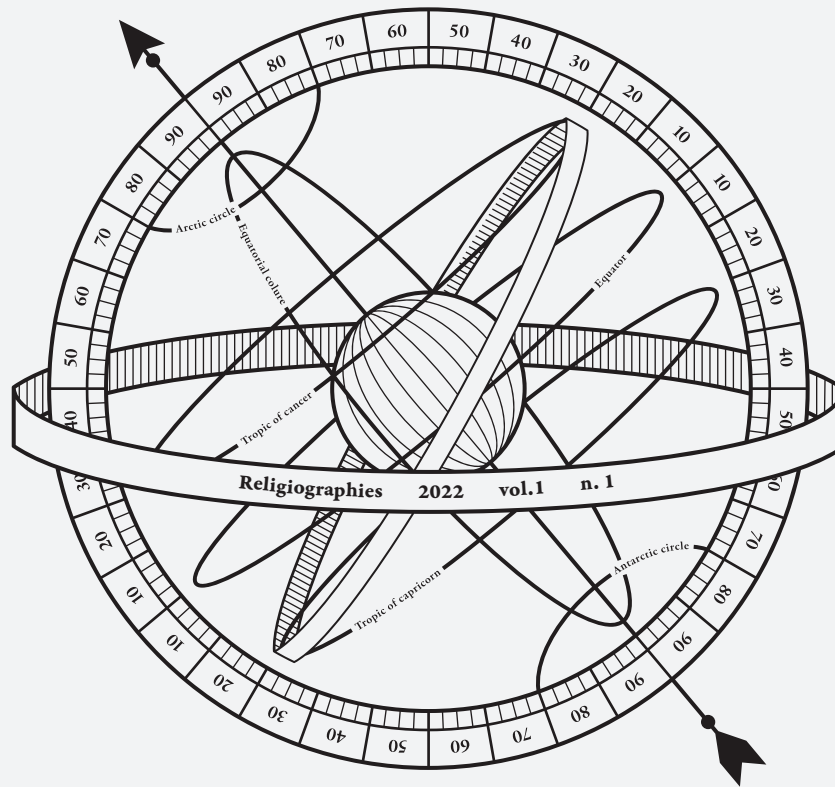


Religiographies



Special Issue

“Holy Sites in the Mediterranean, Sharing and Division”

edited by

Dionigi Albera, Sara Kuehn and Manoël Pénicaud

Mixed Worship: the Double Cult of Sarı Saltuk and St. Nicholas in the Balkans

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DI CIVILTÀ E SPIRITUALITÀ
COMPARATE

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Keywords:

Double cult, saint veneration, Sarı Saltuk, St. Nicholas, Balkans, mixed spaces, shared sacred sites

To cite this:

Sara Kuehn, 2022, “Mixed Worship: The Double Cult of Sarı Saltuk and St. Nicholas in the Balkans,” *Religiographies*, vol.1, n.1, pp. 63-81

Abstract

In the Balkan borderlands, a region characterized by religious (and so cultural) ambiguity, the Muslim allocation of an equivalent saint in the ‘pantheon’ of Christianity was facilitated by a certain ‘rapprochement’ between the two religions: an ongoing fusion of disparate elements into a new language occurred that often blurred religious distinctions. The polymorphic figures of two ‘saints’, Sarı Saltuk and St. Nicholas, are emblematic of this process of cultural intermingling, ensuing act of translating and mixed worship. Their cult is a refraction of conquest and appropriation, tempered by interfaith circulations, joint pilgrimage, and cross-cultural accommodation. The ‘interactions’ and attendant double identity of the two saints will be examined from the perspective of mixed places of worship and the entanglements between the Christians and Muslim worlds taking place within these sites in the *longue durée*.

Acknowledgement: Part of the research for this contribution was accomplished during my tenure as Research Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study of Aix-Marseille University (IMÉRA) in 2015.

Note on transliteration and dates: IJMES transliteration system is used for Ottoman Turkish and Arabic. Inconsistencies are due to the multi-linguistic nature of the period. All dates are Common Era unless otherwise indicated.

1

Cited after Helga Anetshofer, “Legends of Sarı Saltuk in the Seyahatnâme and the Bektashi Oral Tradition,” in *Enlîyâ Çelebi. Studies and Essays Commemorating the 400th Anniversary of his Birth*, eds. Nuran Tezcan, Semih Tezcan, and Robert Dankoff (Ankara: Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism Publications, 2012), 296–304, here 297.

2

For a helpful overview of Sarı Saltuk and the sites of memory in the Balkan Peninsula which played an essential role in his cult, see Robert Elsie, *The Albanian Bektashi: The History and Culture of a Dervish Order in the Balkans* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021), esp. 6, 36–8, 43–7, 122–5, 161–72, 208–10, 249, 256, 308–11; and Sara Kuehn, “Multiplication, Translocation and Adaptation: Şarî Şaltûq’s Multiple Embodied Localities Throughout the Balkans,” in *Constructing and Contesting Holy Places in Medieval Islam and Beyond*, eds. Andreas Görke and Mattia Guidetti (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

3

Anetshofer, “Legends of Sarı Saltuk,” 298–9.

*Sarı Saltuk ... riyâzet ile kâid olmuş bir keşiştir.*¹

The 17th-century Ottoman globe-trotter Evliyâ Çelebi (1611–c. 1682) was fascinated by Sarı Saltuk (Şarî Şaltûq), the archetypal missionary dervish-warrior credited with the early Islamization (and Turkification) of the Balkans.² In his famous travelogue, Evliyâ informs us that Sarı Saltuk’s original name was Muḥammed Bukhārî, contending that he was a Yasavî dervish from Turkestan. He goes on to report a story that Muḥammed Bukhārî adopted the name Sarı Saltuk,³ after he had killed St. Nicholas, the patriarch of the town of Danzig (Gdańsk) on the Baltic coast. He then dressed in the Christian saint’s robes, assuming the identity of St. Nicholas (İsveti Nikola), and in this (dis)guise as Christian saint (Lat. *sanctus*) he called upon Christians to convert to Islam. Evliyâ indignantly quips:

Those who do not believe in the holy man have spread many rumours about him to slander him. [They say that] he was a Christian monk with the name of Sarı Saltuk who has tainted himself with sin. Even in the land of Poland there is said to be a monk named Saltuk Bay in the port of Danzig. He [Sarı Saltuk] had gone to him, and had challenged him to the [right] faith, but when he would not accept it, Saltuk Bay killed “İsveti Nikola” in his cell and assumed his robes. ... For twenty-one years he pretended to be a Christian monk named Saltuk and invited the *kafîrs* [unbelievers] to embrace the true religion [Islam].⁴

Whether the Christian monks themselves identified ‘him’ as Sarı Saltuk or as St. Nicholas is not entirely clear, but what is clear is that this saintly persona

was able to pass between the two faiths with particular trickster-like ease and was evidently well-versed in such cross-cultural exercises.⁵ Extending help and protection to his followers, the dervish-warrior may be seen in the role of *Heilsbringer* (or, ‘bringer of salvation’). Yet Saltuk, the wanderer,⁶ can also be perceived as ambiguous and equivocal mediator of contradiction, to use Claude Lévi-Strauss’ words.⁷

Like Sarı Saltuk, the multivalent St. Nicholas⁸ was (and is) an immensely popular holy person (or saint: a charismatic individual who is perceived by others as having attained a Christian ideal of perfection during his/her lifetime and posthumously, and subsequently become the subject of devotion or worship), a constitutive status considered in this conversation as encompassing concepts similar to the Muslim *veli* (pl. *evliya* ‘) or ‘friend of God.’⁹ St. Nicholas was born in Patara (Latin Patras) on the south-west coast of Lycia in Turkey around 300 CE (one thousand years before Saltuk) and later became bishop of Myra (now Demre). As a saint he performs miraculous gifts of grace, or signs of sanctity,¹⁰ and holds universal appeal as one who helps the needy and intervenes to right injustices against the common people.¹¹ Stories are told of St. Nicholas, protector of sailors and fishermen, calming wind and storms and walking over the sea to rescue ships in danger.¹² In this function he succeeded the Greek sea god Poseidon, attesting to the continuation and reconfiguration of an ancient cult within the process of Christianization. Ottoman-period Balkan Christians, in turn, often memorialized Saltuk in the form of St. Nicholas, reflecting yet another change of time and peoples as well as a shifting of boundaries. At the same time, we must remember that the *vita*e of both holy men have been elaborated with borrowed incidents from the lives of other saints.

