



Περίληψη :

The term *Levantes* acquired a concrete meaning in 19th century, which no longer signified all the non-Muslim inhabitants in the ports of eastern Mediterranean, but only the Roman Catholic ones originating from European countries. The formation of Levantes as a social group lasted many centuries and had been particularly dynamic until the beginning of the 20th century.

Χρονολόγηση

15th - 20th centuries

Γεωγραφικός εντοπισμός

Constantinople (Istanbul)

1. The term Levantes and the birth of an ethno-religious group

The Levantes differed from other ethno-religious groups since they did not belong to a specific ethnic group. Indeed, contrary to the Greek-Orthodox and the Armenians, they never pretended to have a common ethnic background. The few accounts left by Levantes and dated just to the beginning of the 20th century emphasised the group's mixed ethnic character reaffirming a common cliché in the European public discourse of that era. However, we have to approach this imagery in a critical way, using the sources as a point of departure. The records of [Catholic parishes](#) offer the necessary source material to trace the birth of that supra-ethnic group.

The making of Levantes lasted many centuries and, indeed, until the beginning of the 20th century, it had been particularly dynamic. This group was only socio-economically and culturally formed, without having a political or institutional status. Inevitable though this disadvantage was, since there was no conscious effort of integrating the new immigrants from Europe, in fact they managed to get integrated.

2. Catholic islanders and Catholics of Pera

The making of that specific group can be divided into many chronological periods. Initially, there were the descendents of Italian, mainly [Venetian](#) and [Genovese](#) merchants and colonials, who had settled in the area of Aegean Sea before and, mainly, after the [fourth Crusade](#), and they stayed in Levant even after Ottomans had [conquered Constantinople](#). Some of them stayed there as Ottoman subjects or, to be more specific, as foreigners with legal privileges, while some others were inhabitants of the [Aegean islands being under the Venetian rule](#) until the 17th century, except [Tinos](#), which remained under the Venetian domination until 1718. This kind of mixed with Greek cultural elements Catholicism had a great influence in [kea](#) and [Naxos](#), but mainly in [Tinos](#), [Syros](#) and [Santorini](#). There were many monk orders, from Capuchins to [Lasarists](#), which took action in Levant. Henceforth, these Hellenised inhabitants of islands are called Catholics islanders in order to distinguish them from the Catholic inhabitants of [Pera](#), Constantinople's district.

Catholic islanders did not differ at all from the Orthodox islanders regarding their language and way of life, and they were dealing with shipping and fishery or they were artisans, often vagrants, and peasants. However, in Pera, [the geni](#) who originated from families of Genovese patricians were the dominant ones. These people exerted a strong influence on the [Eastern politics](#) of European powers as dragomans of European embassies or even of the Sublime Porte, until [Phanariots](#) consolidated their position. They were connected by marriage and they formed a concrete group, which asserted that the titles of nobility must be bestowed upon them according to the European patterns. Nevertheless, they spoke Greek too and they follow the local customs regarding the mores and dressing.

In the late 17th century, and mainly in 18th, the group of Levantes enlarged due to the appearance of the naval forces of England and Holland, but also due to the influential presence of France, which since the 16th century had played officially the role of the



defender for Catholics of the East. That enlargement pertained to the number of the members of that group as well as their expansion in the Ottoman Empire's territory. Pera was still the centre of Catholics' diplomatic activities, while trade was undoubtedly prevailing in [Smyrna](#). Around 1800, the Levantines of Pera and [Galata](#) constituted a relatively small community of 2.400 members. Around 1900, approximately 60.000 Levantines and Europeans were living in Galata and Pera, that is about 3% of the population. This increase resulted from a massive immigration mainly from Europe, but also from islands, Asia Minor and Near East.

3. Catholic immigrants

In 19th century, the Catholic immigrants from Europe merged through marriages with the Catholic immigrants from the East Mediterranean basin –Dalmatians, Maltese, and Ionians- and with Armenians and Arab **Uniats**, who immigrated to [Constantinople](#) in order to escape from war, persecution and penury. The assimilating process lasted almost a century, up to 1900. The marriage records of the catholic parishes show that the rates of endogamies between catholic immigrants were high, though there were differences relative to their geographical origin. Specifically, the immigrants from Eastern Mediterranean, mostly the Maltese, formed solid communities up to the last quarter of the 19th century.

There were various reasons that led the European immigrants to the Ottoman Aegean area. This fact resulted in different attitudes regarding their integration. Since the French Revolution, migration has been the mirror of the European history. The French Royals were followed by the Napoleon's adherents –Savary, the Police Minister was among them too- and thereafter Poles and Hungarian immigrants as well as Italian Carbonari, adherents of Maccini and Garibaldi followed the same routes. Frequently, the difference between political immigrants and criminals was indiscernible.

