

## Crimean Khans / “Sultans” Giray in the Local History of Gerlovo Region

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The Dynasty of the Tatar khans Giray / Geray<sup>1</sup> in Crimea ruled the Crimean khanate from 1427 to 1475/1478 when the High Gate overruled it.<sup>2</sup> To guarantee loyalty to the official authorities, the Tatar princes “sultans”<sup>3</sup> were sent to an honorary exile in the Ottoman Empire. There they received lands and people to rule on the islands of Rhodes and Lemnos, around Silivria, Visa and Serres.<sup>4</sup> In the Balkans during the period from the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Giray princes first settled in the present southeastern Bulgaria (in the region of Yambol, Karnobat, Sliven), and later on in the area of Gerlovo (the village of Varbitsa).<sup>5</sup> If, initially, the Girays were hostage to the Ottoman rule, after the Crimean khanate (1783 – 1792) was destroyed, they gradually established

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1 The name is found with different spellings: Giray, Gerej, Keray, Girey, Gerey.

2 Петър Груев, „Върбишките султани”, *Марица*, 477/01. 04, Пловдив 1883, s. 2- 3; Васил Маринов, *Герлово. Областно географско изучаване*, София 1936; Петър Миятев, „Потомки крымских Гиреев и их господство в некоторых частях Болгарии”, *Ученые записки института славяноведения АН СССР*, 16, Москва 1958, pp. 288 – 303; Елена Грозданова, Стефан Андреев, „Османски документи от XVII – XVIII в. за татарските султани от династията на Гираите в българските земи”, *Библиотека*, 10, София 1995, с. 30 – 36; Петър Чолов, „Кримските ханове и султани Гераи и България (XV – XIX в.)”, *Българите в Северното Причерноморие. Изследвания и материали*. V, Велико Търново 1996, pp. 245 – 254; Стоян Антонов, *Татарите в България*, Добрич 2004; Д., Борова, „Татари и черкези в Ямболска област (XV – XIX в.)”, *Известия на музеите в Югоизточна България*, XXI (2004 – 2005), pp. 199 – 207; Halil İnalçık “Girāy”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W. P. Heinrichs, 1986.

3 In the state tradition of the Crimean Khanate, the “sultan” is associated with the male representatives of the dynasty, who are also potential rulers, and only the sovereign is designated with the title “Khan”.

4 Миятев, *age.*, p. 290.

5 Мария Михайлова-Мръвкарлова, *За кримските татари от Североизточна България*, София 2013, p. 28; Стамен Михайлов, „За „султаните” и сарая във Върбица”, *Известия на Археологическия институт*, XXIII, София 1960, p. 145.

themselves as local feudal lords, owners of farms, and later became an essential factor in the life of the whole area of Gerlovo.

Giray “sultans” settled in Varbitsa probably in the second half of the seventeenth century, and according to some researchers, in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, even when Bulgaria became an independent state, the heirs of the dynasty were active participants<sup>7</sup> in the region’s life until 1972 when they finally moved to Turkey. Even today, the population of the village of Gerlovo talks about the traditions of the Gerays. Thus, the memory of them becomes an indispensable part of the oral history of the Gerlovo region, including legendary testimonies, personal memories and popular historical knowledge. Such memory is often based on the written and published texts and keeps traces of native mythology.

This article is part of more extensive research. It aims mainly at outlining and systematizing the major themes and motifs related to the Gerays in the oral history of Gerlovo. For this purpose, we analyze specific, poorly researched materials collected as a result of field research in the region (Varbitsa, Stanyantsi, Mingishevo, etc.) and stored in the State Historical Archive in Shumen and in the Regional History Museum in the town of Targovishte.

## 1. Gerays in Gerlovo

There is no unanimous opinion in historiography about Girays’ settlement in Varbitsa. The main sources of information are oral testimonies and recorded legends. Some of them are the following:

*The legend about Girays’ settlement in Varbitsa.* The information is based on a family saga, which says that in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, many villages in Gerlovo became a possession of Khan Mesut Giray. “For one to two centuries they were the only and unlimited feudal lords in Gerlovo, granted by the High Gate with great privileges.”<sup>8</sup> According to a story by Lütfi Giray, his ancestors settled in Varbitsa at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> or the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup> An additional date indicated is 1122/1710 on a plate built in a fountain (ibid). According to

6 Михайлов, *age.*, pp. 146-147; Антонов, *age.*, pp. 45-46.