In the course of the complex processes of such a religio-cultural *translation* (as a metaphor for conceptualizing ideas, terms, interpretations beyond text and language),¹³ transformation and experience, the identification of Sarı Saltuk with the universally popular St. Nicholas was devised and the Muslim ‘friend of God’ Saltuk¹⁴ was indeed revered as St. Nicholas (and *other* Christian saints)¹⁵ by Orthodox and Catholic Christians in the Balkans. The switching of clothes and identities between Muslim and Christian religious figures, as in the example of Sarı Saltuk, does not seem to have been uncommon. For example there were *fetvās* (juridical opinions issued by Muslim jurists) which forbade actors from imitating or dressing up as Christian monks or priests on stage.¹⁶ As we will see, Sarı Saltuk’s saintly agency can be seen to derive from his resemblance to, imitation of, and (re)identification with the ‘other’: *sarı* in Turkish means ‘yellow, pale,’ alluding to his fair complexion and/or blond hair, the distinctive physiognomy of the ‘yellow-haired’ Byzantines. The underlying dynamic of this powerful cult is still in need of a detailed examination.¹⁷

My paper delineates the entangled developments of Sarı Saltuk and St. Nicholas within the context of the Balkan borderlands, a region given to mingling and exchange,¹⁸ one manifestation of which is its religious (and so cultural) ambiguity¹⁹ and hybridization.²⁰ The exploration builds on the nuanced observations on the ambiguization in the veneration of saints in the Bektāṣī milieu of the early 20th-century by British archaeologist Frederick William Hasluck.²¹ In Latin the term ‘ambiguous’ could allude to a double nature, as Dionigi Albera states succinctly, in turn providing an analogy with Hasluck’s seminal work on double cults and shrines that appear to have a dual character. Hasluck surmised that the Bektāṣiyye not only tolerated this ambiguity of the cult of saints, but deliberately

4

Seyāhatnāme I.212b, II.266a, III.111a; Machiel Kiel, “Sarı Saltuk: Pionier des Islam auf dem Balkan im 13. Jahrhundert,” in *Aleviler/Aleviten. Kimlik ve Tarih/Identität und Geschichte*, eds. Ismail Engin and Erhard Franz (Hamburg: Deutsches Orient Institut Hamburg, 2000), 253–86, here 273–4; Anetshofer, “Legends of Sarı Saltuk,” 298–9. There is a parallel story in the *Saltukname* (III.290), in which Sarı Saltuk “kills the monk Nestor ... puts on Nestor’s clothes and puts his clothes on Nestor ... he wiped his face with his hands and took on the appearance of Nestor,” cited after Anetshofer, “Legends of Sarı Saltuk,” 297.

5

For an example of Saltuk effecting religious ‘cross-dressing,’ see Sara Kuehn, “A Saint ‘on the Move’: Traces in the Evolution of a Landscape of Religious Memory in the Balkans,” in *Saintly Spheres and Islamic Landscapes: Emplacements of Spiritual Power across Time and Place*, eds. Daphna Ephrat, Ethel Sara Wolper, and Paulo G. Pinto (Boston: Brill, 2020), 117–48, here 139–42. On traditions of cultural ‘cross-dressing’ and the disguise of body, self, and identity through changes in clothing as popular tactic to deceive the enemy, see *Battālnāme*, Facsimile edited by Şinasi Tekin and Gönül Alpay-Tekin with Introduction, English Translation, Turkish Transcription and Commentary by Yorgos Dedes, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations of Harvard University, 1996), 627.

6

Kuehn, “A Saint ‘on the Move,’” 117–48.

7

Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (London: Penguin, 1963), 226–7.

8

The rapid growth of Nicholas’ popularity in the medieval period has yet to be investigated. As Nancy Patterson Ševčenko points out, “It is indeed surprising that a saint who was not martyred for the faith, who left no theological writings, and whose name is virtually never cited in the whole body of polemical literature of the 8th or 9th centuries, should have achieved such prominence right after Iconoclasm, and have so quickly become one of the most revered Fathers of the Church, alongside Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil and Chrysostom.” Nancy Patterson Ševčenko, *The Life of Saint Nicholas in Byzantine Art* (Monografie dello Centro di Studi per la Storia della Civiltà Bizantina nell’Italia Meridionale, Torino: Bottega D’Erasmus, 1983), 20. On the cult of St. Nicholas and his role as protector in this life and the hereafter, see Henry Maguire, “From the Evil Eye of Justice: The Saints, Art, and Justice in Byzantium,” in *Law and Society in Byzantium: Ninth-Twelfth Centuries*, eds. Elikē E Laiu-Thōmadakē and Dieter Simon (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1994), 200–39, here 227–30, 235–8.

9

See Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982) and Josef Meri, *The Cult of the Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), respectively.

For a discussion of the historical conceptualization of Islamic saints and sainthood across the early modern Ottoman world, see recently Jonathan Parkes Allen, *Self, Space, Society, and Saint in the Well-Protected Domains: A History of Ottoman Saints and Sainthood, 1500–1780* (PhD Thesis, University of Maryland, College Park, 2019), esp. 12–26.

10

For a discussion of ‘miracle(s)’ in both an Islamic and Christian context, see Sara Kuehn, “Miracle. Islam,” in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (EBR), vol. 19, eds. C. M. Furey et al (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021): 287–91.

11

Leander Petzoldt, “Nikolaus von Myra (von Bari),” *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie* 8 (1976): 45–58.

12

Cf. Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pripovijetke* (Belgrad: Državna štamparija Kraljevine Jugoslavije, 1935), 270.

13

This discussion is informed by Peter Burke’s exploration of creolization, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009) which affirms that appropriation or (religio-)cultural translation of beliefs, rituals and of objects and images has complicit human agency.

14

See n. 5 above. Cf. Ahmet T. Karamustafa, “Sarı Saltuk Become a Friend of God,” in *Tales of God’s Friends: Islamic Hagiography in Translation*, ed. John Renard (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 136–44.

15

For Saltuk’s translation into and identification with St. Spyridon, see Sara Kuehn, “A Saint ‘on the Move’”; and with St. George, see Sara Kuehn, “Entangled Sanctity: Sarı Saltuk and St. George in the Ottoman Balkans,” in *Entangled Sufism in (Post-)Ottoman Europe: Cross-Disciplinary Approaches*, eds. Cem Kara, Evelyn Reuter, and Zsófia Turóczy (New York and London: Routledge, forthcoming). Also, Frederick William Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans*, vol. 2 (Istanbul: Isis Press, 2000; originally published Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929), 254–59.

16

Metin And, *A History of Theatre and Popular Entertainment in Turkey* (Ankara: Forum Yayınları, 1963–64), 11–12.

17

The topic has been briefly discussed by Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, “Sarı Saltuk ve Saltuk-nâme,” *Türk Kültürü* 197 (1978): 266–75.

18

Cf. Maria Couroucli, “Sharing Sacred Places. A Mediterranean Tradition,” in *Sharing Sacred Spaces in the Mediterranean*, eds. Dionigi Albera and Maria Couroucli (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 1–9.

19

This study is indebted to Dionigi Albera’s articles

encouraged it in order to make the pilgrimage sites more accessible to the Christian population.²² Accordingly, he referred to Sarı Saltuk as the “stalking-horse” of Bektāšī efforts in south-eastern Europe to win Christians over to their interpretation of Islam.²³ Their continual process of saint-making bespeaks religious mixture, transculturation, fluidity, and hybridity (as well as the contiguous conceptualization of syncretism and creolization) across religio-cultural boundaries.²⁴

Both ambiguity and hybridity are instrumental in shaping the ‘interactions’ and ensuant double identity of the two ‘utraquist’ saints²⁵ – a term used with reference to the phenomenon of interreligious ‘fusion,’ or utraquism, of sainthood(s) – which will be examined from the perspective of mixed spaces (and places) of worship. These multi-religious sites are regarded here, following Edward Soja’s persuasive argument, as a product of a dynamic process of religio-cultural translation, transformation, and experience, in which social and spatial structures are dialectically intertwined.²⁶ These are seen in the context of entanglements (conceived as a metaphor for the multiple forms of coping with other cultures/religions while living in proximity) between the shared cultural worlds of Christians and Muslims taking place within these places in the *longue durée*.

I will present five case studies of religio-cultural ‘accommodation’ exemplified by interfaith intermingling, starting in Babadağ in northern Dobruja (which is associated with Sarı Saltuk in the earliest surviving source on this ‘friend of God’). We then proceed southwards to Kaliakra in southern Dobruja, Babaeski in eastern Thrace, and Patras in northern Morea. The last case study takes us further north-west to Makedonski Brod in the Kičevo region in western North Macedonia, the only sacred place in the Balkans today where we can still witness mixed worship of the double cult of Sarı Saltuk and St. Nicholas. Located on the periphery of the Ottoman empire, these religious sites act as focal points for contact between Balkan Christian and Muslim cultures, their permeable boundaries encapsulating the intercultural dynamic of confrontation and integration, appropriation and transformation.

The Varying Instantiations of Mixed Devotions of Sarı Saltuk and St. Nicholas

On the fringes of the Ottoman empire the Islamification of a holy figure within the Christian ‘pantheon’ was facilitated by a certain ‘rapprochement’ between the two faiths through what Mikhail Bakhtin calls an ‘organic’ hybridization, an ongoing fusion of different elements into a new language which had culturally productive effects.²⁷ In the process of accommodating to new circumstances an ongoing fusion of different elements into a new devotional language took place. This could lead to religio-cultural exchange in which ideas, practices, and information are imitated, adopted, and adapted – ‘translated’ in both the literal and the metaphorical sense into their new context. The ongoing cultural intermingling and subsequent devotional mixing was sustained by shared insights resulting from the cumulative experiences gained through the fusion of elements of mystical Islam, or Sufism, with pre-Islamic beliefs of the Turks, as well as Balkan Christianity’s incorporation of pre-Christian traditions.

A pivotal element in both Sufism and Balkan Christianity was the cult of shared holy sites, the most important element in the rapprochement between the Christian and Muslim communities.²⁸ Saint worship, exemplified here by the double cult of Saltuk and Nicholas, seems to have

reflected a deep-rooted need of the faithful to place between themselves and God a number of special, chosen people marked by divine favour and holiness, so-called ‘friends of God.’ Through their intercession they can prevail upon God to intervene in the course of events in a protective and beneficial way.