The soldier of fortune was a peculiar figure of the Eastern Mediterranean, which must be studied thoroughly. The continuous changes in the population of typical port-cities, such as Galata, should not be overlooked. In the beginning of the period of Tanzimat, the conditions of life for Christians in the Ottoman Empire changed for the better and, simultaneously, there was an increased demand for European specialists to assume the modernisation of the state. In their turn, these European specialists needed a lot of skilled immigrants, from hairdressers **to coach-smiths**, so as to be able to live according to the European habits, which had been already adopted by the indigenous populations, mostly by the non Muslims. The majority of these immigrants were men, while the rate between men and women is estimated to be about 5:1. Most of them stayed in the Ottoman Empire and they married indigenous Catholics. In that way, the next generation of French, British and Germans got integrated into the local Catholic community and culturally assimilated, through their linguistic hellenization.

The immigrants from Southern Europe, mainly from Italy, were integrating through marriages so quickly that according to a consular survey realized in Constantinople in 1905, the 70% the holders of Italian passport were identified as Levantines. In 1900, the practice of endogamy within the Catholic community had already been obliterated. As men outnumbered women and the ideological cohesion, once secured by the Catholic Church, by that time retreated, **the marital market started to expand into** the Greek-orthodox and [Armenian](#) communities, even into [Jewish community](#), though in a limited way. In the beginning of 20th century, the mixed marriages had increased substantially.

Around 1900, this mixture of the European Catholics, inhabitants of Pera and Catholic islanders with Arabs and Armenian Catholics, as well as immigrants from Eastern Mediterranean and members of non-Muslim created a group of people, who had lost any sense of national origin, but their obviously European way of life, due to their Catholic doctrine, set them apart –especially regarding their material culture: the consumer goods, dressing, dwelling and their special legal status.

4. The legal status of Levantines

This legal status did not constitute Levantines' particularity, since the members of the [Orthodox, Armenian and Jewish millet](#) could belong to different legal categories too. However, Levantines differed from those groups, since as a rule they enjoyed a preferential legal status. The Levantines were Catholics, who lived permanently in the Islamic world; as a result, they had to adjust to the Islamic governmental and social model. According to the Islamic Law the non-Muslims were divided into tax- payer subjects (zimmi) or



reayas) and aliens, who were not burdened with taxation and they could stay in Islamic dominion only for a short period of time (Harbis).

Since 1453, the Levantines belonged to both categories, because Mohammed treated Genovese, who had stayed in Galata after the ruin of Constantinople, as Ottoman subjects obliged to pay capital tax. Only those Genovese merchants, who stayed temporarily in the Ottoman Empire, considered as Harbis, just as the Venetians, with whom Mohamed had entered into a trade agreement in 1454. This agreement served as a model for subsequent agreements contracted with France, England, Holland, Prussia, Austria and Sweden, with which Harbis-Franks acquired special privileges. Under the diplomatic pressure of the European Powers, these privileges extended and, in the beginning of the 19th century, they encompassed tax exemption, the legal differences between aliens (strangers) being under Consuls' jurisdiction and in 19th differences between Ottomans and aliens being solved by mixed courts, which meant that the aliens had been exempted de facto from the Ottoman legal system.

According to the privileges recognized to Levantines, the Ottoman authorities were allowed to arrest aliens (strangers) only in the presence of a diplomat, while there were provisions for the protection of domicile. In short time, the validity of these privileges extended so as to include the Ottoman employees of the European consulates and embassies. This advancement concerned primarily the dragomans most of whom were Levantines. In that way, they could transfer or even bequeath the privilege of protection to their families. Between the second half of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century, the European diplomats distributed such berat -strictly speaking sold them- also to reayas, who were not diplomats. According to the Ottoman terminology of berat, these privileged persons were characterised as *Fermanli* or *Beratlis*. There were many Levantines, Orthodox, Armenians and Jews Zimmis possessing such berat. The European Powers distributed generously their protection and in that way they created groups of influence within the Ottoman Empire.

In the first half of the 19th century, it was very easy to acquire protection, but also to change protector. This development opened the way for adventurous attitudes: artful Zimmis could change protector according to the influence and rigidity of the legal system of each power. However, such privileges were not enjoyed by all Levantines. The Levantine Zimmis –mostly Catholic islanders, as well as Catholic Arabs and Armenians- had never formed millet. As a result, they had no representatives recognized by the Porte. Officially, the Catholic Church did not intend to keep contact with the Ottoman government, since this task was traditionally undertaken by the French Embassy. Because of Catholic Zimmis' emigration from Minor Asia and the Arab world as well as the formation of Catholic Armenian millet, the legal status of this specific group came into question. In the beginning of 1840s this problem was solved by the efforts of Constantinople's apostolic vicar, who established a "Latin Reayas Community" led by a Vikeli. It was an office performed almost exclusively by members of Varthalites family of Pera-Galata.

