



Summary :

Kontoskali (Kumkapı) was one of the most significant and populous Greek districts in Constantinople (Istanbul). During the second half of the 19th century it was rebuilt due to fires; the reconstruction was based on new urban planning principles. The local Greek Orthodox community was quite active, running many schools and associations. Nowadays the district has been almost clear of Greek population.

Other Names

Kumkapı

Geographical Location

Constantinople (İstanbul)

Historical Region

Constantinople (İstanbul)

Administrative Dependence

İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality

1. Location – Name – Population

The intra muros Kontoskali district is located right after [Psamathia](#) (Samatya) and Vlanga. According to [Manouil Gedeon](#) it was “one of the most beautiful quarters of the area defined by the Propontis walls”.¹ The district was called Kontoskali, named from the eponymous city gate, “the third one from the Saray to Eptapyrgion [Yedikule], the fifth to the Saray on the Propontis”.² The Turkish name for both the gate and the district is Kumkapı (Sand Gate) “from the amounts of sand gathered there from the beach”.³

During the Byzantine period, just outside the Kontoskali gate and next to Vlanga was located the Theodosius port, which was later embanked. Additionally, the Kadırğa Limanı (Kadırğa port) used to exist where the district square was built in the 17th century,⁴ while until the 1970s a small pier and port were located there to accommodate fishing boats.⁵

With regard to the Byzantine name Kontoskali, Skarlatos Vyzantios explains that it “reminds one of the Kontoskalon, a small pier on the way to Vlanga not as projecting into the sea as its predecessor, the Boukoleon Royal Pier”; therefore, he dismissed the notion that the place was named after Kontoskelis or Kontoskelos (Shortshanks), the nickname of a foreman working in the construction of the neighbouring port.⁶

Kontoskali was an “extensive and densely populated district, mostly inhabited by Armenians, since their Patriarchate was also established there”.⁷ The Armenian Patriarchate had re-located there, specifically in the Nişança quarter, from Samatya around the middle of the 17th century. Other Armenian churches had also been built in the area, such as the Surp Asdvadzadzin, protector of immigrants, Surp Sarkis and Surp Nigogos, both destroyed from fire, as well as two chapels. It is said that first Armenian printing house was established in the Surp Nigogos church.⁸

Greek Orthodox populations continued to inhabit the area during the Ottoman period rendering it one of the most significant intra muros Greek Orthodox communities. According to a census issued by the [Constantinople](#) (Istanbul) *kadi* in 1478, 3,151 Greek households were recorded in this part of the city,⁹ while during the next century both Muslim and non-Muslim population increased.¹⁰ As far as Christian residents were concerned in particular, according to 1540 and 1544 registers with regard to revenue from the *wakf* of Mehmed II, 1,547 Greeks were registered inside the city walls.¹¹ 55 Christians appear to have inhabited the Kontoskali district, referred to as Kumkapı, originating from [Palaia Phokaia](#) (Old Phocaea) and possibly the island of Thasos, re-located there due the [forced migrations](#) organised by the Ottoman authorities.¹²



In the 17th century, the area was also inhabited by Gypsy blacksmiths, hence the rumor that “suspicious characters” wandered around “and in collaboration with Gypsy women arranged secret meetings for beautiful women and their lovers”.¹³ Around the same time, it is mentioned that around the Kontoskali gate there were many [taverns](#), more in number and providing more appealing entertainment than their Samatya counterparts – a tradition running well into the 20th century as shall be indicated further down – and many gardens, partly covering the capital’s needs in green-stuff. The Armenian Eremya K m rc yan also mentions that the grand mansion of Prince Ibrahim was also located there, next to the saray of the heirs to the throne.¹⁴

2. The Greek-Orthodox community in Kontoskali, 16th – 20th century

According to Manouil Gedeon, after the [Fall of Constantinople](#) also residing in the area were “Greeks from [Lesvos](#), mainly those sowing aba [a type of woollen cloth] and many from the Cyzicus peninsula”,¹⁵ while in the following centuries [Turkish-speaking Christians](#) from the East inhabited the area as well, as they did the neighbouring districts of Samatya and Yedikule. Around the mid-17th century four churches had been built, namely St Kyriaki, Virgin Mary of Hope, St Nicholas and St John; a Byzantine monastery was located there as well, the [Myrelaion monastery](#) built in the 10th century during the reign of Romanos Lekapenos, which also served as a burial place for the Romanos family. In the beginning of the 16th century, however, this church was converted into a mosque called Bodrum Mosque.¹⁶

Moreover, not far from the gate of the old port of Kadırğa (Kadırğa Limanı) stood an ancient building, remnant of the Byzantine monastery where St Ioannis Kalyvitis was buried, as was believed by the Christian population. At this site a shaft had been built, the marble opening of which was preserved until 1990. It was a pilgrimage site during the Ottoman period because the water ([agiasma](#)) gushing from it was considered holy and miraculous.¹⁷ An icon of St Ioannis Kalyvitis is kept in the St Kyriaki church.