These transcultural flows and entanglements created religio-cultural ‘syncretistic’ phenomena which could also be subversive and resistant to the dominant cultural power. This was aided by the fact that in the newly Islamized Balkan borderlands the dervishes led a life of self-imposed poverty and communicated in the vernacular spoken by the common people – traits which appealed to the masses. Largely uncompromised by political and cultural power holders, their piety periodically aroused the suspicion of the ruling elites, as a result of which they were repeatedly accused of subversive acts for not adhering to religious formalities but debasing it through corrupting ‘innovations’ (*bid‘a*).

1. Babadağ in northern Dobruja

Sarı Saltuk’s “stupendous miracles and mighty deeds,” which involved converting people to Islam and forming Muslim communities in Dobruja, are referred to in the earliest surviving source on the holy man, the *Tuḡfāh al-ammāh*, compiled in about 1314 by Muḥammad al-Sarraj al-Rifā‘ī.²⁹ The text states that

Saltūk al-Turkī was a wonder-working dervish. He lived in the town of İsakçe [Isaccea] in the Land of the Qıpçak [a Turkish tribal confederation in the western part of the Golden Horde region], died in the year 697 (1297/98) and was buried near the mountain where he had his retreat, some distance away from İsakçe. His followers erected a *zāviye* [often translated as a ‘dervish lodge’] around his grave.³⁰

Eighteen years after al-Sarraj’s account, in 1332–3, the 14th-century traveller Ibn Baṭṭūṭa tells us that “Baba Saltuk” was an ecstatic (*mukāshif*) figure whom he characterized as

extra-worldly and mystical, although things are told of him which are reproved by divine law (*seriat*).

The story derives from his journey through this frontier region, stopping at an important settlement named after the saint-hero (*er*) held by the ‘Turks.’ This settlement can be identified as Babadağ (literally, ‘mountain of the father’; the honorific cognomen *baba* was used particularly in dervish circles denoting either the head of a *zāviye* (i.e., *tekke*) or, more generally, a respected spiritual guide or leader), situated some eighty kilometres from İsakçe in the south-eastern part of present-day Romania.³² It is significant that the belligerent circumstances which characterized the frontier were not prejudicial to cultural exchange and ‘fusion.’ Interestingly, as the sociologist Roger Bastide has observed in a different context, this kind of exchange and fusion seems to occur more readily in times of war than peace.³³ The composite cultural and ethnic elements of frontier life were thus a melting-pot of contradictions that nonetheless accommodated a form of cross-cultural convergence between Muslim and Christian societies throughout the successive frontier zones.

When Bāyezīd I (r. 1389–1402) (re)founded Babadağ in 1389 the

“Towards a Reappraisal of Ambiguity: In the Footsteps of Frederick W. Hasluck,” in *Pilgrimage and Ambiguity: Sharing the Sacred*, eds. Angela Hobart and Thierry Zarcone (Canon Pyon, Herefordshire: Sean Kingston Publishing, 2017), 29–49, and idem “‘Why Are You Mixing What Cannot Be Mixed?’ Shared Devotions in the Monotheisms,” *History and Anthropology* 19, no. 1 (2008): 37–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757200802150026>.

20

My approach derives in part from the work of Pinna Werbner and Tariq Modood, see their “Preface to the Critic Influence Change,” and Pinna Werbner’s “Introduction: The Dialectics of Cultural Hybridity,” in *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multicultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, eds. Pinna Werbner and Tariq Modood (London: NBN International, 2015), xiv–xix, 1–26, respectively.

21

Frederick W. Hasluck, “Ambiguous Sanctuaries and Bektashi Propaganda,” *Annual of the British School at Athens* 20 (1913–14): 94–119, <http://doi.org/10.1017/S0068245400009424>. Cf. Albera, “Towards a Reappraisal of Ambiguity.”

22

Hasluck, “Ambiguous Sanctuaries.”

23

Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam*, vol. 2, 436.

24

Paul Christopher Johnson, “Syncretism and Hybridization,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, eds. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 754–74; Charles Stewart, “Syncretism and Its Synonyms: Reflections on Cultural Mixture,” *Diacritics* 29, no. 3 (1999): 40–62, <http://doi.org/10.1353/dia.1999.0023>.

25

Taking up a term coined by Romain Roussel in the 1950s which underlined the importance of “interreligious fusions” at pilgrimage sites “where, for various reasons, adherents of different, even competing, religions meet in the same sanctuary,” Dionigi Albera shows that religious boundary crossings are widely accepted at ‘utraqist’ pilgrimage sites (Romain Roussel, *Les pèlerinages à travers les siècles* (Paris: Payot, 1954) and idem, *Les pèlerinages* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, [1956], 1972), 98, 117, cited after Dionigi Albera (“La mixité religieuse dans les pèlerinages. Esquisse d’une réflexion comparative,” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 155 (September 2011): 109–29, esp. 110, 113, 121, <http://doi.org/10.4000/assr.23323>). Cf. Hans-Joachim Kissling, “Das islamische Derwischtum als Bewahrer volksreligiöser Überlieferung,” *Beiträge zur Volksstumsforschung* 14 (1964): 81–96, here 82.

26

Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 1989), 126–27.

27

This “organic” hybridization was contrasted with an “intentional” hybridization in the process of which

two points of view are not mixed but set against each other dialogically; Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 360.

28

Speros Vryonis, Jr., “The Byzantine Legacy and Ottoman Forms,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 23/24 (1969/1970): 251–308, here 289, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1291294>.

29

Ibn al-Sarrāj, *Tuffāḥ al-arwāḥ wa miftāḥ al-arbaḥ* (The Apple of Souls and the Key of Gain), unpublished manuscript preserved in Berlin Staatsbibliothek Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Katalog W. Ahlwardt No. 8794. For references with partial translations, see al-Nabhānī in *Kitāb jāmi ‘karāmāt al-awliyā’*, vol. 2, Cairo 1394/1974, 100–101 (into Arabic). Andrew C. S. Peacock, “The Conversion Miracles and Life of the Dervish Sarı Saltuk, by Muhammad b. ‘Alī b. al-Sarrāj,” in *Conversion to Islam in the Premodern Age: A Sourcebook*, ed. Nimrod Hurvitz (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2020), 263–66 (into English); Kiel, “Sarı Saltuk,” 262–5 (by Bernd Radtke into German). The text tells us that Sarı Saltuk was affiliated with the Rifā‘ī and the related Ḥaydarī Sufi communities, both of whom are known to have rejected commonly accepted norms of piety, so Saltuk’s followers were presumably recruited from among nonconformist dervishes.

30

Ibn al-Sarrāj, *Tuffāḥ al-arwāḥ*.

31

Ibn Battūta, *Tuhfat al-nuṣār fī ḡara’ib al-amṣār wa-aga’ib al-asfār*, trans. Hamilton Alexander Roskeen Gibb, *The Travels of Ibn Battūta: A.D. 1325–1354*, vol. 2 (Nendeln: Kraus Reprint, 1972), 499–500.

32

Machiel Kiel, “The Türbe of Sarı Saltuk at Babadag-Dobrudja. Brief Historical and Architectural Notes,” *Güney-Dogu Avrupa Arastirmaları Dergisi* 6 (1977–78): 205–25.

33

Cf. Roger Bastide, “Problems of Religious Syncretism,” in *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader*, eds. Anita Maria Leopold and Jeppe Sinding Jensen (London: Routledge, 2014), 113–39, here 134.

34

Kiel, “Sarı Saltuk,” 274.

35

See Ahmet T. Karamustafa, “Early Sufism in Eastern Anatolia,” in *Classical Persian Sufism: From Its Origins to Rumi (700–1300)*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn (London: Khaniqahi Nimatullahi Publications, 1994), 175–98, 191 and n. 32.

36

Saltuknâme II.290a; Helga Anetshofer-Karateke, *Das Saltuknâme: Philologische und Islamkundliche Aspekte einer Heiligenlegende des 15. Jahrhunderts* (unpublished MA Thesis, University of Vienna, 1995), 32.

town’s central place of veneration was Saltuk’s tomb (*türbe*). However, a few decades later, according to Evliyā Çelebi, the holy man’s commemorative structure was destroyed and covered with earth, stones, and garbage, probably as a result of Mehmed II’s harsh measures against the nonconformist dervish communities in the Balkans, denounced for their ‘innovations’ in practice and beliefs. Unlike Mehmed II, his son and successor, Bāyezīd II (r. 1481–1512), was a patron of Sufi lodges and during his visit in Babadağ in 1484–5 the *türbe* and *zāviye* were substantially rebuilt.³⁴ It was in the vicinity of this holy site that in 1473 Bāyezīd II’s younger brother, Prince Cem (d. 1495), heard stories about Sarı Saltuk from the saint’s followers. He subsequently asked a member of his court, a certain Ebū’l-Khayr Rūmī, to collect the extraordinary oral and built traditions circulating about the holy figure in the hagiographic compendium *Saltukname*, or *Book of Saltuk* (gathered by c. 1480).³⁵



Today there is no trace of Sarı Saltuk’s *zāviye* at Babadağ, south of Tulcea, in the Romanian Dobrogea (Dobruja). The holy man’s *türbe* was last renovated and re-inaugurated by the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2007. The *türbe* consists of a domed tomb chamber and a portico that is open to the front, supported by two wooden posts and covered by a roof. Photograph © Sara Kuehn.