Since the Latin reayas were not organized in millet, their position was weak. As a result, this group of people tried to secure the protection of a European Power. Furthermore, the Levantines' division into Harbis, protected and Zimmis hampered the common political action of this specific ethno-religious group, because the Levantines did not manage at all to take political initiatives following the model of other ethno-religious groups with greater cohesion, such as Greek-orthodox and Gregorian Armenians. On the individual level, they pursued their socio-economic ascension through the possession of European documents.

5. The social structure of Levantines

In 19th century, the Levantines' social structure changed considerably, because their population increased quickly. Since the middle of the 19th century, there had been considerable social differentiation within the former small and concrete community of Catholic merchants and dragomans: The Levantines had formed a mercantile bourgeoisie following the European models and imitating the material culture and way of life of the French bourgeoisie, before the Greeks and the Armenians did so. The growth of trade gave the chance for social ascension to many poor families of artisans and merchants. At the same time, the families of old dragomans passed in the background, as they were displaced in the diplomatic field by the European careerists of diplomacy, with oriental education, such as Hammer-Purgstall. Moreover, their noble origin kept them off trade. Just as in the case of European aristocracy, some families were connected with the socially rising merchants and bankers. Before the penetration of the big European banks, which took place after the Crimean war and mainly after the big crisis in the Eastern Question (1878), the so called Bankers of Galata constituted



the nucleus of the Ottoman economic elite. In this context, the Levantines' economic elite took care of keeping in close contact with the Greek, Armenian and Jews bankers of the Empire.

In the second half of the 19th century, Levantine elite grew by immigrants from Europe, high officials, servants, engineers, bankers and prince merchants. Frequently, however, they were keeping distance from the Levantines of the high social strata. This attitude reflected in their acerbic discourse about Levantines. This migration resulted in the formation of a middle social stratum, which had not existed until 1800; it comprised skilled artisans, shopkeepers, teachers and young professionals, such as lawyers, doctors and journalists, who tried to serve the cause of promoting the European life style in the Ottoman Empire. The lower strata of the ethno-religious group of Levantines also grew due to the immigration of sailor proletariat, whose close association with the Greek lower social strata led to its integration and hellenization. As regards the social group of criminals in Pera and Galata, there were similar developments, as they increased considerably especially during the Crimean war.

6. The basic features of Levantines

The national, legal and social features of Levantines, as presented so far, stressed the disjunctions more than the cohesive features of that group, which are being sought for below. What did it make them a group, even though they were not organized in millet, but politically and institutionally they were swinging between the Ottoman state and the European Powers First of all, it was the doctrine: the fact that they belonged to the Roman-Catholic Church differentiated them from the Armenians and the Arab Uniates. Moreover, to the Ottomans' eyes, their doctrine rendered them Franks, who in the 18th century and mostly in the 19th and 20th enjoyed high social status drawing strength on the one hand from their legal privileges and on the other, from the European culture and life style that served as models for the Ottoman society. In a society organized on the basis of religion, like the Ottoman one, faith served as the fundamental criterion for the institutional integration of the individual as well as for its identity. The Catholic doctrine served as a crucial element of identification for this small social group, which was for long under the threat of Muslims, but mostly of Orthodox and Armenians and it had to assert the right for all the services provided by the millet of Christians.

Until the late 20th century, the old Levantine families¹ manifested their faith in the official Church, which served as a mark of differentiation between themselves and the immigrants from Europe. The Levantines did not manifest their Catholicism only in religious rituals. The members of old families as well as the elite of new immigrants took the highest offices in most of the lay fraternities and Catholic societies, which flourished after the Crimean war. In Pera, the most important Dragoman families rallied round the old Communità S. Anna, while in 19th century, the Charity Union Artigiana di Pietà was established with the support of Sultan himself and of the ambassadors and it functioned as a platform of communication for the European Levantine elites, even for the Ottoman Christians. This Catholic infrastructure also comprised a well organized school system, hospitals, poor houses and houses for the aged. In that way, a wide field of social and philanthropic action was open for the Levantine elites according to the European, but also the local models. It would suffice to think the parallel Establishments of Greeks and Armenians.