A great fire in 1660 going on for three days “burned down the four major churches of Kontoskali”; St Nicholas and St John were never rebuilt, however two holy water fountains bearing their names remained commemorating them, the St John the Precursor agiasma in Kadırğa Limanı and the St Nicholas one in an underground cave construction.¹⁸ Consequently, in the middle of the 17th century the Greek community owned two churches in the area, each one constituting a separate parish.

St Kyriaki, or Gia (from Agia) Kyriaki, as it is mentioned in Paterakis’ 1604 catalogue, is recorded in the Karabeinikov catalogue, who visited it in 1583.¹⁹ The church was completely reconstructed in 1730 “by the expenses and costs of all the pious and Orthodox Christians, by the pains and effort and sweat of many attending Christians, some labouring to the death”[sic].²⁰ A sign commemorating all the donors and benefactors as well as their places of origin indicates that these [Christians hailed from Cappadocia](#), since Cappadocians, as mentioned before, largely inhabited the area. In fact, the sermon was delivered in the Turkish language both there and in the church of the Virgin Mary of Hope.²¹

Both of these churches were burned in the great fire of Hocapaşa in 1865 that destroyed all of the surrounding areas (Emin n , Beyazit, Hagia Sophia, Sultanahmet), as well as the Kontoskali district. The extent of the damage combined with the “modernisation” policy issued during the [reform period](#) of the Ottoman state, resulted into the decision to not reconstruct the area in its pre-fire state – as was the case until then. On the contrary, an improvement committee was established, through which the necessary measures were taken considering the building materials and the condition of the streets, and an urban plan was laid out; that plan included the construction of a new road network, including the street connecting Divan Yolu with Kontoskali.²² Manouil Gedeon also records the re-design scheme in the area, noting that the district “properly designed was rebuilt with stone constructions, most of them well-made.”²³ The same writer mentions that after the fire only the four walls of the St Kyriaki church were salvaged and that the church was temporarily housed in the building of the [monitorial \(Lancastrian\) school](#).²⁴

A few years after the church’s reconstruction was completed (in 1875) it was referred to as “the church with many stairs”.²⁵ In 1893 in the St Kyriaki parish meeting it was decided to completely rebuild the church, a task assigned to the architect Periklis Fotiadis,



who had also constructed the [Zografeio](#) among many important buildings.²⁶ The new church was a magnificent and imposing octagonal building with a bell-tower, a symbol of the potency of the Greek Orthodox communities in Constantinople.

The church also included a holy water fountain (agiasma) of the same name,²⁷ one of many in the area: there were two holy water fountains of St Paraskevi, one of which located in the basement of an Armenian residency demolished in our time, two of St Dimitrios, one of St Menas, one of St George and a third one of St Paraskevi close to the St Kyriaki church; according to Manouil Gedeon, the latter was located inside a Greek grocery store and was favoured by Vlanga residents who honoured it on July 26th, the day of its feast.²⁸

The second parish church was the Virgin Mary of Hope for which “no-one can verify that it stands on the same location as did the church of the Hope of the Desperate that dated back to the last years of the Byzantine Empire, as was suggested by the most venerable of Byzantologists Dr Mordtmann.”²⁹ The church is recorded in the travelogue of the traveller Gerlach in 1567 and was visited a few years later, in 1593, by Karabeinikov, who gave alms to the church and its priest. It is also mentioned in the Paterakis catalogue of 1604 as Olpida (paraphrase of Elpida meaning Hope). According to several sources a built-in inscription on the lintel of the older church referred to the establishment of the church during the patriarchy of [Kallinikos II](#), who served three times as Patriarch between 1690 and 1702.³⁰

