



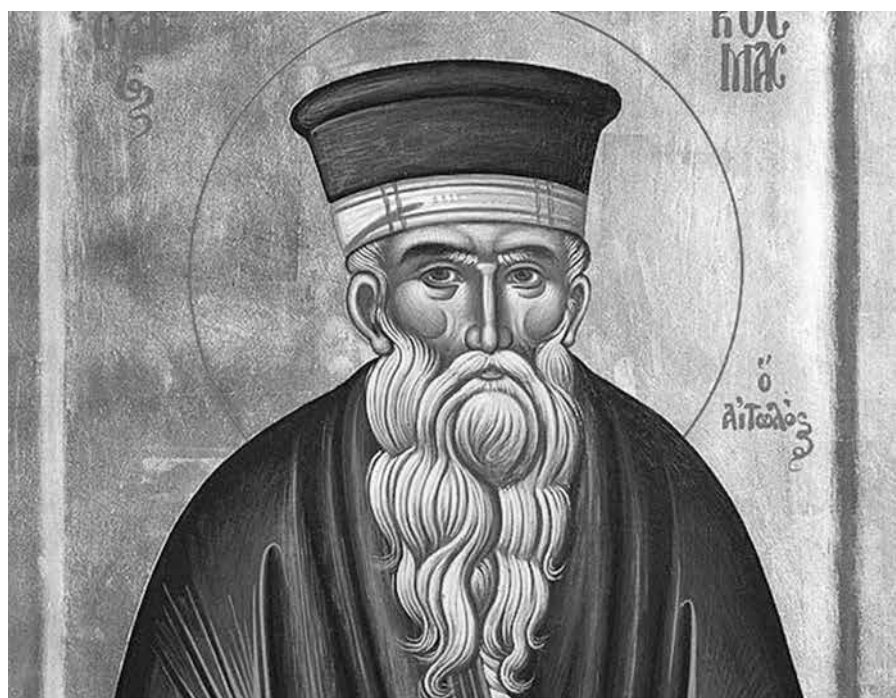
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THE PROPHET AND THE PASHA: ST. COSMAS OF AITOLIA AND ALI PASHA, THE LION OF IOANNINA

by Mother Nectaria McLees

In all of Greek Christian history there is hardly a more interesting or appealing figure than that of the 18th-century St. Cosmas of Aitolia, and scarcely a more disreputable one than Ali Pasha. The two met and recognized each other for what they were: Ali discerning the prophet in St. Cosmas, and St. Cosmas foreseeing the Albanian Pasha's rise to power and his eventual end. Both authoritatively ruled Epirus (now northwestern Greece and southern Albania) – St. Cosmas spiritually, with the devotion of a missionary to his people, and Ali Pasha, a decade later, with the ruthlessness of a tyrant. God's providence and the vivid oriental coloring of the Ottoman occupation interwove the lives of two of the most powerful men of their century, and their story sheds a fascinating light on Christian-Turkish relations.

St. Cosmas of Aitolia

Like a second Paul, St. Cosmas cannot be fixed to any one place. He moved through Greece as the spirit of God led him, and in his wake left a thriving

Opposite: Top: St. Cosmos of Aitolia. Bottom: Ali Pasha of Ioannina

Orthodoxy, resurrected almost single-handedly from the ignorance and malaise that had settled over the Greek Church after the coming of the Turks.

St. Cosmas was born in 1714 in a small village called Megalo Dendro in Aitolia, a remote and mountainous region of central Greece. He was educated in regional schools and taught as a schoolmaster in his native village and later in Lobotina. When he heard of the Athonite Academy that been established at Vatopedi Monastery on Mt. Athos he went there with a number of his own students to continue his studies.

His biographers are unclear as to how long St. Cosmas stayed at Vatopedi. Some say five, others eight years, but all agree that by the time the school closed in 1758 he had gone to Philotheou, another Athonite monastery, where he was tonsured a monk. Long before his tonsure, he lived as a monk in the world, quietly and unobtrusively preparing himself for a life devoted to God, and soon after taking vows he was ordained a priest at the request of the fathers of the monastery. Fr. Cosmas intended to remain on the Holy Mountain, but the teacher in him proved too strong. The silence and peace of the monastery only sharpened his awareness of the millions of Greek Christians living in ignorance, whose lives and souls were slowly being drained of the vitality of Orthodoxy during the long centuries of Turkish occupation.

