effort to convert them to the true religion was deemed valid and morally acceptable. Thus the use of the term *ghaza* was not strange to be recurrently employed in its both physical and spiritual meaning.

This process of attack and conversion is executed by the actions of the heroes of our epics who are supernaturally strong, wise, they possessed profound knowledge of both Islam and Christianity... Usually they were assisted in their exploits by Muslim holy men like *Hizr* and/or *Ilyas*. *Sarı Saltuk* even becomes some sort of a saint as he was blessed by *Hizr* which justifies the notion that this narrative should not be deemed as a *destan*, but rather as a *menakıb name* or hagiography. Even though these and other elements that can be found in the narratives give some indications towards the presence of the Shi'a influences in the region, the narratives abound with the confirmations that all the Muslims are

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed explanation see Cemal Kafadar, 'A Rome of one's own: cultural geography and identity in the lands of Rum', *Muqarnas* 24 (2007), pp. 10–18.

Sunni, which can also be the result of a later Ottoman interpolation in the written versions.

All of the religious actions in the narratives have purely political aim, so much so that it is narrated that prophet Mohammed order his community, and it was actually God's order, to destroy the monasteries of Rum and convert them to mosques and *madrasas*. Chief enemy was always the caesar from Istanbul who was usually named by his title. Descriptions of the Byzantine Emperor were totally in accordance with the Islamic worldview as he himself was gathering his *beys* and *vezirs* around himself, for example. Differences in the dressing styles are also obvious as heroes usually put on *Rumi* dresses or clergy gowns while Christian spies wear Muslim garments. This can only lead us to the conclusion that there was a clear distinction of the dressing styles between the communities, which may further on suggest the stricter implementation of some of the *shari'a* laws concerning *ahlul-kitab*. Christian clergy is the most hated enemy of the believers, but often those same clergy-men and especially monks are represented as crypto-Muslims who exercise Muslim or Sufi rituals in their monasteries. Army men and people on the high positions were represented as uncertain in their own religious belief and some of them easily accepted to convert in exchange for their lives.

#### 4. Conversion zeal

It is interesting to notice that even though the heroes were represented as very knowledgeable of Christianity, the facts seen in the narrative were not as accurate as we would guess. Christians were often depicted as fire<sup>3</sup> worshipers and even worshipers of the deities from the *jahiliyya* period Lat and Manat (Dedes 1996, 116). Muslim heroes in most cases give their defeated enemy a chance to convert before they kill him. If the conversion happens the infidel becomes a perfect believer who is already proficient in the religion, its practices and even religious phrases. This can be seen as a reassertion of the statement that Christianity is only a corrupted version of Islam, and that conversion only brings you back on the right path of both religions. Convert's religious convictions and eagerness overcomes the same feelings expressed by their older coreligionists. This forced conversion sometimes has an aspect of a good deed because heroes of the epics are saving the souls of the infidels from internal flames and damnation. Tijana Krstic states that in the

<sup>3</sup> Fire worshiping is expressed in Christians referral to Christ as *Nar-i Nur* meaning Fire of Light, which could be more easily understood in the context of Zoroastrianism.

early *ilm-ihal* (catechesis) literature<sup>4</sup> there were some unusual opinions concerning conversion benefits. In them it is being claimed that infidels who convert are entirely cleansed of sin or that they are going directly to heaven after death without giving any account of their lives on the Day of Resurrection (2011, 30–31). In the case of conversion soldiers and dignitaries have the opportunity to keep their possessions or it was returned to them after the conversion, which was a common practice in all of the newly conquered lands.