The religious instructions in this hagiography reflect the saint’s ‘confessional ambiguity.’ While the author is at pains to promote Sarı Saltuk as a devout Sunni who fights against the heretics (*rāfiḍīs*), the stories also depict him as steeped in ‘Alid tradition. For instance, when some Muslims were taken captive by the Christians, the holy man left for the town of Eski Baba (discussed below) to perform there the ‘Āshūrā’ fast³⁶ in mourning for the Prophet’s grandson Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī and other members of the Prophet’s family. Throughout the hagiography, Saltuk is moreover in constant communication with four prophets, all of whom are believed to be holy immortals in the Islamic faith tradition, three of them also central to Christianity: Hızır (Khidr; the immortal prophet-saint of Islam),³⁷ Ilyās (Biblical Elijah), Īsā (Jesus), and Idrīs (Biblical Enoch).³⁸

In addition, the text states that the real name of Saltuk is, in fact, that of the helper figure Şerif Hızır who, importantly, is also a name-giver. An example of such a naming event – which echoes Evliyā’s naming story discussed above – is that Şerif Hızır was given the name ‘Saltuk’ by his enemy Alyon, whom he defeated in combat. The change of name is also based on the ancient Turkish tradition according to which a person adopts

a new name after an act of heroism. Saltuk, in turn, ‘baptized’ Alyon as a Muslim, giving him the name of Ilyās. Importantly, it is, once again, *after* this initiation that Saltuk *becomes* the protean character Hızır who appears in various guises and comes to the aid of people in distress. The mythological Hızır – the Green Man, who evokes the legendary presence of a wandering saint and fulfils an important mediating function – is often understood as the being behind the figures of Sarı Saltuk, Saint Nicholas, and other Christian saints.³⁹

These modes of (cultural) translations and identifications are facilitated through notions of incarnationism (Hulūliyye; belief in divine manifestation in humans or other beings) and metempsychosis, which have played a crucial role in heterodox dervish circles as well as in the formation of the doctrine of the Bektāšīs⁴⁰ buttressed by ‘Alid piety. In the process of their institutionalization they claimed Saltuk as their own, as stated in the 15th-century hagiographic *vita* of the Bektāšī patron saint Hācī Bektash (d. 1270–1), even though Saltuk originally had nothing to do with Bektāšism.⁴¹ The doctrinal basis for metempsychosis led the Bektāšī community to believe in the transmigration of the soul from one generation to the next. Accordingly, the souls of the holy figures can change their bodily shells and manifest themselves in new (animate or inanimate) forms. As mentioned above, in both Sufism and Balkan Christianity a holy (wo)man is often conceived as acting as a mediator between God and humans and directing human affairs. According to John Kingsley Birge, there are a number of saints, at least three hundred, who have the power to appear in any form, as human being or as angel, and to change this state at any moment. One of them is the most perfect human being (a mystical axis mundi/*qutb*) who possesses spiritual authority (*velāya*). If this holy man dies, one of the three in the following rank takes his or her place. The place of these three, in turn, is filled by the seven following ones, and so on. These are called Abdāl (from *badal*, substitute) and are recruited from the believers,⁴² though their identity remains secret. It is on this doctrinal basis that saints such as Sarı Saltuk and Nicholas, separated in time by almost an entire millennium, could be culturally ‘translated’ into one other. The notion of the ‘Seven Abdāl’ also brings to mind the significance of the number ‘seven’ in Christian teachings, notably the Book of Revelation (1:20), which refers to seven angels, churches, spirits, stars, etc.; it also recalls the well-known miracle of Saltuk’s sevenfold increase in death and the multiplication of his coffins. This attests to the holy man’s strategically placed efficacy, his ‘relics’ subsequently serving as important means of localizing an entitlement which was claimed by various parties, including the Bektāšīyye.⁴³

Next to show interest in Saltuk was Süleyman I (1520–1566). In 1538, during the expedition against the Voyvode of Moldavia, Petru Rareș (1487–1546), he stayed for four days in Babadağ visiting his *zāviye* and carrying out his devotions at the holy man’s *türbe*.⁴⁴ However, Saltuk’s identification with Christian saints, as well as some of the stories about his actions that were deemed ‘heterodox,’ must have caused some apprehension among 16th-century Ottoman authorities and ‘ulema (Muslim religious scholars).⁴⁵ When enquiring about the saint’s holiness (*velāya*), Süleyman obtained a *fetvā* from the famous *Şeyhül-islām* Ebū Su‘ūd (d. 1574).⁴⁶ While the official legal opinion of the famous Muslim jurist underlined Saltuk’s ‘Christian aspect,’ it remarkably had no detrimental effect on the privileges of his *türbe* and his *waqf* (charitable foundation),⁴⁷ the enduring link between the

37

For a discussion of Hızır in the Balkans, see Sara Kuehn, “Cyclical Time, Nature Spirits, and Translation Activities: The Transreligious Role of the Meeting of Khidr and Ilyās in the Balkans,” in *Khawaja Khidr from the Middle East to the Balkans: A Survey of a Multireligious Figure*, eds. Michel Boivin and Manoël Pénicaud (New York and London: Routledge, 2023).

38

Anetshofer, “Legends of Sarı Saltuk,” 293.

39

See n. 6 above. Irène Mélikoff, “Hasluck’s Study of the Bektashis and its Contemporary Significance,” in *Archaeology, Anthropology and Heritage in the Balkans and Anatolia. The Life and Times of F. W. Hasluck, 1878–1920*, vol. 1 (Istanbul: Gorgias Press, 2010), 297–307, here 289–99. Also, Ahmet T. Karamustafa, “Sarı Saltuk Becomes a Friend of God,” in *Tales of God’s Friends: Islamic Hagiography in Translation*, ed. John Renard (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 136–44, here 137.

40

Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, *Bektāšī menākıbnāmelerinde İslām öncesi inanç motifleri* (Istanbul: Enderun, 1983), 154–72; Rainer Freitag, “Der Kreislauf des Seins. Die Wanderung des Geistes bei den Bektaschis,” in *Seelenwanderung in der islamischen Härese*, ed. Rainer Freitag (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 1985), 204–23. Cf. Cem Kara, *Grenzen überschreitende Dervische: Kulturbeziehungen des Bektaschi-Ordens, 1826–1925* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019), 73, 104, 116–9, 161, 207–8, 330–1.

41

Erich Gross, *Das Vildjet-nâme des Hâğgî Bektasch, ein türkisches Dervischemangelium* (Leipzig: Mayer & Müller, 1927), 73–75. During the 16th century the Ottoman state increasingly restricted religious antinomianism which led to the Bektāšīyye being transformed into a fully formalized order that absorbed other heterodox dervishes in the process. Cf. Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *God’s Unruly Friends: Dervish Groups in the Islamic Later Middle Period, 1200–1550* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 84.

42

John Kingsley Birge, *The Bektaschi Order of Dervishes* (London: Luzac, 1937), 119.

43

Seyāhatnâme II.266b–267a, III.111a; Anetshofer, “Legends of Sarı Saltuk,” 302.

44

Kiel, “The Türbe,” 216.

45

Anetshofer, “Legends of Sarı Saltuk,” 293.

46

He was the chief jurist of the Ottoman Empire from 1545 to 1574. On the *fetvā*, see M. Tayyib Okiç, “Sarı Saltuk’a Ait Bir Fetva,” *Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 1 (1952): 48–58, https://doi.org/10.1501/İlhak_0000001108.

47

Kiel, “Sarı Saltuk,” 278.



Türbe of Sarı Saltuk at Babadağ, south of Tulcea, in the Romanian Dobruja. Celebration of the 750th anniversary of the holy man's coming to the Balkans. Photograph © Sara Kuehn.

48

Cited after Anetshofer, "Legends of Sarı Saltuk," 293.

49

Toader Nicoară, *Istoria și tradițiile minorităților din România* (Bucharest: Ministerul Educației și Cercetării, 2005), 68.

50

Tijana Krstić, "State and Religion; 'Sunnitization' and 'Confessionalism' in Süleyman's Time," in *The Battle for Central Europe: The Siege of Szegedvár and the Death of Süleyman the Magnificent and Nicholas Zrinyi (1566)*, ed. Pál Fodor (Brill: Leiden, 2019), 67–68.

51

Amet Refik, *On altınca asırda Rafızîlik ve Bektaşîlik* (Istanbul: Muallim Ahmet Halit Kitaphanesi, 1932), 17–19, cited after Grigor Boykov, "Abdāl-affiliated Convents and 'Sunnitizing' Halveti Dervishes in Sixteenth-Century Ottoman Rumeli," in *Historicizing Sunni Islam in the Ottoman Empire, c. 1450–c. 1750*, eds. Tijana Krstić and Derin Terzioğlu (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 308–40, here 326, 330.

holy man's sanctuary and the increasingly prosperous town of Babadağ:

He is a Christian hermit emaciated through excessive fasting.⁴⁸

Deeply resonant with Eastern Christian faith traditions, this description of the holy man's extreme asceticism must have offered an inspiring image that Greek, Slavic, or Latin Christians as well as Muslims could relate to and revere. Thus, by means of his 'office,' Saltuk's legacy acted as a bridge between Islam and Christianity.