7 Mehmedali Geray Mesudov is a member of the Bulgarian National Assembly in 1911, 1911 – 1913; 1923; 1927 – 1931.

8 Минко Пенков, „Турски архивни документи за черкезите в Герлово”, *Известия на Народния музей – Шумен*, IV. Шумен 1967, p. 151, № 68.

9 Михайлов, *ibid*, p. 147.

another version reported by Mehmedali Giray, this happened a century earlier, presumably in 1677.<sup>10</sup> In the 1980s it was reported that the Girays arrived in Varbitsa “240 years ago”, i.e. about 1640.<sup>11</sup>

*The legend for their relationship with the Ottoman authorities.* According to another story, there was a sacred union between the sultans of the Ottoman Empire and the family of the Crimean khans. Such an idea contains the statement about the ambitions of the Vidin ruler, Osman Pazvantoğlu,<sup>12</sup> supported by the “sultan” of Varbitsa.<sup>13</sup> It was recorded earlier by Sofronii Vrachanski: “But there was a hearsay that they had discussed with Pazvantoğlu the sultan to become (the king), and Pazvantoğlu a vizier...”<sup>14</sup> Eighty years later, this legend is still alive but relates to “Cingiz Gerey’s” brother and Mustafa Tristenikoğlu<sup>15</sup>: “When in 1808 he went to Constantinople he informed his benefactor Mehmet Gerey to come to Constantinople, where he would act to make him a king, and Gerey to make him a vizier... Even today it is said in Varbitsa that if there is no heir of the Turkish royal family, they would choose a king among these sultans”<sup>16</sup> Due to scarce information, the problem of these relationships is still not clearly defined, but according to some researchers, the story is based on a historical truth.<sup>17</sup> Quite naturally, the deficiency of written documents in that era allows for trust in oral testimonies. As it is stated there, the versatile images of the “sultans” in the region of Varbitsa assert them as powerful local rulers, who conduct an independent politics in regard to the High Gate, which makes them potential contenders for the supreme power in the Ottoman Empire. Such elements turn into popular ideas and go into the scientific publications on the subject and mark an indicative trend developed later in the local historiography.

10 Маринов, *ibid*, p. 57.

11 ДИА – Шумен, Ф. 99к, оп. 1, а. е. 124.

12 Osman Pazvantoğlu (1758 – 1807) an Ottoman feudal lord, who received villages in Vidin for the his favours to the sultan and in 1799 became an independent ruler with his own army.

13 This is probably Cingiz Giray, and the event is the beginning of the Austro-Turkish war (1778 – 1791): Н. М. Дълевский, А. Н. Робинсон, *Софроний Врачанский. Жизнеописание*. Ленинград 1976, p. 133, № 219.

14 Софроний Врачански, *Житие и страдания грешнаго Софрония*, София 1981, p. 55.

15 Ismail aga Tristenikoğlu – governor in Ruse: Р. Мантран, *История на Османската империя*, София 1999, pp. 442-443.

16 ДИА – Шумен, Ф. 99 к, оп. 1. а. е. 124, 4.

17 П. Орешков, Няколко документи за Пазвантоглу и Софроний Врачански, *Сборник на БАН*, III/ 2, София 1914, с. 1-54; Дълевский, Робинсон, *аге.*, p. 114, № 74; 120, № 110; 133, № 221.

*The legend for the establishment of the settlements.* Upon settling in Gerlovo, Mesut Giray comes into possession of the villages of Karagözler (now Çernoookovo), Alvanlar (today Yablanovo), Karaatlar (now Vrani kon), Rahmanlar (Kraygortsi).<sup>18</sup> In the legends the establishment of some settlements in the region of Varbitsa is related to Girays' activity. According to some verbal information recorded in the 1930s, the Girays were accompanied by subordinates who settled in their domains and were called "köle", "köpek" and "softa".<sup>19</sup> These people founded the following settlements:

*Kölmén* (from "köle" – 'slave'), i. e. this is 'slaves' village'.<sup>20</sup> In M. Penkov's words: "The story says that the Girays' farm was at the place of today's village and one day, walking around with his people along the river, the Sultan said, "I will give my property on the opposite bank of the river to the one of you who dares to swim across Kamchia now when its water is the deepest." The bravest of his slaves won the bet. The newly-established village was called Köleköy – 'the village of slaves', or Kölemen, or Kölmén, or Kölemin and Kö/ülemen.<sup>21</sup> The "sultan" of Varbitsa often said: "*Kölemin köyüne giderim.*" / "I'm going to the village of my slave."<sup>22</sup>

The origin of the name of the village of Köpekköy (Köpekli, Köpek) is interpreted differently. According to one version, it comes from "köpek" – "dog", and it is explained that the "sultan's" people faithful as dogs have settled there.<sup>23</sup> According to another version, the old name of the village was Göbekköy, as it was located at the center of Gerlovo's göbek.<sup>24</sup> According to a third version, this is related to the word "küpe" – "earring", since the village was the most beautiful in the sultan's

18 ДИА – Шумен, Ф. 99к, оп. 1. а. е. 124, 4а.