Family relations constituted one more cohesive feature of great importance. Most of the external observers agree that regarding the meaning of family, the Levantines often exaggerated. Until the end of the 19th century, there seemed to have been no mixed marriages concerning the denomination, except for the lower social strata. As a result, the Dragoman and Merchant families followed strict marital politics. The genealogical research made possible to reconstruct the extremely broad nets of relations among these groups. The cooperation in business life and the family relations were closely linked, especially regarding their competition with the Greeks, Armenians and Jews. Constantinople's commercial guides offer many relevant examples.

7. The contacts with other ethno-religious groups

Though there was no institutional framework, Levantines constituted an actual social and economic unity, therefore they could be compared with Christians' millets. They appeared as a distinctive group in the social and economic life of the Empire. Especially, in business life and in the public space, they had built up close relations with members of the non-Muslim elites, which were socially equal to them: The Stock market of Galata, the mixed courts of law, the Chambers of Commerce, Casinos, which functioned during the 19th century, the new European hotels, restaurants, lecture rooms, coffee rooms and the gardens in Pera served as places of



communication for the various elites. The Levantines of the lower strata in social hierarchy, met the members of other ethno-religious groups in public houses, coffee bars, inns and brothels of the port.

The disintegration of the religiously homogeneous Levantine district played a decisive role in the intensification of the contacts between the ethno-religious groups. The address lists of Pera prove that about 1900, there were no ethno-religious divisions either in the roads or in **tenements**. The social position was the fundamental determinant. Thus, the Levantines, Greeks, Armenians and Jews clerks and professionals as well as other members of the middle strata dwelled in the same roads. However, there were some preferences: The contacts between the Greek-speaking Levantines were more intensive than the contacts between Levantines and Armenians. Moreover, the social gap between Levantines and Sephardic Jews was wider than that between the new-comer Ashkenazi from central and Eastern Europe, who identified themselves more with Europeans.

In their communication with members of other ethno-religious groups, the Levantines enjoyed a considerably high status as the bearers of the European culture in the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, they would not be characterized in any case as the driving force of modernization of the Ottoman society. The Levantines represented the model of the European material culture –especially in vogue-, but the bearers of specialized knowledge in the administration, army, industry, education etc as well as the pacemakers of modernization were the new-comer specialists from Europe, who consciously adopted a European profile in order to dissociate themselves from the Levantines.

8. Playing with identities

The Levantines as an institutionally non-existent group exemplified a very flexible adjustment to a rapidly changing political, legal and social context. However, this flexibility involved only the external features of Levantine identity that is the strategy of communicating with the European and Ottoman authorities, on which the Levantine privileged legal status depended. The religious faith and the family relations, which were the core of their identity, remained untouched in a great degree. This internal loyalty can hardly be traced in the sources, because it had to be hidden from the authorities, which most of the information for Levantines came from. At last, we have to make a distinction between the attitude of groups and the respective one of individuals.

The French historian Maria-Carmen Smyrneli uses the term **"playing with identities"** to describe the strategies of the Levantines regarding their identity. This game involved the simultaneous presence of Levantines in and between two political systems, as they were taking the utmost advantage of what these systems offered them. Beside the elements of Levantine internal identity –faith and family relations- there are other factors too, such as their relation to the space as well as language. Though their internal relation to the vital space was indisputable, it had never overstepped the limits of the district or the city of settlement, at the very most. The Levantines of Pera showed little concern for the fate of the Levantines of Smyrne and vice versa, despite the family and social relations they had probably developed. The Levantines had never overcome this spatial fragmentation, which inhibited any –even hesitant- attempts of political emancipation. As a result, their social environment offered them just the possibility to develop a local identity, but in no way could it be taken for granted that it was a constituent feature of this specific ethno-religious group as a whole.

As far as the other factor, that is language is concerned, the situation was similar, since the multilingualism –mostly Greek, Italian, French and Turkish- was a common situation, despite changes that had happened during the 19th century regarding the signification and the function of languages. Thus, after 1850, the French language displaced the Italian, the old colloquial language in Levant. In fact, the current Modern Greek was the main language of Levantines. Besides, more than any other ethno-religious group, the Orthodox had closer association with Levantines concerning language and mentality. Printed texts in **Frank-Cean** were used even for religious purposes. Also, they utilized this strange version of Greek in writing private letters, songs, even contracts. Contrary to the pure language cultivated by the Orthodox, this language included many neologisms, because it was closely intertwined with a modern and elaborated demotic language.