While staying at Babadağ in 1641, the Bulgarian Catholic Archbishop of Ottoman Sofia, Petăr Bogdan Bakšič (1601–1674), observes that Sarı Saltuk is much honoured in this city and notes that his tomb was surrounded by candles. He adds that even Christians, who confuse the Muslim saint with St. Nicholas, come to pay their respects.⁴⁹ The site seems to have played a constitutive role in the continual process of saint-making. Facilitated by shared understandings of sainthood, the sacred place seems to have been appropriated, claimed, and venerated by the faithful of the two religions and became a centre of the double cult of Sarı Saltuk/St. Nicholas.

The visit must have taken place before the late 16th-century Ottoman 'Sunnitizing' policies and their reformist and puritanical tendencies,⁵⁰ which were sharply opposed to the cult of the saints as unorthodox, equivocal practice. The religious and political authorities targeted "the misbelievers in Baba" (that is, Babadağ) and took action against the "Kızılbaş" (perceived to be outside of canonical Sunni Islam) in Dobrudja engendered through their interfaith attendance. Saltuk's *zāviye* was transferred to the Halveti Sufi order (in 1584 a Halveti *halvethāne* existed in its place) and the resident dervishes were dispersed. The dervishes of the *zāviye* of Sarı Saltuk in Kilgra (discussed below) were similarly persecuted after a sultanic order was issued following a report of the judge (*kādī*) of Kilgra in which he urged an investigation into whether the dervishes of the *zāviye* were guilty of 'heresy' and antinomianism.⁵¹



St. Nicholas Chapel, erected in 1993, at Cape Kaliakra in the Bulgarian Dobruja. Photograph © Balcon del Mundo.

2. Kilgra in southern Dobruja

Along the Black Sea coast a number of Orthodox church-monasteries were located on capes. The most popular patron saint of these religious sites was St. Nicholas. His popularity was so extraordinary that the British admiral Adolphus Slade (1804–1877), who had become an admiral in the Ottoman Navy, notes in his travel narrative:

St. Nicholas is their favourite saint; and they have a superstition firmly believed by the lower classes that, when God dies, he will succeed him.⁵²

It is here at Kilgra (present-day Kaliakra near Varna), the then-capital of Dobruja, situated on a cape extending out into the Black Sea that, according to the *Velāyetnāme*, Saltuk alights on his prayer rug together with two dervishes, Ulu Abdāl and Kiçi Abdāl. The story alludes to the flight of translocation as well as to the Sufi metaphysical understanding of ‘flying’ in inner space.⁵³ The shrine itself was a natural cave said to have been inhabited by a local dragon who was miraculously defeated by Saltuk. It was situated at or near the ruins of the ancient Greek church of St. Nicholas, under which, according to the epic *Saltuknāme*, Saltuk was later buried.⁵⁴

Both the *Saltuknāme* and Evliyā’s *Seyāhatnāme* (Book of Travels) recount a contest between Sarı Saltuk and a Christian priest. Saltuk was victorious, signalling the appropriation of the Christian clergy and, by extension, the transmission of their sainthood and the adoption also of the potent force of their *berkeket*, by Bektāšism, the religion which came to dominate Kilgra and its surroundings. Afterwards, Saltuk converted the king of Dobruja and his subjects to Islam and built a Sufi *tekke/ṣāviye*, known as Tekye-i Kilgra Sultān, on the promontory of Kilgra.⁵⁵

Just as in Babadağ, the ambiguous devotions at this religious site at the margins of the empire attracted the attention of the authorities. In a decree from 1559, Süleyman I ordered the *ḫādī* of Varna to interrogate the members of the *ṣāviye* of Sarı Saltuk in Kilgra that were said to act

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Adolphus Slade, *Records of Travels in Turkey, Greece, etc., and of a Cruise in the Black Sea, with the Capitan Pasha, in the Years 1829, 1830, and 1831*, vol. 1 (London: Saunders and Otley, 1854), 344.

53

Velāyetnāme 35–357. Saltuk’s supernatural ability to travel the Danube on top of his prayer rug, or flight of translocation, is a common motif in the *Saltuknāme*. Anetshofer, “Legends of Sarı Saltuk,” 297.

54

Cf. Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam*, vol. 2, 578.

55

Siyāhatnāme 567; Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam*, vol. 2, 429–31, 578.

against the *şeriat*. When he learned that the rumours were true, the sultan ordered the *keādi* to ban all the dervishes that did not conform to the rigid confessional boundaries of the Ottoman Sunnitization campaigns that took place during the 16th century.⁵⁶

However, the remote location of the *zāviye* was probably instrumental in protecting the sacred site from the stratagems of the *keādi* and other religious authorities. Some twenty-five years later, in 1585, the French François de Pavie (1563–1611), Baron de Fourquevaux, who was on a Black Sea galley tour from Constantinople to Balcik, visited Kilgra *zāviye*. He reports that

there is a monastery where approximately 200 dervishes dwell dressed entirely in white, who [...] give alms to all who come there, be they Christians or others.⁵⁷

De Fourquevaux describes a large, devoted, and hospitable community of dervishes that, on account of their long white robes, were perhaps Bektāšī dervishes or related ‘groups’ and communities who clearly welcomed interfaith frequentation at their *zāviye*.

At the same site a parallel cult appears to have developed during the next three centuries and continued in existence. In his detailed account of the site in 1886 the Czech Slavist Konstantin Jireček notes that at the far end of the promontory of the cape there are four small interconnected caverns hewn into the rock next to the lighthouse. A corner framed with a lower walled enclosure was thought by the Christians to contain the grave of St. Nicholas, while the local Muslims worshipped it as the grave of a holy man known by the generic honorific “Hadži Baba.”⁵⁸ Observing that “Sarı Saltuk’s grave in the Kilgra cave is called S. Nicolas’s as well for the benefit of a mixed population,” Frederick Hasluck confirms that in the 1920s the site was still visited by both Muslim and Christian pilgrims.⁵⁹ Local lore moreover associates the cape with a miracle of St. Nicholas according to which, while the saint was fleeing from the Ottomans, God lengthened the ground before him, thus creating Kaliakra cape. Today nothing remains of the cave sanctuary described by Jireček and Hasluck, but in 1993 a chapel was erected above the purported location of the tomb of St. Nicholas,⁶⁰ testimony to his ongoing cult.

3. *Eski Baba in eastern Thrace*

Even though the small town of Eski Baba (Bulgarophyon)⁶¹ was not yet under the dominion of the Turks during Sarı Saltuk’s lifetime, the *Saltuknâme* associates the holy figure with the conquest of Edirne (Adrianople) and its surroundings by Murād I (r. 1362–1389) in 1362.⁶² Located fifty-five kilometres east of Edirne on the Edirne–Istanbul Road, the settlement was already deserted by the Byzantines when Bulgarophyon was taken by Murād I’s troops.⁶³ It is therefore conceivable that in the 14th and 15th centuries the eastern Thracian town was a primarily Turkish settlement. When visiting the town in the late 16th century, the German Lutheran theologian Stephan Gerlach recorded that Eski Baba was a Turkish village with few Greek inhabitants.⁶⁴

One of Saltuk’s legends nonetheless states that, after the conquest, Eski Baba’s Christian sovereign Istefan rushed from the city walls to surrender to the saint and declare his conversion to Islam. Saltuk thereupon changed Istefan’s name to Ismail and left him in possession of both

his “dignity” and his domain. This generous gesture reflected the Ottoman policy of *istimālet*, or conciliation towards conquered subjects, designed to win hearts and minds and to facilitate Ottoman expansion in the Balkans. The story also relates that next to the town of Eski Baba there was a church with forty priests who were forced to convert to Islam by the newly converted prince. Saltuk is then said to have ‘converted’ the church into a mosque.⁶⁵

The fact that the conquerors found the town of Eski Baba uninhabited reduces the credibility of this legend, but we can assume that ‘Islamization’ of priests took place, given the documented conversion of clerics elsewhere in Thrace.⁶⁶ The story about the converted prince Istefan in Eski Baba shows that Islam was spreading in Thrace⁶⁷ and attests to intense cultural changes and encounters.

The Islamization and Ottomanization of the region was not only due to the Muslim saint’s apparent superior power (*kerāmet*) and sanctity (*velāya*) but was facilitated by the prospect of economic improvement and social advancement – at a time when the Byzantine Church was undergoing an economic and moral crisis.⁶⁸ Islamization may also have been furthered by the fact that the Byzantine Church did not consider the Turks “infidels.” Patriarch Neilos (1379–1388) called them “people who have a bad faith,” a designation corresponding to the widespread idea, current both in Byzantium and in the West, that Muslims were not “infidels” but rather “apostates from Christianity.”⁶⁹

Travelogues by some of the first travellers to visit the settlement testify to the manifold exchanges between the Muslim and Christian communities. In 1470 the Venetian Giovan Maria Angiolello (d. c. 1525) described an old church with the tomb of a Christian saint who, after the Ottoman conquest, was much revered by the Turks, so much so that many dervishes settled nearby.⁷⁰ The earliest known traveller to mention the Islamic name of the town, “Eski Baba,” was the diplomat and prelate Antonius Verantius (Antun Vrančić, 1504–1573), who travelled through the Thracian town in 1553 en route from Vienna to Constantinople.⁷¹ A few years later, probably in 1557, the Polish diplomat Erazm Otwinowski (d. 1614) visited Eski Baba. He took a keen interest in Ottoman society and culture and was generally sympathetic towards Islam. In his travel report he does however remark upon the “idolatry” (*bałwochwalstwo*) at the shrine of St. Nicholas in Eski Baba:

In the town Baba there is idolatry at the tomb of Nicholas, [performed by] Turkish monks [dervishes].⁷²

The tomb then most probably had been ‘converted’ into a dervish *türbe* and the saint had become the object of double identification by both Christians and Muslims. The gradual creolization of sacred symbols of originally distinct religious traditions at the tomb of St. Nicholas must have produced new ‘syncretic’ ritual practices,⁷³ which Otwinowski perceived as “idolatrous.”