His desire to help revive the Orthodox Spirit that was slumbering throughout Greece was more than idealism. His years as a school teacher had shown him that the need was profound. His biographer, Sapheiros Christodoulides, said:

He would often say that our fellow Christians have a great need for the word of God, and that those who themselves become learned should not run to the mansions of the powerful and the courts of rulers in order to acquire wealth and honor, thus wasting their education, but rather they should teach the common people who live in great ignorance and squalor, so that they might receive a heavenly reward and everlasting glory.¹

As Fr. Cosmas clearly saw, this widespread ignorance not only led to material deprivation, but if it continued unchecked it would gradually undermine the entire Greek culture. In northern Greece particularly, the

¹ Christodoulides, S., "St. Cosmas of Aitolia, Equal-to-the-Apostles." *Orthodox Word*, Pascha, 1968.

peasants were increasingly taking on the language and customs of the Turkish rulers, and in some cases, their religion. At the same time Father Cosmas was cautious, waiting on God to reveal that this was indeed *his* mission – for the role of a traveling preacher was a unique one for a monk. After a long period of questioning and prayer, his doubts were finally set to rest when he opened the Holy Scripture and found the words of St. Paul, *Let no man seek his own, but let every man seek the other's good.* (I Cor. 10:24). This was the confirmation he had been waiting for. Revealing his intent to his brother monks, he departed the Holy Mountain in 1760 and went to his brother, Chrysanthos, a teacher at the Patriarchal School in Constantinople, from whom he took lessons in rhetorical speaking. Far from being an idle dreamer, Fr. Cosmas methodically prepared himself and sought counsel from the most pious of the city's bishops and teachers. Seeing the hand of God in his praiseworthy intent, they gave him their support, and before setting out he received permission from Patriarch Seraphim of Constantinople to teach freely wherever he wished.

Preaching first in the cities and countryside around Constantinople he made his way down through Mesolongi and Nafpaktos, (across from Patras on the southern coast of the mainland, and later through the Dodecanese islands.) After fifteen years as a traveling missionary he returned to Athos in 1775 and preached in the monasteries of the Holy Mountain. He remained there for some months, immersing himself in the works of the Holy Fathers. Finally, he told the monks, "I can no longer endure the love that burns in my heart to benefit the Christians," and set out again, this time to the area around Thessalonica, Veria, and throughout Macedonia. Later he went to Chimarra, Akarnania, Aitolia, Arta and Preveza. From Preveza he sailed to the island of Lefkas (Aghia Mavra) and Cephalonia, and did extensive preaching in Albania and southern Serbia as well.

Traveling by foot, by donkey, and by boat, his reputation preceded him and large crowds met him wherever he went. There were usually no churches large enough to hold the great number of people who wanted to hear him, so he preached outside. When he arrived at a village he would tell the people that they should confess and hold vigil "with an abundance of light [candles]." Thus, each village spent the evening in prayer and fasting. After his mission became well known, Fr. Cosmas was often accompanied by forty or fifty priests who helped him with the services and confessions. At each town or village the saint had the villagers make a large wooden cross and erect



it on the spot where he was to speak. Candles would be passed out to the crowd and they would stand prayerfully through the service, which was followed by Holy Unction. So that the huge crowds could see him, Fr. Cosmas set up a portable speaker's stand which consisted of a wooden pedestal with a support upon which he could lean. After the services, the stand was dismantled and carried from village to village. (This movable podium had been made for him by Kurt Pasha, one of Albania's Moslem rulers who had been greatly moved by his preaching.) As many as two or three thousand people followed him from village to village, and in the evenings his followers and the local inhabitants would boil wheat and prepare large quantities of bread. The food was passed out on the wayside, so that everyone at the service and even chance passers-by could eat. The recipients of the food were asked in turn to pray for the living and the dead.

His biographer Christodoulides reports:

His teaching – even as we heard it ourselves – was extremely simple, like that of the Fishermen. There was such a calm and peace about it that it seemed as though it was completely filled with the joy and peace of the Holy Spirit and so the holy Cosmas sowed the seed of the Divine word in the hardened and fierce hearts of these Christians, and through the help of Divine Grace, his preaching bore much fruit. He tamed the wild, made the thieves desist from their lawlessness, made the hard-hearted and uncompassionate merciful, brought the irreverent to reverence, instructed the ignorant, and simply, brought each sinner to repentance and correction – so much so that all said that a new Apostle had appeared in their days.²

Fr. Cosmas' own view of his mission: *Not only am I not worthy to teach you, but not even worthy to kiss your feet, for each of you is worth more than the entire world...I am a servant of our Lord God Jesus Christ Who was crucified. Not that I am worthy to be a servant of Christ, but Christ condescended to have me because of His compassion.*

Fr. Cosmas' correctives were often down-to-earth acts of charity and repentance; he spoke out freely against the injustice that ground down the poor and uneducated, vigorously condemned the mistreatment of women,

² Ibid.

Opposite: Monastery of Kipinas, Epirus, where St. Cosmas preached.

and spoke openly about the cheating that characterized much of the marketplace: *So, my brethren, whoever has wronged any Christian, Jew or Turk, return what you have taken unjustly because it is cursed, and your affairs will never prosper.*

After his talks Fr. Cosmas passed out gifts – prayer ropes, crosses, kerchiefs, combs and books to the crowds – asking them to forgive the sins of the rich who had donated them. The kerchiefs he gave to the women to cover their heads and the combs to men who promised to grow their beards, both pious Orthodox customs. He explained the use of the prayer ropes, and distributed the books among those who were literate or who wanted to learn to read. In each place he preached he asked the wealthy to donate large copper baptismal fonts to the churches, so that baptisms could be done by immersion in the Orthodox manner, rather than by sprinkling. At the time of his death over four thousand churches had received fonts. Never did Fr. Cosmas accept money for himself.