Until 1860s, Levantine group, with the special features mentioned above, developed without facing up to particular problems. The need for a precise definition of their identity and position in the field of antagonism between the Ottoman Empire and the **patron forces** had not aroused yet. Changing national status and relation of protection according the personal interests of each of them



constituted a common phenomenon. However, the Ottoman reformers and the European diplomats came to an understanding in order to control this egregious abuse. Thus, in 1863 they posed barriers to the status of the protected, which henceforth was bestowed exclusively to the Ottoman officers in diplomacy. Indeed, the status of protection was strictly personal and lasted as long as these persons exercised their duties. Thereafter, in 1869 the Ottoman Empire introduced its own national status for its subjects. These measures were adopted by both sides in order to set a limit to the grey zones of their legal system and to the exploitation of the benefits offered by both systems, without a sense of responsibility. Simultaneously, the European powers broadened the European concept of the national state to include their compatriots who had settled in the Ottoman Empire, and they pushed for the nationalization of the Levantine colonies (paroikies) in Pera and Galata, just in the moment when the Levantines were creating infrastructure of a national kind (schools, hospitals, chamber of commerce, societies, leisure activities) and they were reorganising towards a strict representation of the balance of power within their group. If anyone did not declare that he accepted the new national identity, he would run the risk of exclusion from colony (paroikia) and degradation to the status of Ottoman subject, which had always been their greatest fear. Similarly, they were weak towards the possibility of revision of διομολογήσεων on behalf of the Ottoman authorities. Levantines had nothing to expect from Tanzimat reforms, since every attempt to modernize the state and society resulted in the curtailment of their privileges, which were of vital importance for them. However, as the Levantine elites occupied high positions within the national colonies (paroikies), they showed no eagerness to defend the interests of the group as a whole. The lack of leadership facilitated the on going process of –external- nationalization and Levantines' integration in the patroness power, whichever may be. After 1900 this change influenced also the supranational structure of the church. The identification with the national state served as a message with specific goal and it was addressed according to who was the receiver each time.

Until the beginning of the 20th century, there had been little change considering the continuous presence of this particular ethno-religious group in everyday life. On the eve of the First World War, there was no room for manoeuvre between the two systems, which Levantines traditionally benefited from. According to the strict legislation for passports introduced by the European powers, the citizenship of a European country could be obtained provided that the interested party lived permanently in this country. The status of protection did not secure them any more from violent intrusions of the Ottoman authorities. Lastly, any change in their institutional status was almost impossible due to the strict regulations of the Ottoman authorities, but also of the European ones. Later on, under the Neo-Turks rule, the nationalising process in the Ottoman Empire went into a decisive period during which the detachment from the ethno-religious social structures was heralded. In this framework, the end of Levantines was visibly ahead. That time, they had to pay the price for the fact that in the past they had constantly swung between two systems. Contrary to other Christian groups, such as the Greek-orthodox, Gregorian Armenians, Bulgarians, even Aromunians, the Levantines had never managed to form their own nation (or ethnos). Their institutional position in the borderland between the Ottoman Empire and the occasional patroness forces explains their weakness. Furthermore, they lacked the necessary preconditions for such a thing: an adequate number of members, a secure space, a common language or the possibility of developing an official national language, a leader group capable of enunciating political demands. Most of all, they lacked the willingness to shape their future within the Ottoman system. However, the Levantines constituted an apolitical group. The passports and the berat were considered as a guarantee for their social and economic prosperity of the group. As a result, preferred to accept, even if only typically, the new identity propagated by their patrons (protectors). The Ottomans and the European Powers considered the established (διομολογήσεις), issued from the Middle Ages, as anachronistic in the age of national states. the formation of a Levantine identity on exclusively religious basis figured similarly obsolete in the beginning of the 20th century. The Levantines were ignored in the process of social modernisation. It did not destroy them, but rather it left them disappear as a group. Most of the Levantines did not manage to overcome the obstacles that had been placed in the professional activity of strangers (aliens) in Turkey after 1923, but also the xenophobia, which the legislation of the new Turkish Democracy was marked by.

1. Common Levantine names in 1800: For those originated from France: Arlaud, Beuf, Boyer, Castagne, Crespin, Dalmas, Dejean, Gravier. For the Catholics born in the islands and in Constantinople: Babacari, Ballari, Caro, Castelli, Corpi, Corpi-Giustiniani, Dapei, Dhamalà, Drossa, Gallici, Lapiera, Livadhari, Magnifico, Mamachi, Marcello, Marcopoli, Mazzolini, Peri, Privileggio, Rugieri, Salgani, Sari, Stefano, Timoni, Xanthachi.



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Γλωσσάριο :



berat

A sultanic decree that bestowed an office or a set of privileges on an individual or a group of people. They were given not only to all state officials, but also to the members of the high clergy, including patriarchs and metropolitans.