19 Йордан Йорданов, *История на гр. Върбица*. Част втора. Гираите, Шумен 2006, р. 28.

20 Part of the Turkic colonists in the Balkans in the 16th century are released slaves: М. Кил, "Анатолия преселена? Модели на демографски, религиозни и етнически промени в района на Тозлука (Североизточна България) 1479 – 1873", *Град Омуртаг и Омуртагският край. История и култура*. Том 2, Омуртаг 2003, 246; Р. Ковачев, Османските регистри за казата Ала Клисе (Осман пазарь) от втората половина на XV-XVI в., *Град Омуртаг и Омуртагският край. История и култура*. Т. 2. Велико Търново 2003, pp. 302-303.

21 In 1867-1868 the lands of the village of Gölmen were transformed into their own farm: Б. Матеев, „Ценни документални материали за върбишките султани Герай”, *Исторически преглед*, XIII/ 2, 1956, p. 117.

22 Минко Пенков, „Селища и селищни имена в Герлово”, *Известия на Народния музей – Шумен*, VI, Шумен 1973, pp. 291-292, 308.

23 Йорданов, *ibid*, p. 28.

24 Пенков, *ibid*, p. 293.

domain and resembled the earrings of a maiden - therefore today’s name of the village is Mengishevo.<sup>25</sup>

The village of Sofular/ Sofiler (today’s Malomir) was established by a third group of people who accompanied the “sultan”. According to one version, the name comes from “softa”, i.e. “wanderer”, and according to another - from the Arab “sofu” or “sofi”/ “sufi” – “mystic, sage, philosopher” (ibid). This is a more likely version, given the spread of Islamic mysticism in the area.<sup>26</sup> An Ottoman document from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century indicates an older name of the village - Hoşkadem, which has been forgotten (ibid).

There is a legend that the village of Duracakköy (today’s Stanyantsi) is founded by Anatolian migrants, “brought by the Giray “sultans” to cultivate their land.”<sup>27</sup> They called the place “Duracak yer”, that is, ‘a place where a person can stand, stop or settle’. According to elderly residents of the village it was founded around a farmhouse, probably the sultan’s “mülk” (property), which is related to the other name of the village - Çiflik Mahallesi and the fountain - Çiflik Çeşmesi.<sup>28</sup> According to the modern records, the settlement arises around a spring found by a sultan’s worker/ shepherd. Today this spring is turned into a fountain (Çiflik Çeşme), located in Çiflik Mahalle, and the street to the fountain is called Çiflik Çeşmesi. Thus the toponymy keeps information about a former farm, and – a faint memory of a distant connection with the “sultan’s” participation in the establishment of the settlement.

In the local memory, probably the information about migrations of Muslims from Anatolia to Northeastern Bulgaria after the 16<sup>th</sup> century is mixed with the memories of the Girays’ participation in the life of Gerlovo area. Additional studies on local toponymy may add new, still vital testimonies about the commitment of the memory about the sultans to the local oral history. However, the results of such surveys are heavily dependent on the demographic changes in the area.

## **2. The Legend about Asian Gerila (Geray) from Gerlovo**

The handwritten history of the Papazov family from the village of Vardun, Targovishte is kept at the Regional Museum of History in Targovishte. It was

25 Йорданов, *ibid*, p. 28; Маринов, *ibid*, p. 80.

26 Пенков, *ibid*, p. 293, 294, 302.

27 In the late 1950s, there are written records of the Turkic colonization of Gerlovo: Кил, *ibid*, p. 275.

28 Пенков, *ibid*, p. 298, 307; Маринов, *ibid*, p. 62.

recorded in the 1980s by Colonel Stoyan Yordanov Papazov, born in the village of Vardun. According to the recorder, they reflect memories of more than sixty years ago. Sources of this story are family narrations and legends, personal memories and impressions, probably chronicle notes and fragments of the native mythology of the descendants of the Giray “sultans”.