Although we can recount his simple words, the spiritual power that moved through the quiet, unassuming monk cannot be recaptured in print. In his talks Fr. Cosmas emphasized true Orthodox doctrine and practice, persuading his listeners to cease from evil acts, inspiring them to lead godly lives, and calling on them to give alms and build schools. He challenged his listeners to do acts of charity and forgiveness. His words and explanations were understandable to the simplest villager, and yet profound enough to touch the hearts of well educated rulers:

Shall we make a bargain? Let me take upon myself all the sins you have committed from the time of your birth until now, and you in turn, my honored friends, must take in their place, four hairs. And what will I do [with your sins]? I have a deep pit and I will throw them into it. And what is this deep pit? It is the compassion of our Christ.

Now, the first hair that I give you is your confession, the beginning of which we have already spoken of: “Forgive your enemies.” Will you do this?

(The crowds would open-heartedly answer, “We will, saint of God.”)

Opposite: Ruggedly beautiful Epirus, near the Albanian border where St. Cosmas preached.



Then you have taken the first hair. The second hair is to find an educated and virtuous confessor, so that you can confess all your sins to him. If you have one hundred sins and confess ninety-nine to the confessor and hide one, all of your sins are unforgiven. It is when you commit a sin that you should be ashamed, but when you confess you should feel no shame...tell him everything that pricks your conscience – whether you have committed murder, or fornicated, or sworn falsely, or lied or haven't honored your parents, or any such thing. And when you have confessed, behold, you have taken the second hair.

The third hair is when you have confessed and the confessor asks you: "Why, my child, have you committed these sins?" You must be careful not to condemn anyone but yourself and say, "I did these things because of my evil disposition." Is it a difficult thing to accuse yourself? No, and see, you have already taken the third hair.

And now for the fourth. This is when the confessor gives you permission to depart. Do so with the firm resolve that it would be better to shed your blood rather than to sin again

The four hairs are your medicine. The first is to forgive your enemies; the second, to completely confess, the third, to condemn yourself; the fourth, to resolve to not sin again, and if you can, to go to confession every day. If you can't every day, then once a week, or once a month, or at least four times a year.³

One story that is told of his remarkable care for the spiritually lost, which drew thousands to repentance, occurred during his second missionary tour in the village of Vouvossa, in the mountainous region of Epirus, where there lived an infamous brigand chief named Toskas. The region's villagers were terrified of him, and left him alone in his stronghold high in the mountains. Although the villagers begged him not to endanger himself, St. Cosmas insisted on climbing into the mountains to find the bandit. When he came to the first lookout post he raised his cross up for the guards to see and shouted, "I want to see your captain." Toskas himself appeared and drew his sword to strike the saint, "First listen," said St. Cosmas, "then kill me." The brigand lowered his sword, and after listening to the priest's

³ Vapouris, Nomikos M., *Father Kosmas; the Apostle of the Poor*, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1977.

entreaties for repentance, he began to cry, then knelt and confessed. When he finished, he begged the saint to allow him to become a monk. St. Cosmas refused, however, saying, “You will stay here, not to kill or plunder, but to fight against the tyrants of our enslaved country, to help, not to oppress. This is your mission: you will fight.” St. Cosmas baptized him and left.⁴

St. Cosmas was also well known for his prophecies, many of which came true only in the twentieth century. He not only accurately foretold the dates of the liberation of the northern Greek provinces and Thessalonica, but of the French and English occupation of the Ionian Islands. (The English departed fifty-four years after his prediction, the precise date that Fr. Cosmas had foretold.) He also foresaw World War I and the bloody Greek civil war that followed World War II, as well as the deforestation of Greece due to the shortsightedness and greed of the people.

His clairvoyance extended well into the twentieth century, piercing our own times:

You will see men flying in the sky like blackbirds, and throwing fire upon the earth. Those that are living then will run to the tombs, and will cry out: “Come out, you that are dead, so that we the living can come in.” In the plain you will see a horseless carriage going faster than a rabbit.

There will be a time when the land will be girded about with a string, and men will talk from one distant place to another, as though they were in adjacent rooms; for example, from Constantinople to Russia.

There will come a time when things mute and senseless will govern the world. [i.e. radio, television and computers]

There will come a time when the devil will make orbits with his pumpkin [satellites perhaps, referring to the use the evil one may ultimately make of sophisticated technology.]

*The evil will come to you from those who are learned.*⁵

Miracles abounded in the saint’s wake, both healings and punishments, the punishments usually for sacrilege and blasphemy. It was not that the saint punished, nor that he asked God to do so, but he was such a potent vessel of grace that people with evil intent reaped what they had sown. Those of good will, whether Christian or Moslem, conversely often found

⁴ Xenia, Igumena, *Teacher of the Slaves: St. Cosmas the Aitolian*, pg. 27-29.