A decade later, in 1567, a member of a Habsburg mission to Selim II, Marco Antonio Pigafetta, visited the town. He describes a monumental sarcophagus in the church of St. Nicholas in which he was told a giant Turkish warrior was buried, responsible for various miraculous deeds against the Christians. The sarcophagus was guarded by Muslim “priests” and monumental weapons hung on the church walls.⁷⁴ The Turkish warrior was identified by Stephan Gerlach with Sari Saltuk when he visited the

64
Stephen Gerlach, *Stephen Gerlachs des Ältern Tage-Buch ... herfür gegeben durch seinen Enckel Samuel Gerlachium* (Frankfurt a. M.: Zunner, 1674), 511.

65
Saltuknâme, ed. Fahir İz, fol. 245v–246r, 265v, 270v, 278r; see Adamović, “Das Tekke,” 15. The hagiographical account of the miracles (*menāqubnâme*) of Sheikh Bedreddin (composed by his grandson, Halil bin İsmail) similarly relates the conversion miracle of one hundred Christian relatives of Ghāzī Isrā’īl’s (Christian) wife, whom Ghāzī Isrā’īl likewise treated very well and entertained daily. Hans Joachim Kissling, “Das Menāqubnâme Scheich Bedr ed-Dīns, des Sohnes des Richters von Samāvnā,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 100, no. 1 (1950): 112–76, here 140.

66
The conversion of priests is also known from a Byzantine document dated 1391. Another example is the return to Christianity by the Presbyteros Nikolaos together with his children: “...since many of them [the Turks] in fact believe the same as we do, namely those who achieve the [correct] faith through their character; these are Christians in practice and only lack the official designation.” Ihor Ševčenko, “Alexios Makrembolites and his ‘Dialogue between the Rich and the Poor,’” *Zbornik radova Vizantoloskog instituta* 6 (1960): 187–228, here 196.

67
For further examples see Georgios S. Vogiatzis, *Die Anfänge der Türkenherrschaft in Thrakien und die ersten Niederlassungen* (PhD Thesis, University of Vienna, 1987), 244–46.

68
Vogiatzis, *Die Anfänge der Türkenherrschaft in Thrakien*, 245–48.

69
Ivan Dujčev, “Le patriarche Nil et les invasions turques vers la fin du XIV^e siècle,” *Mélanges de l’école française de Rome* 78, no. 1 (1966): 207–214, here 211.

70
Giovan Maria Angiolello, *Viaggio di Negroponte*, ed. Cristina Bazzolo (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1982), 20.

71
Verancsics’ “*összes munkái*,” cited after Konstantin Josef Jireček, *Die Heerstrasse von Belgrad nach Constantinopel und die Balkanpässe, eine historisch-geographische Studie* (Prag: F. Tempsky, 1877), 166–7.

72
Italics added. Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, *Podróże i poselstwa polskie do Turcji* [Polish Travels and Envoys to Turkey] (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Biblioteki Polskiej, 1860), 10. Kraszewski’s publication is based on the 17th- or 18th-century manuscript in the Jagiellonian Library, Krakow, MS 52675.

73
See n. 33 above. Also, Magdalena Lubanska, “Religious Syncretism: History of the Concept; the Subject of Research,” in her *Muslims and Christians in the Bulgarian*

74

Marco Antonio Pigafetta, *Itinerario di Marc'Antonio Pigafetta gentil' huomo Vicentino* (London: Appresso Giouanni Wolfio Inghilese, 1585), cited by Adamović, “Das Tekke,” 17.

75

Gerlach, *Stephen Gerlachs*, 511.

76

For a discussion of Saltuk's wooden weapons, see Kuehn, “A Saint ‘on the Move,’” 125–28.

77

Gerlach, *Stephen Gerlachs*, 511 (translated from the German by the author).

78

Martin Gruneweg, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Dominikaners Martin Gruneweg (1562 – ca. 1618) über seine Familie in Danzig, seine Handelsreisen in Osteuropa und sein Klosterleben in Polen*, ed. Almut Bues (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2008), vol. 2, 739.

79

Reinhold Lubenau, *Beschreibung der Reisen des Reinhold Lubenau*, ed. Wilhelm Sahn (Königsberg: Beyer, 1914), 157 (translated from the German by the author).

80

Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawl. C. 799, f. 50v.

81

Michael G. Brennan, *The Travel Diary of Robert Bargrave, Levant Merchant, 1647–1656* (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1999), 127.

sanctuary eleven years later on June 10, 1578. Gerlach's account in his travelogue is closely comparable to that of Pigafetta.⁷⁵ He notes that in the Turkish village “Eßkibaba” there were only a few Greek families “who do not have churches, but have to go to the next village.” While attesting to mixed attendance, he also states that both Christians and Muslims lay claim to the holy man whose tomb was located in the church of St. Nicholas. The Christians identified the tomb as the resting place of St. Nicholas, whereas the “Turks” claimed it for the dervish-warrior Sarı Saltuk Baba.

Gerlach documents the materialization of the sacred in the interior of the site, detailing the Muslim religious paraphernalia and the wooden weapons⁷⁶ which hung on the walls. The bishop's hat, or mitre, and other relics, alleged by the Muslims to have belonged to St. Nicholas, were not accepted as genuine by the Christians, who instead claimed that the Muslims put them there.⁷⁷ Even though the Christians did not accept the claim, it is noteworthy that the “Muslim priests” attributed the relics to the Christian saint. The “priests” in charge of this shrine were most probably dervishes. Since the Bektāşī gradually incorporated Saltuk into their network and identified him with the Christian St. Nicholas, these “priests” were perhaps dervishes affiliated with the Bektāşī who in the 16th century recognized the large sarcophagus in the former Christian church as the burial place of Saltuk and, in turn, as that of St. Nicholas.

Four years later, in 1582, another traveller, the Dominican friar and merchant Martin Gruneweg (1562–c. 1618) similarly notes the ongoing negotiation between the Christians and the Turks. He tells that in the weathered old Greek church there is supposed to be a stone, presumably the sarcophagus, that both the Christians and the Turks want to take out, or tried to lay claim to, but they did not succeed. This, Gruneweg says, substantiates the many miracles that are told about this holy place. He also records that besides the Turks and Greeks, Jews live close to the church.⁷⁸ The fact that members of the three monotheistic faiths chose to live in the proximity of the sanctuary suggests that the site was attractive to and perhaps also frequented by all.

The utraquist cult at the church-*tekke* of St. Nicholas was evidently an important centre of multi-religious pilgrimage in the late 16th and 17th centuries, because further travellers relate that an ambiguous saint's “tomb” is located in the former church of St. Nicholas. In 1587, dispatched to Constantinople by the Austrian emperor, the German apothecary Reinhold Lubenau (1556–1631) mentions the church in his account of the trip. He states that a certain Christian saint named “Sares Soldak” [Sarı Saltuk] is buried in the ancient Greek church:

At night we arrived in Eskibaba ... here, too, there is a very old small Greek church, in which someone, by name of Sares Soldak, a Christian, is buried.⁷⁹

The account of the British merchant Robert Bargrave (1628–1661) provides us with further insights into this church-*tekke*. In his diary⁸⁰ he notes in the entry for September 14, 1652:⁸¹

We came to a Toune calld Babà Sarı Saltık (Father yellow Pate) which has its name from a Chappell therein so calld by the Turkes; but by the Greeks, Aghios Nicolas, where a Christian Saint is sayd to be buried; to whom belongs this Story: When the Turkes

first conquerd these Parts, they assayd divers times to burne this Chappell, but were still miraculously prevented: wherefore they conclude that Saint to have been in part a Mussleman (of theyr Relligion) & so proclaime him to this day: It is now lookd to by a Dervis=woman, who keeps a Lamp allways burning in it, & it is calld a Tekie.

Bargrave's report confirms that the town was indeed named after Sarı Saltuk Baba. He also informs us that during and after the town's conquest by Murād I the church of St. Nicholas seemed to be miraculously protected despite several attempts by the Ottoman army to burn it down. This was interpreted as a miraculous sign of its sanctity and of the holy man's sainthood (*velāya*) whose supernatural ability (*keramet*) was such that he must (at least "in part") be a Muslim. Muslim conceptions of religious topography, as Josef Meri suggests, were thus also dependent on particular holy sites and their tomb inhabitants.⁸² To consolidate the Ottoman claim over the remarkable tomb in Eskibaba, it is mentioned alongside Kilgra both in the *Velāyetnāme* and the *Seyāhatnāme* as one of the holy spaces to which one of Saltuk's famous seven coffins was dispersed.⁸³ At the same time, Christians continue to claim the resting place within the church, known as "tekīe" (*tekīya*, *tekke*), to be that of St. Nicholas.⁸⁴ We thus witness what Bakhtin refers to as "organic" hybridization of originally distinct religious traditions at the site, an ongoing mixing and fusing of diverse elements into a new "language." Christians participated in what appears to be a Bektāshī-coded cult but clearly on their own terms.

