

A History of Sürmene, Pontos

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Pontic Historian and Ethnologist (2024)

Introduction

Sürmene is a town on the Black Sea coast in north-east Türkiye (Pontos), 40 km east by road of Trabzon (Plate 1, Fig. 1). The population of Sürmene is estimated at 26,000 (2022). It experiences an increase in summer due to the influx of tourists. The main industries of the region are fishing, agriculture and tourism (due to its natural beauty) (Ismail et al. 2023). The Manahoz River runs north 30 km to the Black Sea at Sürmene. Sürmene had a continuous Greek history until 1923 (Bryer et al. 1972–1973). The area has a peculiarity in that some Muslim Turks in some of the surrounding villages still speak *Romeyka*, an old Greek dialect.



Plate 1: Sürmene, Black Sea coast, north-east Türkiye (2018,
www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_lgl3whw9c)

History

It is assumed that ancient Greeks colonised Sürmene sometime after Greeks from Sinope had colonised Trabzon in the 6th century BC. Initially, the Greeks probably had to force the indigenous Anatolian natives from the Sürmene area. According to Bryer et al. (1972–1973) there is no evidence of Greek monuments in the town.

Although the army of Alexander the Great (336–323 BC) defeated the Persians in Anatolia, the Greeks did not march north to conquer the Black Sea coast. These areas however, eventually accepted Greek authority (Şerifoğlu and Bakan 2015). In 302 BC, Mithradates I of Persian descent, established the kingdom of Pontos (Roller 2020). Mithradates and kings from the same family ruled over the area from Heraclea (west of Sinope) east to Trabzon on the Black Sea coast until Mithradates VI was defeated by the Romans in 64 BC (Erciyas 2001).

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Fig. 1: Trabzon to Rize, Black Sea coast in north-east Türkiye, (Trabzon to Sürmene = 35 km, Crow and Bryer (1997:285))

The kingdom of Mithradates VI which encompassed Pontos and other areas around the southern, eastern and north-eastern Black Sea area was eventually absorbed within the Roman empire. Then it became part of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) empire.

The site of Arakli Kalesi (inland from modern Araklı, north-west of Sürmene) was a Roman fort which was visited in the early 2nd century by the Roman governor of Cappadocia (Fig. 1). In the 5th century a Roman garrison was mentioned there. The Kara Dere [Black River]² and the town of Arakli, is 5 km west of Sürmene (Fig. 2). The mountaintop at Aho Tepesi (south-west of Sürmene) was probably a late Roman or Byzantine outpost (Crow and Bryer 1997:283, 288).

As a result of the Fourth Crusade's sacking of Constantinople in 1204, the small Komnenoi Byzantine empire of Trebizond in north-east Anatolia, was formed (1204–1461). With the surrender of Trabzon to Ottoman sultan Mehmed II in 1461, a process of Islamisation began in Sürmene and the Anatolian north-east.

East of Trabzon, it would seem that in the latter half of the 16th century there was a population movement from Of (Fig. 2) westward into the Sürmene valley (Poutouridou 1997:53).

Since at least the Middle Ages, the villagers around Sürmene have produced goods such as butter, cheese, wool, hides, beans, flax, hazelnuts, hemp, maize and squash and undertaken activities such as boat-building, anchovy-fishing and cloth-dyeing (Meeker 2005).

Until recently, it was Sürmene rather than Trabzon that offered the shortest path from the coast to the trade routes of the interior. This enabled Sürmene to compete commercially with the much larger Trabzon. The topography of Sürmene, however, posed a security risk. The foothills rise so abruptly from the bay that in the 18th and 19th centuries they proved ideal sites for the local elites to build fortified residences from which they competed for control of the town. Sürmene, as a result,

² Words within square brackets [] within a reference are the author's words.