⁵ Christodoulides, *ibid.*



themselves healed of spiritual and physical maladies in his presence.

His followers were varied; simple villagers, educated monks and lay people who wanted to help in his missionary endeavors, ardent young people often aspiring to monasticism, former *khleftes* (bandits, sometimes mercenary soldiers), men-at-arms. One spiritual child, Dimitrios of Samarina, was a new martyr who was bricked up alive behind a wall by the Turks. Another probable follower was a monk named Samweil, originally from the St. Nicholas Monastery on Andros, where a portion of St. Cosmas' relics are enshrined. After some years Samweil left the monastery and was present in 1804 when the Suliot Christians rebelled near Pereveza, encouraging and leading them in their fight against Ali Pasha, whose reign St. Cosmas had predicted thirty years earlier. When Suliot resistance finally broke, Samweil, with five other men, waited in the fort at Kunghi – in the Church of St. Paraskeve. When the Turks reached the door the men inside blew up the fort, the enemy and themselves, rather than be taken captive. The tragic Suliot uprising and Samweil's part in it was one of the festering wounds that sparked the 1822 Greek revolution.

One of the great fruits of the saint's missionary endeavors, and one that he himself deeply cherished, was the establishment of schools so that Greek children might receive instruction in Greek language, culture, and Orthodox doctrine. He believed strongly that Greek schools were the key to reviving the Orthodox life of Greece and from one of his letters we know that his preaching in thirty provinces founded over two hundred elementary and ten secondary schools. In response to being asked why, as a monastic, he placed such emphasis on schools, Fr. Cosmas replied with his characteristic simplicity, *"It is better, my brother, for you to have a Greek school in your village, than even fountains and rivers, for when your child becomes educated, then he is a human being. The school opens churches; the school opens monasteries."*

One of the most interesting facets of Fr. Cosmas' work was his relationship with the Ottomans. Not only Christians, but also many Moslems, particularly in Albania, gathered to hear his preaching and believed him to be a saint. Wherever he went, Fr. Cosmas had a custom of going first to the local bishop and then sending to the secular leaders to obtain permission to preach. This brought him into contact with Moslem rulers throughout Greece, among whom he was often highly esteemed; there is no record of

Opposite: Ali Pasha, the Lion of Ioannina. Oil painting by Agim Sulaj, late 20th century.

them ever denying permission. We can only assume that this tolerance originated from the Turks' perception of the man himself because, seen externally, his mission of reviving Orthodoxy and promoting Greek education would have surely seemed a dangerous seed of Greek nationalism.

It is interesting to note that the only two places we know Fr. Cosmas was not allowed to preach were not those occupied by the Turks, but the Ionian Islands of Zakynthos and Corfu, both of which were under Venetian rule and locally administered by Greeks. Although he was greeted by crowds eager to hear him, Fr. Cosmas was denied permission to preach by the wealthy Greek administrators, whose avarice had often materially injured their own countrymen. Fearful on the one hand of Fr. Cosmas' censure for their treatment of their people, and on the other, of the displeasure of the Venetians if he urged the Greek faithful to resist un-Orthodox religious practices introduced by the Italians, they asked him to depart.

Saint Cosmas had his own view of the Turkish yoke:

God sent us St. Constantine and established a Christian Kingdom; the Christians had this kingdom for 1150 years. Then God took it from the Christians and brought the Turks, and gave it to them for our good; and the Turks now have had it for 320 years. And why did God bring the Turks and not some other race? For our good, because the other nations would have caused detriment to our Faith.⁶

Interestingly, there are no records of local Moslems being forbidden to listen to his Christian preaching, and crowds of them gathered freely along with the Christians, an interesting circumstance in a society under Islamic rule where conversion from Islam was punishable by death.

The few narratives we have of Moslem response to Fr. Cosmas are as diverse as the Turks themselves. One Turkish officer, "incited by a demon" had so much hatred for the saint that he leapt on his horse, determined to do him bodily injury. As the horse was running, however, it stumbled and

6 Vaporis, N.M. "The danger to the faith that St. Cosmas is referring to here is the Roman Catholic and Protestant influence from the West, which would undoubtedly have deeply affected Greek Orthodoxy if the Turkish Moslems had not occupied Greece."

Opposite: Ali Pasha with Kyria Vasiliki. Oil painting by Raymond Monvoisin, painted a few years after Ali Pasha's death.



threw him to the ground, breaking his right foot. When the man returned home that night he found his son dead. Seeing this as a punishment from God for attempting to hurt one of His chosen ones, the officer wrote Fr. Cosmas a letter begging his forgiveness.

On a second and happier occasion, the Moslem ruler of Philiates came with his officers to hear the saint's teaching for himself. As it was summer, they slept out in the open and in the middle of the night they saw a cloudlike light covering the place where the saint stayed. In the morning the Agha and his men told this to the Christians and asked Fr. Cosmas to give them his blessing, "not from your lips alone, but from your heart."