Conversion can come to pass even as a result of a bet between an infidel and a hero. When Christians convert to Islam of their free will it is usually preceded by the appearance of prophet Mohammed in their dreams. If the Christian is a female, prophet Mohammed does not only lead her to convert, but tells her who is the darling with whom she will marry. When we are talking about representation of women in these narratives, Christian women are the only ones who can influence Muslims to convert to Christianity. But this is, of course, done by the way of magic and spells. The convert regrets his conversion as soon as the charms are lifted. These scenes of Muslim's wrongful conversion due to the influence of a beautiful woman were really popular in the period and are present in some of the most distinguished literary works as Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*. Marrying and converting Christian women proved to be an important topic in the academia, especially because of the cultural and linguistic background they brought to the Muslim community. Not all of the Christian women had to convert in order to get married with a Muslim and they were relatively free to practice their religion which had a substantial effect on the upbringing of their children (Krstic 2011, 66). Rustam Shukurov explains how the dual parentage caused the development of a dual identity among the members of the Seljuk royal family. The important thing is that this duality was not intermixed and it was highly anti-syncretic (2013, 134).

Large groups of Christians convert to Islam only if a hero is proven able of producing one of Christ's miracles – resurrection, walking on water, transmutation – and these miracles are produced with the help of the previously mentioned holy men. Again, the reproduction of Christ's miracles was used as an attack on Christian belief with an aim to devalorize Christ and reject his uniqueness as the son of God representing him as a prophet and a holy man that was highly respected in Islam.

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<sup>4</sup> These narratives can also be analyzed in the light of didactic materials that had an obligation as literature of *ilm-ihal* to educate new converts how to behave like a good Muslim, thus increasing their conversion zeal.

The key theories that were introduced in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century concerning the mentioned conversions of the Christians were pioneered by the famous Turkish scholar Fuad Köprülü who explained these conversions through an elaborate schematics of influences emanating from heterodox *Sufi* mystics. These mystics, according to Köprülü, employed a specific kind of Christianized Islam, or more precisely Islam which incorporated different elements that were in many aspects contrary to the pure orthodox *Sunni* Islam, to attract new converts. In the more recent times this theory is being rejected and new theories are being introduced to explain this phenomenon. One of the leading theories of the conversion is the theory of the *interpretative communities* (Stock, 1983) that are gathered around different interpretations of the same text/object that connects them all. The other one is the theory of *metodoxy*. It comprises the notion of the people being above a distinct belief. *Metodoxy* is described in Kafadar's book *Between the Two Worlds* as: "... a state of being beyond doxies (beliefs), a combination of being doxy-naïve and not being doxy-minded, as well as the absence of a state that was interested in rigorously defining and strictly enforcing an orthodoxy (true belief)" (1996, 76). Nevertheless, Tijana Krstic challenges this doxy centered theory by the use of Brian Stock's *interpretative communities* and by highlighting the religious anti-syncretism and intercommunal workings towards peaceful coexistence.

## 5. Conclusion – And What About the Commoners?

In these narratives we come across three types of conversion and those are conversion of a soldier/dignitary, a Christian lady and a clergy-man. Why was it necessary to convert exactly these three groups of people and for that conversion to be promoted among the commoners who were the most affected by and exposed to the narratives? Reasons for promoting these conversions through the narratives are pretty obvious and they served to attract common people to Islamic rule or later on Ottoman Empire. The impact they had on the population of Anatolia can be explained through appeal of their oral performances by *medahs*, which proved to be the best way of overcoming the illiteracy obstacle found among the non-elites. Common people would, under the impression that the leaders of their communities are being converted to Islam, have concluded that they themselves should make the same step, especially if they will be provided with an economical gain from it like annulation of the tax and gaining access to the higher positions in the administrative system of the state. Conversion of Christian ladies facili-



tated interreligious marriage that was already allowed by the law. The biggest impression was made by the tales of the clergy conversions as representatives of Christian faith and community after the dissolution of an actual (Christian) state authority, that shattered the essence of the communal spirit.

Although the position of the academia on the Medieval Anatolian narratives is that there is no mention of conversions of the common people in them, still it does not exclude the common people completely from them. Common people like a peasant in the field, fruit seller or a poor old woman are actually present in the key moments of our heroes' adventures. They are always there to provide a hiding/resting place, help or food to the hero in trouble. They were not Muslims, but they were not forced to convert, either. Their dress was not specifically distinguished as Muslim or Rumi. They were actually other that was a common part of the Muslim world. From that we can conclude that exactly in these supporting roles we can find key for understanding coexistence and religious tolerance that were present in the pre-Ottoman period in Anatolia and that later on developed in the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, this conclusion leads us to the hypothesis of research that is yet to be conducted.