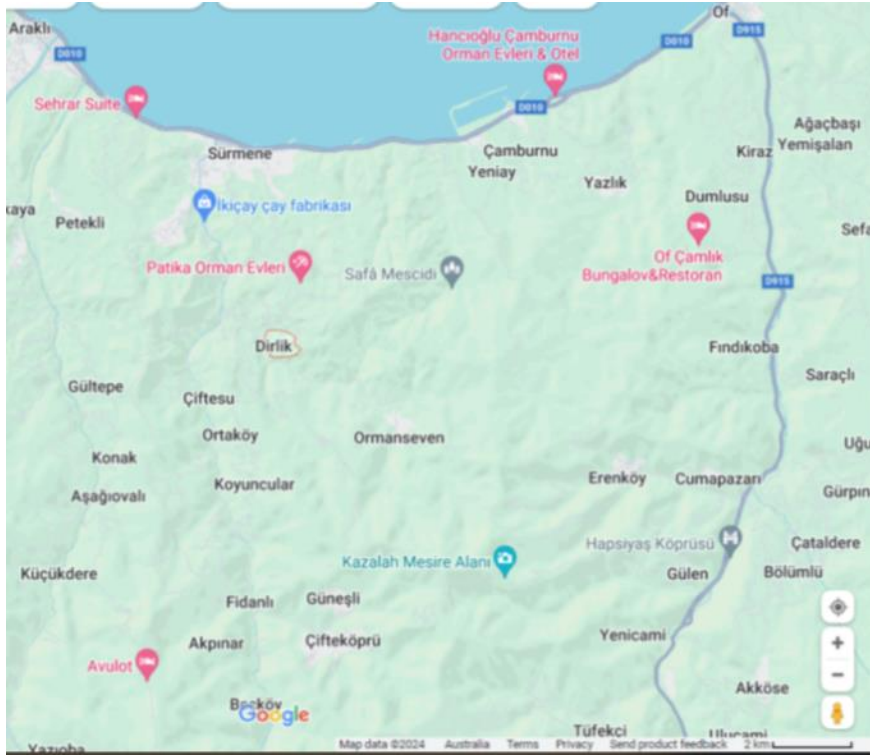


Fig. 2: Sürmene area, north-east Türkiye (Sürmene to Of = 13 km, Google maps)

became a place of both architectural interest and social disorder (Meeker 2005).

These fortified residences also served as places of government. By the 1830s, the Ottoman provincial government had destroyed the older fortified hilltop residences [of the local elites, the *derebeys*]. However, the coastal districts were governable with the assistance of the local elites, who re-emerged as officially appointed representatives. These elites began to build new mansions near the coast while still serving as sites of local government (Meeker 2005).

In 1835, Brant described the interior of the Sürmene district as: The country is so wooded and mountainous, that it does not produce grain sufficient for the consumption of the population ... Corn fields are to be seen hanging on the precipitous sides of mountains, at which no plough can arrive. ... corn is the grain usually grown, and it is seldom that any other is used for bread by the people (Bryer and Winfield 1985:323).

According to Alexandris (1999:64), the 1910–1912 Greek population in the Trabzon district (*sanjak*) was 117,700 of which 9,715 Greeks came from the Sürmene county (*kaza*).³ According to Chrysanthos (1933) in 1913–1914, in the Sürmene 'region', there were 10 villages with [approximately] 865 Greek families (Table 1). Each village had a Greek school and a Greek church (with two Greek churches at Tsita). A figure of five people per family has been used to attain an approximate Greek population figure (see Lowry 2009) which would mean that there were 4,325 Greeks in the 10 villages (i.e. 865 families x 5 = 4,325 people).

³ The total number of Greeks in the large Trabzon province was believed to be 298,200 (Alexandris 1999:64).

Table 1: Villages in Sürmene region and number of Greek families (1913–1914)

Village name ⁴	Greek families
Kahora	25
Houmourkianton	30
Halaniki	25
Mexezi	35
Tsikoli-petra	110
Assou	100
Tsita	210
Karakantzi	50
Moulkanton (Hotzaranton)	60
Koinonissa (Kelonissa)	220
Total	865

(Author's translation of Chrysanthos (1933:794–795).)

In May 1914, the Ottoman Turks boycott against Christian businesses was applied at Rize and at Athina (east of Rize). Some Christians closed their establishments and took refuge in Sürmene. The economic boycott also affected the Greek communities of Trabzon, Of and others (Greek Patriarchate 1919:112).

From March 1916 to early 1918, during World War I, Sürmene was occupied by Russian forces.⁵ Two months before the reconquest by the Turks of the Trabzon province [December 1917], Ahmed Bey, President of the Moslem Committee at Trabzon visited Chrysanthos (the Greek Orthodox metropolitan of the large Trabzon metropolitanate) asking for protection for Moslems who were menaced by the occupying Russians forces. Soon after, Moslems joined the advancing Turkish bands destroying Greek villages and massacring many Christians. The district of Sürmene was pillaged. The greater part of its inhabitants migrated to Russia. The remainder paid 70,000 rubles in order to remain in Sürmene (Greek Patriarchate 1919:113).

Chrysanthos understood that this organised destruction by the Ottoman Turks was aimed at the extermination of Greeks. In January 1918, Chrysanthos wrote to Ottoman General Vehid Pasha notifying him of what the Turks were doing to the Christians. While he waited for assistance from the General, Chrysanthos distributed arms to Christians for their own protection. Thanks to this measure and the resistance offered over several days, Tsita near Sürmene and other areas were saved (Greek Patriarchate 1919:113–114).

Romeyka⁶

Romeyka is the last surviving variety of the Greek language spoken in north-east Türkiye (Pontos). *Romeyka* presents the linguist with several interesting properties that are not found in other varieties of the Greek language (www.romeyka.org/).

Islamisation of Greek speakers in the areas of Tonya (south-west of Trabzon), Of, Sürmene [e.g. Beşköy (Fig. 2) south of Sürmene,

⁴ Both Houmourkianton and Halaniki (to its west) are located near the beach. Koinonissa is located east of Houmourkianton. Assou is 1 km from Tsita.