In Phanar in Albania, a little north of Sarande, one Turkish official saw the large wooden cross that Fr. Cosmas had left in place after his visit to remind the Christians of his words. Seeing the hewn wood, the official uprooted it, thinking that it would make good bedposts, but as he entered his house with the cross there was violent shaking as if from an earthquake and he fell to the earth convulsing and foaming at the mouth. Two Turks passing by came to his aid and laid him on his bed. When he regained consciousness he told them that this was God's punishment because he had taken the cross. Taking it back, he replanted it firmly in the ground, and afterwards, each day when he passed by he would dismount from his horse and reverently kiss it. When Fr. Cosmas visited the area a second time, the official went to meet him, related what had happened and humbly asked his forgiveness.

One Moslem leader who was particularly touched by his teaching was Kurt Pasha, the ruler of Albania and much of northern Greece. Hearing that Moslems were also proclaiming Fr. Cosmas to be a man of God, the Pasha ordered him to be brought before him. He was so impressed by what he heard that he had the wooden speaker's stand, mentioned above, made as a gift. It was God's providence, however, that Fr. Cosmas should end his life as a martyr, and it would be Kurt Pasha who delivered the death sentence.

According to the original biography by Christodoulides, in 1779 Jewish merchants of Ioannina, not liking either the saint's moral strictures or his advice to change the common market day from Sunday to Saturday, told the local authorities that the sixty-five-year-old priest was a secret emissary of the Russians, spreading unrest and dissatisfaction among the Greeks. Although Fr. Cosmas was able to clear himself of this charge, many of the Christians of the area suffered from extra taxes imposed as a result of the

slander. Although he never preached against the Jews, the merchants appear to have felt the censure of his moral teaching and they sent a delegation to Kurt Pasha, telling him that Fr. Cosmas was disturbing the region, and bribed the pasha with gold to have him put to death. A later biographer modifies the account by saying that the delegation was made up of Jewish, Turkish, and Christian merchants and landowners who were angered by the saint's strong ethics against worldliness and cheating, and his demands for the just treatment of tenant farmers, fair prices and equitable taxes and rents:

...And you who have harmed your brethren... even if all of the spiritual men, patriarchs, bishops, the entire world would forgive you, you remain unforgiven. For who has the power to forgive you? He who has suffered your injustice... you should return four for one as the holy Gospel says – only then will you receive forgiveness. If you don't have the money to return it, go and sell your possessions, and whatever you receive give to those you have cheated. If you don't have enough, go and sell yourself into slavery, and whatever you receive, give that. It would be better for you to be a slave on earth for five or ten years and to go to paradise than to be free on earth and tomorrow go to hell and burn forever.⁷

Swayed by his own avarice and powerful arguments that Fr. Cosmas had turned into a troublesome element, Kurt Pasha ordered his arrest.

It appears that the saint himself may have had foreknowledge of his death, for even after obtaining both episcopal and secular permission to teach in the Albanian village of Kolikontasi (today's Chorovode/Kolkontasi) he seemed unsatisfied and went personally to the *hodja*, the local ruler under Kurt Pasha. His companions tried to stop him, begging him to send someone else, for it was uncharacteristic of him to go in person for permission. He refused, however, and set off. When he arrived, the *hodja*, knowing of the death sentence that hung over him, had him detained on the pretext that Fr. Cosmas must go to the pasha himself. Here, St. Cosmas' biographer states that the saint clearly understood that he was to be put to death. It is likely that, foreseeing his martyrdom, Fr. Cosmas unobtrusively gave himself up to avoid violence and bloodshed between his followers and the Turkish soldiers sent to arrest him.

⁷ Vaporis, 276.

In any case, the monks who were with him reported afterwards that he spent the whole night glorifying the Lord with psalms – not sorrowfully, but in great joy, as if he were going to a festival. When daybreak came the Turkish executioners had him ride out with them, under the pretext of going to Kurt Pasha. After they had ridden about two hours, the soldiers made Fr. Cosmas dismount on the bank the Osum River, and told him that they had been ordered to kill him. The saint received the news with joy, and kneeling down, thanked God that he was allowed to give his life for Him. Then he arose and blessed the entire world, in each of the four directions, and prayed for all Christians.

The executioners had him sit next to a tree, but the saint would not let them bind his hands, but crossed them himself over his chest. The soldiers slipped a cord around his neck, but they had barely begun to tighten it when Fr. Cosmas' reposed and his spirit ascended to heaven. On the night of his death, local Christians reported seeing a heavenly light shining above the cross which he had planted at the site of his last talk.

The executioners took his clothing, and putting a large stone around his neck, threw his body into the river. When the Christians learned what had happened they set out with boats and nets to try to find the relics, but gave up after three days of fruitless searching. Finally, at Kolikontasi, a pious priest named Mark from the Church of the Entrance of the Mother of God into the Temple, prayed fervently and went out to search himself. As soon as he set out in the boat he saw the relics floating upright on the water, as if the saint were alive. He clothed the relics in his riassa and buried them in a nearby church.