The church was significantly damaged by consecutive fires, especially the great fire of 1660, which burned it down. However, Nikita Alexievich, the Russian ambassador in Istanbul at the time, mediated in order for an annual grant to be issued by the Russian government for its reconstruction.³¹ The new church was wooden and consequently burned down again in 1719, 1762 and in the great fire of 1865. Until 1895, when the foundation stone of the new church was placed according to the Sultan’s firman, the Turkish-speaking Karamanli attended mass in a small wooden church.³² The new church was built in the **three-nave basilica** type by the architect Vasileios Tsilenis and was considered one of the grandest in town. It was constructed by Thracian craftsmen – members of the parish, its strict baroque style serving as a fine specimen of the period’s [architecture](#) and its imposing mass emphasising the potency if the local Orthodox community as well.³³

Under the church the St George holy water fountain (agiasma) was located, which was used as parish church between 1955 and 1961 and was completely rebuilt in 2003.³⁴ The church itself was also reconstructed not many years ago.³⁵

Both parishes ran [schools](#) in the churchyards as early as the 18th century. Specifically, a “Greek school” is mentioned at the St Kyriaki parish in 1762. In 1889, according to an inscription, a new parish school was built in the churchyard; another source provides data that in 1896 one more school was added in the churchyard, while the Association “Eos” established an all-boys school.³⁶ Three schools are recorded in the district in 1906: a seven-grade school, a seven-grade all-girls school and a three-grade nursery school. These schools are mentioned as “Inomena Ekpaideftiria” (United Schools) of both parishes.³⁷

In the beginning of the 20th century and in the context of establishing and constituting the Orthodox communities in Istanbul, the two parishes unified; from then on they were administered by a seven-strong Central Committee, as well as several sub-committees (one for every church and one for the schools). According to the drafted statute “the Virgin Mary of Hope and St Kyriaki Greek Orthodox parishes in Kontoskali are thereby united according to the minutes of the general assembly of both parishes that took place on March 20th 1922 validated by the revered Patriarchal authorities; therefore they constitute one community called “Greek Orthodox Kontoskali community”.³⁸

[Associations](#) and societies established in the area during the 19th century – the period of keen societal organization – were either parish or district oriented. The Charitable Society of Kontoskali “Transfiguration” was established in 1898 and operated until 1922, while it was revived during the early 1950s. It included members of both genders aiming to financially aid indigent folk of both parishes. It was comprised of many departments (medical care, alms for indigent students and the unfit to work, provision of work when allowed by the society’s income); they also planned to establish a workshop for ladies and girls.³⁹



Other philanthropical institutions include the “Eos Charitable Society” (established 1883) and the “Ladies’ Charitable Society”, established in 1910 and renamed “Evangelismos” (Annunciation) in 1914. Just across the street from the St Kyriaki church, the “Eilikrineia’ (Honesty) Society of the St Kyriaki district of Kontoskali” was housed in a neo-classical building since 1867; that was probably the year another society was established in the area called “Elpis” (Hope), while in 1880 the Kontoskali Society “Dikaiosyni” (Justice) was founded. In 1897 the “Kontoskali Religious Reading-Room” and the “Euelpis” (Hopeful) Ladies’ club are also recorded.⁴⁰ Finally, in 1886 the Constantinopolitan Society of Shoemaking Workers “Elpis” (Hope) was established, thus perpetrating the guild solidarity tradition.⁴¹

Kontoskali was one of those areas privileged to be connected to the railway network as early as its construction around 1876.⁴² The added accessibility resulted in a population increase and transformed Kontoskali into a transit nodal point. Around the end of the 19th century and the early 20th, the area was thought of as Greek and was renowned for its taverns, most of which were Greek-owned, their proprietors hailing largely from the Peloponnese.⁴³ The narration of the journalist Stephanos Papadopoulos about the area is characteristic: “When I was a lad, I remember visiting Kontoskali at Easter from Samatya where I lived. I thought I was in Greece, because there were so many Greek flags, most of which belonged to taverns. The multitude of taverns, however, can be explained, since the rents were low and Kontoskali was a popular area. Additionally, people went there at night to catch the train and return home to Yedikule or other Greek populated Thracian suburbs, such as Makrochori and St Stephanos”.⁴⁴

Until the 1970s, the area was known as a fishing settlement, mainly inhabited by Greeks and [Armenians](#), where some of the most celebrated fish taverns in town were located (such as Menas’ tavern, Giorgos’ etc).⁴⁵

After the transition to the Turkish Republic, however, the area lost a great percentage of its population, further decreased by the massive postwar re-location of Christian residents from the Golden Horn districts and the ones close to the Walls, to the more central ones.⁴⁶ Even so, Kontoskali continued to be one of the most active Constantinopolitan Greek communities. According to a 1949 patriarchal census, 309 families inhabited the area, while a few years later (1955), according to data from the private archive of Christophoros Chrestides, the number had increased to 405.