⁵ In Pontic areas near the Russian occupation, the Ottoman Turks deported their Christian population to inland Anatolia. Many died in what was considered genocide.

⁶ See the author's article on the Pontic Greek dialect at: www.pontosworld.com/index.php/history/sam-topalidis/688-a-brief-introduction-to-the-pontic-greek-dialect See the author's forthcoming article on *Romeyka*.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7n6o1gwPsU], Rize and Maçka, is reported in the 15th-18th centuries. Through the Exchange of Populations between Greece and Turkey [under the Lausanne Convention signed in January 1923], Greek-speaking Muslims were allowed to stay in their Anatolian homeland, which explains why Greek survives only in small enclaves in this area. *Romeyka* is under serious danger of becoming eroded through contact with the Turkish language (Sitaridou 2023; www.romeyka.org/).

Spoken for many centuries in villages, *Romeyka* has been discreetly preserved. [Many Greeks became crypto-Christians.⁷] Today, despite the dependence on oral transmission across generations, communities refrain, at least openly, from identifying with the language out of fear that their heritage might be perceived as antagonistic to their Turkish-Muslim identity (Sitaridou and Sağlam 2020:20).

In 1929, a flood destroyed several villages in Çaykara, Of and Sürmene and a large part of the population remained homeless. As most parts of the Maçka valley (south of Trabzon) were empty after the forced exodus of the Christians in 1923 [due to the Exchange of Populations], the homeless population from Sürmene was largely settled there. This is why [some] of the population from Maçka spoke a dialect [of *Romeyka*] similar to that spoken in the southern parts of Sürmene (Brendemoen 2002:32).

Churches

At Assou [now Aksu Hanlari, 1 km south-west of Tsita (Turkish Dirlik, Fig. 2)] the church was demolished to provide stone for the new school. There were two 19th century stone churches at Tsita. Timiou Stavrou (the church of the Cross of Honour (www.pontosworld.com/index.php/pontus/churches/230-timiou-stavrou-tzita?highlight=WyJ0aW1pb3UiXQ==)) was finished around 1891 with the exterior made of grey stone with three apses. The west end has an open arcade with rounded arches at ground level (Plate 2). Inside, the church it is secured by iron tie beams across all the arches.⁸ It is now a mosque. Lower down the hill about 500 m from this church is a second, smaller former church of the Metamorphosis probably built in 1880 (Bryer et al. 1972–1973:134). As at 2023, it was still in ruins (Plate 3) with iron rods connecting its internal columns. The status of the churches in the other eight villages in Table 1 is unknown to the author.

⁷ Crypto-Christians were people who had openly converted from Christianity to Islam, but retained their Christian beliefs and practices in secret.

⁸ Iron bars have been used in churches in the 19th century to provide reinforcement against earthquakes (Petrou and Charmpis 2019).



Plate 2: Former Greek church Timiou Stavrou now a mosque, Dirlik, south of Sürmene (2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-mC1FF5EHk)



Plate 3: Former Greek Church of the Metamorphosis, Dirlik, south of Sürmene (2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=bY8_ZZo-6aQ)

Memisaga Mansion

A tourist destination, the two floor Memisaga Mansion (Plate 4), is located 4 km east of Sürmene, on the Trabzon-Rize highway. The mansion, part fort, part house, was built in 1856 and restored in 2000 and is an important traditional Sürmene dwelling. The south façade, the east and west main outer walls are made with cut stone. The north façade basement floor is similarly bonded with a stone wall. The wall thickness is about 70 cm (Kurak Acici et al. 2018:754, 761).

The locals believed that the mansion was built by a member of the Yakupoğlu family who would have been the *derebey*, a virtual ruler of the district (Winfield et al. 1960:197).



Plate 4: Memisaga mansion, east of Sürmene (www.tripadvisor.com.tr/Restaurant_Review-g2187663-d12612732-Reviews-Memis_Aga_Konagi-Surmene_Turkish_Black_Sea_Coast.html)

Sürmene Knives

Sürmene was renowned as a centre of knife making, especially the ornamental daggers worn by men with traditional dress (Plate 5) (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism 2011).⁹ The Sürmene knife is an ethnographic artefact with its construction, design, decorations and scabbard. They are known for their durability and sharpness. The knife, which has a length of approximately 20 cm, is produced in various models (Güdü Demirbulat and Özgürel 2024).



Plate 5: Sürmene knives
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:S%C3%BCrmene_knife.jpg)

Conclusion

⁹ Be aware, if you bring knives (with a point) in your luggage into Australia they will be confiscated at the airport.

Sürmene is a town on the north-east coast of Türkiye with much history, although little of it is written in English. Today it is visited by tourists due to its natural beauty and culture and in some of its surrounding villages is one of the few areas where *Romeyka*, an old Greek dialect, is still spoken by some local Muslims. Sadly, unless drastic action is taken to preserve this dialect, it will be lost.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Michael Bennett and Russell McCaskie and for their comments to an earlier draft.

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