After their return, one of the executioners who had taken St. Cosmas' monastic head covering, put it on himself, and began to mock his victim. He immediately became possessed, and tearing off his clothes, began shouting loudly that he had killed the saint. Hearing of his madness, Kurt Pasha had him put in irons in a small dungeon where he died miserably.

Soon realizing that he had wrongly believed the saint's slanderers, Kurt Pasha repented of his tragic decision and freed the monks who had been held by his *hodja*. The monks hastened to the grave, and in the presence of many priests and other Christians, had the body exhumed that they might learn more about the saint's martyrdom. They found the relics completely

Opposite: The monastery built on Nissi by Ali Pasha for his Christian wife, Kyria Vasiliki.

incorrupt, and even after three days in the river, giving forth a sweet fragrance; in appearance he looked as if he were simply asleep. A possessed woman who was present at the service was healed. The monks took some of the hairs of his beard as relics to different places, and two of the saint's followers set off to the island of Naxos, to tell the saint's brother, Chrysanthos, of his martyrdom. When they reached Naxos, a sick woman holding one of these hairs was restored to health, as were many of those who took earth from around his grave.

Saint Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain was among the first to write an account of St. Cosmas' martyrdom, but the earliest extant narrative is an old record from Veratio [Berat] which reads: "It was on a Tuesday that a hermit called Cosmas came and taught in our village Veratio for three days. He stood on a stool and was teaching the people. The women threw their silk dresses and silver things into the fire. After the second year he came to Mouzakia and arrived at the village of Kalikodassi. They choked him to death with a rope and threw him into the river. They took him out and buried him in the village mentioned above. I also record the day they killed him. It was Saturday, 24th August, 1779."

As we will see below, a decade later the relics were ceremonially enshrined in the altar of a newly-built monastery, under the orders of Ali Pasha, with Bishop Ioasaph of Belgrade in attendance. The cross which had been illumined on the night of his martyrdom was also taken and placed in the altar, next to the tomb of the saint.

Saint Cosmas was canonized in Constantinople on April 20, 1961 (April 7, OS). His feastday is celebrated on August 24. The Albanian monastery dedicated to St. Cosmas was forcibly closed during the Communist regime in Albania, but some of the saint's relics were already enshrined in Greece – one of the largest portions, his jaw, is kept at St. Nicholas Monastery on Andros, brought there by his spiritual sons after his martyrdom. There is also a small piece in the Metropolitan Cathedral in Ioannina, but by far the greater portion of his relics remained for many years in the local museum and now are enshrined again in the monastery in Kolikontasi. According to one report, several years ago the Albanian government offered to send the relics back to Greece in exchange for the monastery property. The Greek Church refused, hoping that if they retained title to the monastery, they might eventually be able to reopen it as a place of pilgrimage. Sadly, in the

Opposite: Portrait of Kyria Vasiliki. Charcoal portrait by H. Helley.



summer of 1997, the relics were stolen, but have since been returned by the “treasure seekers,” hoping for a reward.

Even now, the saint’s voice echoes down to us through the centuries, asking us, even as St. John the Theologian, the Beloved of the Lord, might have asked, *“How are you getting along here, my Christians? Do you have love amongst yourselves? Do you wish to be saved? If you do, seek for nothing else in this world except love.”*

Ali Pasha and his Christian Wife, Kyria Vasiliki

While he was yet alive, St. Cosmas met and predicted the rise and fall of the young Albanian Ali Pasha, the future “Lion of Ioannina,” who was to become the most notorious and colorful Ottoman ruler of the nineteenth century.

Ali Pasha’s history is strangely entwined with that of the Christians under his rule and with his own devoted marriage to his Greek Orthodox wife, Kyria Vasiliki – herself one of the most interesting women of the Turkish Empire. Many foreign visitors, including the poet Byron, wrote about his opulent, decadent court⁸, and Ali Pasha was so well known throughout Europe that Alexander Dumas freely used his story as background for *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

After his appointment as the ruler of Epirus in the opening years of the nineteenth century, the young ruler proceeded to carve out a virtually independent state for himself, which by 1820 stretched from what is now southern Albania down to Arta. His sons Veli and Mukhtar, by his first wife Emine, later dominated most of the Peloponnese. In later life, neither the Greek nationalist movement nor the Ottoman sultan could ignore his power, and he courted both when it was to his advantage.

The intriguing part of Ali Pasha’s history that concerns St. Cosmas began much earlier, however, in 1775, when Ali was an ambitious young regional governor harassed by Kurt Pasha, then ruler of Epirus. Parasceve Rothios, an old woman from Epirus, told the author the long-held local version of their first encounter:

When the saint was preaching in Albania, near Epirus, he was threatened by local Turks. Hearing of the threats, the mother of

⁸ Byron’s poem, “Childe Harold,” contains verses describing Ali Pasha and his court.

Ali Pasha took St. Cosmas under her protection as a man of God and was so impressed with his teaching that she sent word to her son, "Come to me. I have a prophet here." Ali Pasha came, and demanded of the monk, "Will I rule Epirus? Will I have Ioannina?" The saint told him that he would. Then Ali Pasha asked, "Will I go to Constantinople [riding in as a conqueror]?" Saint Cosmas answered, "Yes, you'll go to Constantinople with a red beard."