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### Summary

Islamization of Anatolia that started with the advancement of Turkic nomadic tribes to the Byzantines territories in 11<sup>th</sup> century brought forward a radical change in ethnical, religious and social identification of Christian Anatolian population. To determine how exactly this change come to pass we will use the three most famous popular narratives of the Medieval Anatolia Battal-name, Danishmand-name and Saltuk-name. The importance that these narratives have in the analyses of the aforementioned social activities are obvious if we allude to the tripartite paradigm of premodern Middle Eastern Islamic cultures, that defines popular culture as a mean between elite and folk. Using these narratives, we acquire an overview of a continual chronotop which gradually moves towards the west whereas the end of the frontier region is in the Balkans, the space which was concordant with the line of the contemporary conquest.

All of these narratives have the same topic and it is *ghaza* or the war/jihad (spiritual and physical) against the infidels. These infidels were *Rumis*, but some *Franks/Frenks* could be found coming from *Fengistan* or Europe governed by *Pap* or the Pope. Later on when Islam spread to the Balkans it became Rum or *Rumeli* while Anatolia became *Yunan* and its ruler was seated in Kayseri. Christian were usually called *kafir/kufar*, but words like *gebr*, *la'in*, *bī-din*, *din duşman* were also utilized to name the non-believers. Sometimes term *nasrani* was used or they were associated with other Christian-specific cultural markers such as church or monastery (*deyr*, *kilise*), clergy (*ruhban*, *rahib*, *papaz*, *patrik*, *keşiş*) or political elite (*tekfür*, *tefür*, *mihal*, *ban*, *kiral*, *kaysar-i rum*, *padişah*, *filyon*, *pap*). Because of their loose morals and corruptness every attack of Muslims or every effort to convert them to the true religion was deemed valid and morally acceptable. Thus the use of the term *ghaza* was not strange to be recurrently employed in its both physical and spiritual meaning.

Differences in the dressing styles are also obvious as heroes usually put on *Rumi* dresses or clergy gowns while Christian spies wear Muslim garments. This can only lead us to the conclusion that there was a clear distinction of the dressing styles between the communities, which may further on suggest the stricter implementation of some of the *shari'a* laws concerning *ahlul-kitab*. Christian clergy is the most hated enemy of the believers, but often those same

clergy-men and especially monks are represented as crypto-Muslims who exercise Muslim or Sufi rituals in their monasteries. Army men and people on the high positions were represented as uncertain in their own religious belief and some of them easily accepted to convert in exchange for their lives. If the Christian is a female, prophet Mohammed does not only lead her to convert, but tells her who is the darling with whom she will marry. Marrying and converting Christian women proved to be an important topic, especially because of the cultural and linguistic background they brought to the Muslim community. Not all of the Christian women had to convert in order to get married with a Muslim and they were relatively free to practice their religion which had a substantial effect on the upbringing of their children.

Reasons for promoting these three types of conversion through the narratives are pretty obvious and they served to attract common people to Islamic rule. The impact they had on the population of Anatolia can be explained through appeal of their oral performances by *medahs*, which proved to be the best way of overcoming the illiteracy obstacle found among the non-elites. Common people would, under the impression that the leaders of their communities are being converted to Islam, have concluded that they themselves should make the same step, especially if they will be provided with an economical gain from it like annulation of the tax and gaining access to the higher positions in the administrative system of the state. Conversion of Christian ladies facilitated interreligious marriage that was already allowed by the law. The biggest impression was made by the tales of the clergy conversions as representatives of Christian faith and community after the dissolution of an actual (Christian) state authority, that shattered the essence of the communal spirit.

Question if the position of the common people in the narratives is one which answer was never directly presented. Common people like a peasant in the field, fruit seller or a poor old woman are the supporting roles in which we can find key for understanding coexistence and religious tolerance that were present in the pre-Ottoman period in Anatolia and that later on developed in the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, this is one of the questions on which we will base our further research.