As the legend says, the conversion of the local Christian population and the settlement of Turkic colonizers in the region are related to the fact that Assen Gerila, a boyar’s son of the Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Shishman (1350-1395), accepts Islam and the name Asian Geray.<sup>29</sup> The family history presents a legendary version of the dynamic historical processes and events during the Ottoman era in the area of Gerlovo: migrations; colonization of Turks and Yürüks from Asia; Tatar migration from Crimea; relationships of the indigenous Christian population with the newcomers; processes of conversion into Islam, etc.<sup>30</sup> The whole narrative abounds in folk motives – the lost kingdom and the betrayal of faith. This proves that it is shaped by the strong influence of the local song and legendary tradition.

An important place in the family history takes the evidence about the Bulgarian origin of the population from a number of villages in Gerlovo area and especially the indirect and legendary testimonies about the Bulgarian line in Gerays’ genealogy.<sup>31</sup> Such is the story of the adopted Bulgarian boy by “Sultan Geray”, whom he educates in Christianity. Similar suggestions give the examples of patronage of the Gerays on local Christians against rapists and assailants, the “kinship” relationship between Papazov’s heirs and the Gerays, and especially their decision to remain in Bulgaria after the 1880s (ibid).

Significant element in this legend is the relation of the Girays with the toponymy and in the festive tradition of the Muslim population of Gerlovo. In the Kartali/Kırtallı area, not far from the village of Bozhurka, Targovishte, the holiday Baba konu, which is celebrated in July and August, gives the name of the area today.<sup>32</sup> According to the legend, the name “Baba konu” – “father has settled or returned” is associated with the return and settlement of the Girays in Gerlovo.<sup>33</sup>

29 РИМ Т-ще, №36, 3.

30 Р. Стойков, „Селища и демографски облик на Североизточна България и Южна Добруджа през втората половина на XVI в.”, *Известия на Варненското археологическо дружество*. Т. XV. Варна 1964, pp. 97 – 118.

31 РИМ Т-ще, №36, pp. 4-5.

32 N. Hasanova, “Babakondu Geleneğinin Geçmişi ve Bugünü”, *Uluslararası Söz, Sanat, Sağlık Sempozyumu*, Edirne 2016, pp. 250-254.

33 РИМ Т-ще, №36, p. 6.

The legend of Asian Gerila from Gerlovo is part of an indicative trend in the oral history of the region. Local legends recorded in the 1960s and 1980s represent the Gerays as patrons of Christians and Bulgarophiles, their wives are Bulgarian, etc. Thus the local memory overcomes the negative ideas about the masters, and the memory of the Girays becomes an inseparable part of the oral history of the Gerlovo region.<sup>34</sup>

### 3. “Sultans” and Sarai in the local memory

In the verbal history of the people of Varbitsa, associated with the “sultans”, there is a property they have inhabited, called even today “Saraia”, which is emblematic in its character. The wooden building has been repeatedly burned and rebuilt (in 1800, 1808-1809, 1835). The last Sarai was built in the 1930s by Usta Kolyo Ganchev.<sup>35</sup> In the 1950s it was proclaimed a monument of culture of local importance, and in this respect the architecture and decoration of the building were well documented.<sup>36</sup> After the family had left in 1972, the building was not maintained, gradually dilapidated and completely burnt after a fire in 1984.

In the Ottoman language there is a well-known eulogy in honor of Masud Geray for the construction of the Sarai in Varbitsa.<sup>37</sup> It points out the date 1251/1835 and mentions the names of the poet who composed the inscription Akif and the calligraphist, Hacı Hüseyin Hamdi.<sup>38</sup> Local people also know a legend about a tragedy for the firing of the Sarai in the 1850s, which is portrayed in G. Rakovski's poem “Gorski patnik” (‘Forest Traveller’).<sup>39</sup>

Some local names are also associated with the Sarai. According to P. Gruev:

34 Венета Янкова, Бюлент Кърджалъ „Кримските ханове/султани Гирай в устната история на Върбишкия край”, *Uluslararası Söz, sanat, Sağlık Sempoziumu*, Edirne 2016, pp. 234-241; Венета Янкова, “Предания за „султаните” Гирай от Върбица и у-свояването на другостта”, *Хармония в различията*. Ж. Назърска, С. Шапкалова (съст.), София 2017, pp. 236-243.

35 Михайлов, *ibid*; М. Пенков, „Върбишките султани Герай”, *Коларовградска борба*, №60, 1956; Й. Стоилов, Й. Йорданов, *История на град Върбица*. Шумен 2004, p. 61.

36 Михайлов, *ibid*; Hans-Jürgen Jornrumpf, Zafer Karatay, “Şumnu Vilayeti'ndeki Virbitsa'da Kıpın Hanlarının Sarayı.” *EMEL*, No. 208, Ankara 1995, pp. 19 – 22.