Twelve years after the prophecy and eight after St. Cosmas' martyrdom by Kurt Pasha, Ali was named Pasha and Vizier of Ioannina and proceeded to subdue Epirus and southern Albania to his rule. When he ceremonially entered Berat as the new governor, he ordered Bishop Ioasaph of Belgrade to uncover the relics of St. Cosmas and build a monastery in his honor. Thus, the Saint's relics were translated, and his skull enshrined in a silver reliquary, through the gratitude of an Albanian governor who became one of the most influential rulers of the Ottoman Empire.

Ali's marriage to the Christian, Kyria Vasiliki was another twist in the intricate and complex relationships between him and his Christian subjects. In 1804, Ali had received orders from Constantinople to crush a gang of counterfeiters in a village called Plichivitza. He surrounded the village, caught the counterfeiters red-handed among their moulds and melting pots, and ordered that the village be pillaged and the inhabitants massacred as accomplices. When the bloodshed began, a beautiful twelve-year-old girl named Vasiliki came and threw herself at Ali's feet, begging his protection for her mother and brothers. He was so taken with her that he ordered them to be spared and carried her off to Ioannina. He placed her in his harem, and she soon became a great favorite. Ali not only allowed the girl to remain a Christian but furnished and maintained a small chapel for her in the palace where a Greek priest came to officiate.

In the words of French writer, Gabriel Remerand, who saw her years later, Vasiliki grew into "a large and beautiful woman with a white complexion, black eyes and eyebrows, and a superb head of hair." By 1816 she had succeeded in retaining the pasha's affections longer than any other woman except Emine, Ali's Moslem first wife and the mother of his sons Veli and Mukhtar. Emine, who had died in 1803, was known for her benevolence to both the Moslem and Christian populations, and her death came after a heated argument with Ali over a dream she had had that he should grant

independence to the Suliot Christian tribesmen in his southern territories. Mistakenly thinking that her angry husband had ordered her death, she expired before morning of a terror induced stroke. Ali lived in regret for the next decade.

Ali eventually decided to marry Vasiliki, which he did with great ceremony. According to one account, “the streets were choked with people and beasts of burden carrying presents. Even the women of the poorest villages brought a little honey or firewood: they were taken into the palace and beaten to make them sing, while their husbands waited for them outside. On the wedding day itself two men announced that they had taken on their own heads all the misfortunes that fate might have in store for the Vizier, and threw themselves from a high tower to the courtyard below. Both were severely injured, and Ali accorded them a small pension and a daily ration of bread.”⁹ Although the marriage was childless, by all indications it was not unhappy. During the tortured rages of Ali’s later years, Vasiliki was the only one who could calm him. Ali Pasha’s political and military influence was widespread and he operated a sophisticated intelligence service in Constantinople. Although ostensibly in the service of the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II, Ali contracted his own foreign alliances with the French, British and Russians, based on who could best serve his purpose at any given time. By 1815, he had bought or captured over two hundred pieces of artillery, and his troops – a combination of Tartar cavalry, Albanian Skipetars, Moors, Turks and Greek Martolos – were trained and drilled by European officers. He harbored a fleet of sixteen ships built for war and commerce off the coast of northern Greece and was admired for his military prowess by both Napoleon and Admiral Nelson.

As with many Turkish rulers, Ali Pasha’s forbearance changed to oppressive brutality when he was thwarted, and he was greatly feared. In one well-remembered tragedy, after his troops bloodily quelled an 1803 rebellion of Souliot tribesmen – the same Christians his first wife Emine had asked him to free – scores of Souliot women and children threw themselves over a cliff near the monastery of Salonga, near Preveza, rather than surrender.

In 1809, after the well-known priest Papa Thymios Vlachavas was tortured to death for inspiring a rebellion against Ali Pasha and his son, who

⁹ Plomer, William, *The Diamond of Jannina: Ali Pasha 1741-1822.*, pg. 121, 227.

ruled the area around Meteora, Fr. Parthenios Orphides, the Abbot of Great Meteora¹⁰, was taken by force to Ioannina and held captive in the pasha's dungeons as punishment for Meteora's alleged support of the movement. When a British traveler, Colonel Leake, visited Great Meteora in 1810 he reported that the abbot and two of his monks, along with one or two monks from each of the other monasteries, were still in prison, waiting to be ransomed because they had supplied food to the rebels. According to one report, the food had been forced from them at gunpoint. Fr. Chrysanthos of Trikala, a nineteenth-century contemporary of the monks relates: "... The pasha captured Papa Thymios Vlachavas and sent him to Ioannina to the Vizier, and he cut him to pieces. As the war finished, the Vizier closed down all the monasteries and took the Superior to Ioannina where he is up to now." As further punishment the Monastery of St. Demetrios was razed to the ground by Turkish-Albanian cannons, and the others in the lower elevations of Meteora suffered as well.