The keeper of the tomb (*türbedar*) of St. Nicholas (alias Sarı Saltuk) who ensures that the candle at the tomb is always lit was a woman. The ritual use of candles or oil lamps at tombs points to a Bektāshī administration of the sacred site. This tradition of permanently lit lights is found both in Bektāshī *tekkes* and in Christian monasteries.⁸⁵ The fact that both practices followed ancient patterns suggests however that these overlaps were based more on shared cultural heritage than on processes of religious exchange.⁸⁶

In 1667 the cult provoked the censure of the strict Sunni preacher Vani Mehmed Efendi who wanted to abolish it as superstitious.⁸⁷ Despite this opposition, the joint cult continued, as is shown in the account of John Covel [Colvill] (1638–1722), who went to Constantinople as chaplain to the Levant Company and was commissioned to make a study of the Greek church and, interestingly, of its stand on transubstantiation.⁸⁸ In 1675 he stayed at Baba Eski, which he describes as "a pretty large town, [which] will dayly increase."⁸⁹ In his travelogue he further notes that

An old Turk took it from the Christians, and from him it is now so named, for bobba [*baba*] is the common name for Father, and is given to every old man in common discourse. He lyes buried in St. Nicholas' church, the one thing remaining of the Greekes memoriall or building here. It is made a place of prayer, and he is reckoned a great saint amongst the common people. When we went into it to see his tomb we met another old Turk, who had brought three candles, and presented them to an old woman that looks after it, and shews it to strangers. He said he had made a vow in distresse to do it.

Covel, once again, mentions the cult of burning candles and alludes to the

82
Meri, *The Cult of the Saints*, 11–12.

83
Anetshofer, "Legends of Sarı Saltık," 303. In alternative versions there were twelve or forty coffins. Peter Brown (*The Cult of the Saints*, 90–103) notes that the possession of a saint's relics could even unify communities.

84
Anetshofer, "Legends of Sarı Saltık," 303.

85
Andreas Kiriakidis, *Bektaschitum und griechisches orthodoxes Mönchtum. Religionskontakt und Vergleich zweier mystischer Traditionen* (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2010), 35.

86
Kiriakidis, *Bektaschitum und griechisches orthodoxes Mönchtum*, 35.

87
Madeline C. Zilfi, "The Kadizadelis: Discordant Revivalism in Seventeenth-Century Istanbul," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 45, no. 4 (1986): 251–269, here 263, <https://doi.org/10.1086/373194>.

88
John Covel, "Extracts from the Diaries of Dr. John Covell, 1670–1679," in *Early Voyages and Travels in the Levant*, ed. J. Theodore Bent (London: Hakluyt Society, 1893), 186.

89
Covel, "Extracts from the Diaries," 186.

In the diary of a journey to Jerusalem by Arsenije Crnojević, published in Bernard Lory, “Les notes de voyage du patriarche Arsenije III Crnojević, de Peć à Silivri, en 1682,” *Turica* 49 (2018): 373–87, here 373, <http://doi.org/10.2143/TURC.49.0.3285085>; John Bagnell Bury, *A History of the Eastern Roman Empire* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1912), 345.

Cf. Lory, “Les notes de voyage,” 384. On the 9th-century St. Nicholas the Warrior, model of chastity, see Claude Laporte, *Tous les saints de l'orthodoxie* (Vevey: Xenia, 2008), 649.

Hasluck (*Christianity and Islam*, vol. 2, 55, n. 6, and 271) notes that in 1907 “Christians incubated in the church, and that a round stone on which patients sat gave oracles by turning under them, right for recovery and left for death. The tekke-church has not yet fallen into ruin, and down to the Balkan war was more or less occupied by dervishes, according to one of my informants.”

An attempt to localize Sarı Saltuk’s “tomb” at Eski Baba is made by Thierry Zarcone in “*Alévi et Bektasî de Thrace orientale: les tekke de Sarı Saltuk à Babaeski et d’Ariz Baba à Havsa*,” *İkinci Tarih Boyunca Karadeniz Kongresi Bildirileri, 1–3 Haziran 1988* (Samsun: T.C. Ondokuz Mayıs Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi, 1990), 629–38.

practice shared between Christians and Sufi communities, such as the Bektāṣī, when making a wish or propitiatory vow to secure a saint’s intercession. Should the vow be fulfilled, the supplicants make votive offerings to the holy man. In this case the old man brought three candles in gratitude for the saint’s intercession. Covell also records a short conversation on the intercessory powers of the saint which he had with the female *türbedar* (who was perhaps the same woman Bargrave encountered during his visit twenty years earlier):

The old woman told us: Yes, my sons, when ever you are in danger pray to this good holy man, and he will infallibly help you. Oh, fyel sister, quoth the old Turk, do not so vainly commit sin, for he was a mortall man and a sinner as well as we. I know it, quoth the old wife, that onely God doth all, and he doth nothing; but God for his sake will the sooner hear us; and so ended that point of Turkish divinity.

As the female *türbedar* concisely puts it, despite the holy man’s human frailty and the fact that he was like them in everything including sin, an appeal to him was thought to grant immediate access to the power and presence of God.

A few years later, in 1682, the church-*tekke* was visited by the Serbian Patriarch Arsenije III Crnojević (1633–1706), Archbishop of Peć,⁹⁰ who supported Ottoman expulsion from the Balkans. Contrary to Covell’s observations that the church was “pretty intire [intact],” Arsenije III states that the building was heavily damaged. When he and his entourage went to pay their respects at the holy tomb of the saint, he identifies the saint as the 9th-century “Saint Nicholas the Warrior, who had a vision in a dream of the Greek emperor Nicephorus going to war against the Bulgars, as it is written in the Prologue [or Synaxarion, a Greek church calendar of commemorated saints arranged by feast],” thus linking the saint to a historical event, the disastrous campaign of Emperor Nicephorus I against the Bulgars in 811. At the same time, he tells us that he⁹¹

was secretly angry that the Turks had twisted a turban around his [the saint’s] head; above the tomb is his bow, which is very large, and the banner which he carried with him.

While expressing his indignation at the Ottomanization of the sacred place, he had no doubt that the bow and banner belonged to the Christian saint, unlike the Christians Gerlach encountered a century earlier who attributed the relics to the false claim of the Muslims, implying that, over time, interfaith frequentation blurred religious distinctions in the wake of translator thinking of local religious ideas, practices, and of sacred objects and images. In addition, the learned clergyman tells us that this church at Eski Baba was named after the famous St. Nicholas of Myra, with whom Sarı Saltuk is identified in other places.

Interestingly, Gerlach also noted that the *tekke* functioned as a hospital. There is a parallel here with Hasluck’s report from the 1920s, which states that Saltuk’s *türbe* at Eski Baba lies in a famous pre-Islamic sanctuary thought to possess miraculous healing power, said to be a church of St. Nicholas, but visited by both Greeks and Turks.⁹² The holy site disappeared completely when it was levelled by Bulgarian troops during the First World War.⁹³

4. Patras in northern Morea

While it was mainly Muslims who conflated Saltuk with St. Nicholas, Christians were well aware of this appropriation and, in turn, at times also claimed Saltuk as their own. In the *Seyahatnâme*, Evliyâ, for instance, records that Greek Christians of Patras (Turkish Baliabadra), the capital of the province of Morea (today's northern Peloponnese), visited the pilgrimage site (*ziyaretgâh*) of a saint called Sarı Sadık Baba, claiming, "This is Sarı Saltuk who is our Sveti (İsveti) Nikola." Through offerings to the caretakers (*türbedârlar*) of the shrine, they manage to visit the tomb, to the chagrin of all judges (*hâkimler*) who have not been able to prevent the Christian visits nor their claim.⁹⁴ In spite of the apparent tension and ambiguity reflected in the story, it also shows that the local population responded with initiative and adaptability to the agents of change. By noting that the holy man was a successor of Hâcî Bektash, Evliyâ shows that he, too, equates Sveti Nikola of Patras with Sarı Saltuk Baba.

A local legend attributes the creation of a promontory near the town of Vostitsa (to the north of Patras) to the miraculous power of Sari Sadik Sultan (Sarı Saltuk Baba?). When the dervish wanted to catch the ferry to the opposite shore of Naupaktos and the ferrymen left without him, he filled his garments with sand and then gradually scattered it into the sea, creating new ground so that he could cross on foot. The story parallels the above-mentioned legend of the divine creation of Kaliakra by St. Nicholas. The boatmen, fearing for their business were the strait to close completely, returned and brought the saint to his destination. Other *menâkıb* performed by Sari Sadik (Siddik?) Sultan, who now rests in Patras, are said to be recorded not in Muslim sources but in Byzantine chronicles (*rûm tevârikhleri*) alluding to a Byzantine appropriation of what appears to be Sarı Saltuk Baba.