37 К. Венедикова, “Няколко срещи с изтъкнатия османист на Шумен и Шуменско Минко Пенков”, *Места на всекидневието на Балканите*. В. Янкова, И. Саръиванова (ред.), Шумен 2015, pp. 205-206.

38 К. Венедикова, „Епиграфски паметници, посветени на образованието и културата”, *От регионалното към националното – просветното дело и музеите*. Хр. Харитонов (съст.), Велико Търново 2016, pp. 207 – 219.

39 Г. С. Раковски, *Съчинения в четири тома*. Подбор и редакция: Кирил Топалов. Том първи. София 1983: 194 – 202; Стоилов, Йорданов, *ibid*, p. 54; Йорданов, *ibid*, p. 36.

“They built the Sarai above the village in a high and pleasant place, now called “Sarayska polyana” (‘a Sarajan meadow’). In the village of Varbitsa there was Sarai mahalesi.<sup>40</sup> Vasil Marinov registered in the 1930s the toponyms: Sultan mezari (Sultan cemetery), Sultan’s kuria/koru (Sultan’s forest), Sarai fountain, Sarai neighborhood.<sup>41</sup> Around the Sarai there was the famous Gül bahçe.<sup>42</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The Crimean “sultans” Giray settled in Varbitsa at the will and favor of the High Gate. The memory of them and the symbolic places associated with their lives and activities today are perceived as a significant part of the historical memory of the people of Gerlovo. What is important for such memory is not so much the historical correctness but the generalized image of the local rulers, their relation to the local landscape and its reclamation. This explains the existence up to now of Giray loci in the toponymy among which the symbolic presence of Sarai is emblematic. The absence of preserved material evidence of the past is offset by verbal sagas, legends, memoirs, etc. The image of the Gerays is aristocratic, their high status in the social hierarchy then determines their independent behavior with regard to the central Ottoman rule. Moreover, the tendencies to assimilation of the ideas of the local rulers, their approximation to their own, Bulgarian ideas and Gerays’ gradual demythologization are also illustrated by the local Christians. Thus, the former feudal masters are conceived as “their nobles”, who have Bulgarian ancestry and protect their Christian subjects from violence and outrage. That is why the work of the Girays’ heirs for the prosperity of the region, their participation in the life of Gerlovo after the 1880s, contributes to the family myth, which the family consistently builds and maintains. To the inclusion in the local memory undoubtedly contributes the immediate impression of the native Varbitsa people about Girays’ heirs, their personal contacts with them and the common “shared life”. Such a generalized notion, mostly cleared from the negative nuances of mythology and from the details of the objective truth and scientific facts, spreads an important message: the prestige of the aristocratic Girays traced in Gerlovo’s past. This adds a unique touch to the peculiarity of the regional historical memory.

40 ДИА – Шумен, Ф. 99к, оп. 1, а. е. 124.

41 Маринов, *ibid*, pp. 57-60.

42 К. Бойчева, „Върбишките султани носят и българска кръв”, *Вестник за жената*, бр. 10/10. 03. 1994, p. 10.



### **Application**

Stanyantsi Köyü'nün en eski adı Duracak'tır (Bu durabilecek olduğun yer anlamına gelir). Onun yapılanması Sultan Mesut Geray'ın emri ile ilgilidir. Sultan hizmetkârı olan Osman'a kendisine ev kurmak için bir yer bulmasını emretmiş, ancak bu yer, yardımına güvenebilmesi için onun konağına yakın olması gerekmiş. Çevreyi dolaşırken Osman Dede, doğal su kaynağı olan cazibeli bir yer bulmuş ve hayatını bu yerde sürdüreceğine karar vermiş. Böylece o, Duracak Köyü'nün kurucusu olmuş ve Hacı Osman sülalesinin temelini atmış. O, Mekke'ye hacılığa giden tek kişi imiş. Daha sonra bu köye Anadolu, Konya'dan Hatip Oğulları kabilesi yerleşmiş. Onlara berber cinsinden iki kuzen olan Koca Hüseyin ile Koca Mustafa katılmış. Böylelikle köy büyümüş. Daha çok evler yükselmeye başlamış...”

Recorded by student Fatme Hüdail, Turkish department, University of Shumen  
(2018)

## Archives

ДИА – Шумен, Ф. 99к, оп. 1, а. е. 124. – Public historical archive of Shumen

РИМ Т-ще, №36. – Regional museum of Targovishte

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**Appendices**



The Sarai (by: Йорданов 2006)



Tombstones from Sultan's graveyard (photo: Veneta Yankova, 2015)