In stark contrast to this brutal destruction was Ali Pasha's order to build and maintain a small Orthodox monastery dedicated to St. Panteleimon on the island in Lake Ioannina as a gift for his wife Vasiliki. Later, out of her husband's purse and with his consent, Vasiliki also gave large sums of money to help revive Konstamonitou Monastery on Mt. Athos, as well as gifts and donations to other Christian foundations.

Perhaps the most dramatic illustration, however, of the strange Oriental convolutions of Turkish-Christian relations during the occupation was Ali Pasha's own death.

In 1820, two years after Ali Pasha had raised the flag of rebellion against the sultan (promising Greek nationalists help in their own bid for independence if they supported him), the sultan sent 50,000 armed troops to lay siege to Ioannina. Hopelessly outnumbered, Ali Pasha surrendered. Khourshit Pasha, the sultan's military commander, insisted that he retire to St. Panteleimon's Monastery on Ioannina Island to await an imperial pardon, supposedly promised by the sultan in return for his voluntary surrender of Ioannina. Ali Pasha went to the monastery with Vasiliki and a small group of servants and guards on July 14, 1822.

Suspecting treachery, Ali Pasha had stationed a faithful servant, Selim, outside the munitions vault under the Ioannina fortress. The servant stood

¹⁰ Meteora – huge pinnacles of rock standing in a plain in mid-Greece, each topped by a monastery. The entire complex is known as Meteora. Great Meteora was for many years the ruling monastery of the group.

at the open door with a lit torch and a burning brazier, ready to blow up the powder magazine (and the fortress with it) if he heard a series of rifle shots from the island – the pasha’s signal that he was being attacked. If, however, the pardon arrived as promised, Ali Pasha would send his amber prayer beads to Selim, to tell him that all was well and that he could extinguish the torch.

Ali Pasha’s suspicions were not unfounded. The sultan had in fact given orders that he was to be killed, and his head brought back to Constantinople. Ioannina, however, was the jewel of Epirus – and knowing that Ali Pasha would have no scruples about blowing up the fortress and much of the town if he realized the betrayal, Khourshit Pasha searched for a way to buy time and save Ioannina.

In the end his plan was remarkably simple. Khourshit Pasha sent a secret emissary to Vasiliki at St. Panteleimon’s and told her of the sultan’s irrevocable order to kill her husband – but that she could still save the large Christian population of Ioannina if she chose. If the town surrendered peacefully everyone would be saved, both Moslems and Christians, but if there was resistance and the fortress was destroyed, all would be looted and put to the sword.

Although apparently she had enjoyed a not unhappy marriage with Ali Pasha, and had indeed been loved by him, according to the local tradition, Vasiliki saw the hopelessness of their situation and agreed. Being the only one besides Selim who knew the signs by which the fortress would be torched or spared, she contrived to take the amber beads from her husband’s belt as he slept on the night of January 21st and sent them to Khourshit Pasha, who gave them to Selim early that morning. Selim kissed the beads, touched them to his forehead in reverence, and put out the torch.

As soon as he received word that the fortress was safe, Khourshit Pasha’s men rushed the monastery and shot Ali as he came to the head of the stairs. He retreated into his room, where he was fatally wounded by soldiers firing up through the floor below. As he lay dying, he felt for his beads, and realizing that they were gone, ordered his servants to kill Vasiliki.¹¹ She was saved by Khourshit Pasha’s men, however, and Khourshit Pasha took her with him to Constantinople. A baggage train accompanied them with soldiers carrying her husband’s head – the fulfillment of St. Cosmas’ prophecy

¹¹ A second version of the story holds that Ali Pasha ordered Vasiliki killed to save her from reprisals by the sultan’s troops. It is unlikely, however, that if she was a conspirator, she would have come to any harm.

that Ali Pasha would enter Constantinople with a red beard. Vasiliki lived for some time in Constantinople, was later taken to Brussa, and finally retired to Aitoliko in the west of Greece where she owned an estate near Missolonghi that Ali had settled on her.

Contemporary accounts say that the still young Vasiliki had numerous offers of marriage from both Greeks and Turks, but she turned them all down saying, “There is no man living for the widow of Ali Pasha.” The last years of her life were spent on her estate, where she took to drink and died in 1835.

This local tradition of the Vizier’s death and the saving of Ioannina, written and posted in the Ali Pasha Museum in Ioannina, is believed to be accurate, as it is known that the inhabitants of Ioannina were neither looted, massacred nor enslaved after the sultan’s victory, an otherwise inexplicable act of clemency for a region in rebellion. Local inhabitants still view Vasiliki as a heroine; it would be interesting to know how she saw herself.

So ends one of the most fascinating accounts of the Turkish occupation of Greece, the intermingling of the lives of Greece’s prophetic missionary-saint with that of the inscrutable and notorious Turkish ruler who venerated him. God has glorified the one; may He have mercy on the other. ✦



The head of Ali Pasha presented to Sultan Mahmud II. Contemporary painting by Agim Sulaj in the Ali Pasha Museum, Ioannina, Greece.