It is remarkable that Evliyâ uses the Slavic form to name the saint, Sveti Nikola, rather than "Hagios Nikolaos" as one would expect in Greek-speaking Patras. But since Evliyâ gives no information about the setting of the sacred site, its exact location can no longer be determined. He mentions only the *türbedârlar* – hence only a *türbe* and no *tekke* seems to have existed – but does not allude to a former church. The behaviour of the *türbedârlar*, however, does not exclude the possibility that the Bektâşî had a hand in this. It remains a matter of speculation as to whether or not there had been an earlier local shrine of St. Nicholas, the Greek patron saint of the sea, or whether Evliyâ was influenced by stories he had heard from the Bektâşîs with whom he spent eight months in the large Kilgra *tekke*.

5. Makedonski Brod in western North Macedonia

According to Christian popular tradition, a monastery dedicated to St. Nicholas had been established before the Turkish invasion on a hill near the small town of Makedonski Brod, located in the rural hinterlands on the road that leads from Kičevo (Kërçova) to Prilep (Kanatlar) in the western part of North Macedonia. This is corroborated by an archival text from 1544 stating: "It is the *zâviye* of Hızır [Khidr] Baba – otherwise known as Nikola Baba . . ."⁹⁵ This entry may have come about because after the arrival of the Turks in Kičevo a dervish called Hadir (Hızır) Baba settled in what was probably an abandoned Christian monastery and 'converted' it into a *zâviye* (i.e. *tekke*). According to local tradition, he had come from Khurasan in Eastern Iran to this part of Macedonia during an outbreak of the plague. When he began to heal the sick,

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VIII.262a, cited after Anetshofer, "Legends of Sarı Saltuk," 293.

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Tapu defteri no 232, f. 210r, Başbakanlık Arşivi, Istanbul, see Liliana Mašulović-Marsol, "Les Bektachis dans la république de Macédoine," in *Bektachiyya: études sur l'ordre mystique des Bektachis et les groupes relevant de Hadji Bektach*, eds. Alexandre Popovic and Gilles Veinstein (Paris: Geuthner, 1997), 339–68, here 351.

local people were convinced of his miraculous powers.



H'd'r Baba Tekke/Church of St. Nicholas (Crkva Sveti Nikola), Makedonski Brod in western North Macedonia. Photograph © Glenn Bowman.



Tomb of H'd'r Baba in the H'd'r Baba Tekke/Church of St. Nicholas (Crkva Sveti Nikola), Makedonski Brod in western North Macedonia. Photograph © Glenn Bowman.

A Bektāšī *tekke* once occupied the site but was destroyed in 1918. Today only the *tīrbe* remains, an unassuming square shaped building built of sundried brick and timber. In the south-western part of the building there is a single tomb covered with a green cloth. According to the Christians, this contains the remains of Sveti Nikola, whereas for the local Muslims it is the resting place of

Hadir (H'd'r) Baba. The Baba carries the name of and has since been conflated with the mythological Hızır (Khidr) who, as mentioned earlier, is often seen to stand behind the saints Sari Saltuk (Sar' Salt'k) and Nicholas.⁹⁶ In 1994 the local bishop officially consecrated a church at the shared sanctuary henceforth known both as Church of St. Nicholas (Crkva Sveti Nikola) and as H'd'r Baba Tekke. The mixed local population, however, still refers to it simply as *türbe* or *tiilbe*. Each year Christian pilgrims gather together to honour the Translation of the Relics of St. Nicholas as well as the feast day of St. George on May 5–6 (also known as H'd'lerle) and Muslim pilgrims to honour the memory of Hadir Baba on May 6–7. Across from the entrance of the tomb, icons of St. Nicholas hang on the wall. It is on this side that Christian believers come to pray and light their candles, while the opposite side is reserved for Muslim devotions. When the Muslim pilgrims come, the Orthodox caretaker, presently a woman, replaces some of the Christian materializations of the sacred with Muslim religious paraphernalia, such as large prayer beads, and depictions of 'Alid piety, such as 'Alī, the Twelve Imams, and Bektāšī saints.

On the conflation of Hızır Baba/Saltuk with St. Nicholas, see Tihomir R. Djordjević, *Naš narodni život* (Our Folk Life) (Beograd: Prosveta, 1984), vol. 3, 398; Glenn Bowman, "Orthodox-Muslim Interactions at 'Mixed Shrines' in Macedonia," in *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective*, eds. Chris Hann and Hermann Goltz (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 195–219, here 201; Kuehn, "Cyclical Time, Nature Spirits, and Translation Activities."



Icon of St. Nicholas in the H'd'r Baba Tekke/Church of St. Nicholas (Crkva Sveti Nikola), Makedonski Brod in western North Macedonia. Photograph © Glen Bowman.

Members of both the various Muslim denominations and North Macedonian Orthodox Christian communities participate in several ritual practices of the 'other group' – such as the exchange of coloured eggs, lighting candles, and the apotropaic rite of passing through long strings of prayer beads to obtain the holy man's blessing and protection. Seeking health, well-being, and happiness for their families and themselves, members of both conceptual communities also visit the site for its well-known curative properties and take holy water and local herbs home with them. Pilgrims seeking the healing or transformative power of Sveti Nikola/H'd'r leave personal items, such as towels, blankets, shirts, or socks, overnight by or on the *türbe* in the belief that this, like the water and the herbs, would help to heal a disease, cure infertility, and gain various other blessings. Unlike the examples discussed above, these practices

Elizabeta Koneska, *Peace for All*, 26', Broadcasting Council of the Republic of Macedonia, 2007; <http://practicalmattersjournal.org/2012/03/01/peace-for-all/>; Kiriakidis, *Bektaschitum und griechisches orthodoxes Mönchtum*, 126–7.

Bowman, "Orthodox-Muslim Interactions," 206.

Irène Mélikoff, "Qui était Sari Saltuk? Quelques remarques sur les manuscrits du Saltukname," in *Studies in Ottoman History in Honour of Professor V.L. Méléage*, eds. Colin Heywood and Colin Imber (Istanbul: Isis Press, 1994), 231–8.

Kiriakidis, *Bektaschitum und griechisches orthodoxes Mönchtum*, 35.

are still shared across the religious traditions and attest to a "non-competitive atmosphere of connectedness."⁹⁷ Yet while the different faiths share the same space and there are intercommunal interactions in the apotropaic and healing rites or the exchange of presents, the communities no longer cross religious borders and partake in common saintly devotions and joint religious observances, as was the case during Ottoman times.⁹⁸

Conclusion

"The name of Sari Saltuk," as Irène Melikoff has pointed out, "should be seen as a symbol of the Islamic-Christian syncretism characteristic of the Balkans. It also remains an eloquent symbol of the spirit of religious tolerance that prevailed during the early centuries of the Turkish conquest."⁹⁹ We might add that it can still be felt today (even though it has lost much of its force). Saltuk's encounter with Nicholas and his subsequent 'reincarnation' as this Christian saint demonstrate the fluidity and porousness of cultural paradigms. This is evidenced, for instance, by the *fetvā* of Ebū Su'ūd (d. 1574) which emphasized the Muslim saint's "Christian aspect," providing an inspirational conceptualization which both Christians and Muslims could relate to and revere.

The case studies have shown that the transfer and translation of saintly cults, sainthood, and holy places took place mostly in borderland regions in south-eastern Europe at the margins of the Ottoman empire and were initiated by dervish orders rather than representatives of the official religion, who instead looked askance at this mixed worship. Despite recurrent instances of orthodox opposition, the saints' followers continued to translate devotional practices directed towards the Christian saint to the Muslim saint, and vice versa, enacting the inextricable embeddedness of religio-cultural contact.

These cultural paradigms allowed ancient religious structures associated with St. Nicholas to be perpetuated and jointly reconfigured with "the blonde dervish." In this they followed ancient pathways of religio-cultural translatability as exemplified by Nicholas himself absorbing elements of the cult of Poseidon. This process of assimilation, which took place under the umbrella of the Sufi confraternities, was facilitated by the fact that recognizing a holy man in Islam was both a personal and an informal affair, often based on a consensus of the common people, the saint's devotees, and their interaction with 'their' saint. The translation process also benefitted from the fact that, as Andreas Kiriakidis notes, "those laymen in both cases are followers of a mystical community (Bektāṣī dervishes and Greek Orthodox monks, respectively) that is a model in spiritual terms and a point of orientation in spiritual life."¹⁰⁰ The dervishes had taken a vow of poverty and lived in secluded asceticism, comparable to Christian monastic orders. The Bektāṣī in particular, but also other Sufi orders, were conciliatory and empathetic toward Christianity and practiced religious coexistence. Consequently, they translated Christian modalities just like the Christians had appropriated and reinterpreted ancient pagan traditions. In this they saw themselves as natural successors and 'guardians' of the Christian tradition in the new Islamic environment. In this way, they also had no difficulty in transforming the Christian saint's name, St. Nicholas, into that of Sari Saltuk. The process was also aided by the function attributed to these religious sites which was (and still is) linked to a particular efficacy such as healing. There was a certain trans-confessional pragmatism, which focused on the hoped-for effects anticipated at these holy places

irrespective of religious affiliation.

The double cult of the protean figures of Saltuk and Nicholas thus embraces conquest and appropriation along with multi-religious pilgrimage and cross-cultural negotiation. Outside the remit of official religious policy, they embody that assimilation and cultural exchange characteristic of borderlands that allows customs to converge on both sides. The tangled routes of cultural transmission can be traced through the simultaneous use of these holy figures, their shared sacred sites, and sometimes even their shared holy dates. These time-honoured routes allowed and can still allow for rapprochement, translation, and positive, peaceful contact between Muslim and Christian communities.