During the school year of 1951-1952, 125 students were enrolled in the school’s community,⁴⁷ which came about after the unification of the St Kyriaki all-boys school and the Virgin Mary of Hope all-girls school. In 1955 a new building was under construction in order to house this school.⁴⁸ Moreover, in 1951 efforts were made to found a model primary school in the area, where the students were to be taught according to the latest schooling methods. Elias Vingopoulos, the community’s teacher, was chiefly responsible for introducing the idea; for that purpose he had been sent to Perugia University on the expenses of the community to acquaint himself with the Montessori method, which he applied to the school.⁴⁹

In the beginning of the 1950s, the community supported a theatrical association, provided meals for 26 students and 8 indigent elders, medical facilities, while the Philanthropical Society “Transfiguration” had also been re-established, as stated above.⁵⁰

In 1954 the community was targeted by the anti-minority Turkish policy: on the occasion of a dispute between the Kontoskali Greeks, particularly between the Thracians of the Virgin Mary of Hope parish and the Easterners, mainly Karamanli, of the St Kyriaki parish, it was attempted to divide the community based on the parish boundaries. That constituted a challenge on behalf of the Turkish authorities against the broader forms of communal organisation. The same incident was used to try to abolish the institution of the so-called Great Foundations (Meizona Idrymata). In both occasions the communal authorities intervened and the measures were not implemented.⁵¹

The gradual political crisis affecting bilateral relations between Greece and Turkey, such as the Cypriot situation and the following anti-minority measures, lead to the population decrease and the elimination of the Kontoskali Greek-Orthodox community.



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9. Γεράσιμος, Σ., «Έλληνες της Κωνσταντινούπολης στα μέσα του ΙΣΤ' αιώνα», *Η Καθ' ημάς Ανατολή 2* (Athens 1994), p. 118.
10. According to some Ottoman sources from the period 1520-1535, the Christian population in town numbered 25,252 inhabitants. Mantran, R., *Η Καθημερινή Ζωή στην Κωνσταντινούπολη τον αιώνα του Σουλειμάν του Μεγαλοπρεπούς* (Athens 1999), p. 79.
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25. *Ορθόδοξοι ενοριακοί Ναοί και Αγιάσματα της Περιφέρειας Βλάχκας, Κοντοσκαλίου και Υψωμαθίων* (Εκδοση Ιεράς Μητροπόλεως Μύρων, Athens 2004), p. 21
26. Μήλλας, Α., *Σφραγίδες Κωνσταντινουπόλεως* (Athens 1996), pp. 282, 694-695.
27. This specific holy water fountain is elsewhere referred to as St Basil's. *Ορθόδοξοι ενοριακοί Ναοί και Αγιάσματα της Περιφέρειας Βλάχκας, Κοντοσκαλίου και Υψωμαθίων* (Εκδοση Ιεράς Μητροπόλεως Μύρων, Athens 2004), p. 22.
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Glossary :

agiasma

The holy water (as well as the sacred place from where the water spurts), which the faithful drink, sprinkle or wash themselves in order to be healed.

cross-domed basilica

Type of domed basilica. A church plan, whose core, enveloped on three sides by aisles and galleries with a transept, forms a cross. The core is surmounted by a dome in the centre.

kadi

Office that combined judicial, notarial and administrative duties. The kadi, who held court at the kaza's seat, registered all legal acts and documents in the court's codices (sicil). The kadi passed judgement based on the saria (the holy law of Islam), taking also into consideration the kanun (sultanic law) and the customary law (örf). Resort to his court had all the subjects of the Empire. The kadi had also administrative duties, which he performed in collaboration with the officials of the kaza., and he had to supervise tax collection.

monitorial system

Teaching method developed by Joseph Lancaster, under which the older students (in Greek: "protoscholoí") taught the smaller children some skill or activity.

wakf (vakif)

A foundation, a grant of land or other source of income, including tax revenues, which was considered to be dedicated according to the sacred law (şeriat) and was used for religious and charitable purposes.

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