



Summary :

Silversmithery and goldsmithery in the Pontic lands, an occupation to which the Greek-Orthodox of the Pontos played a significant role, is particularly interesting not only in regard to art, but also because of its important economic and social dimensions.

Date

Ottoman Period (15th - 20th century)

Geographical Location

Pontos

1. Historical framework

The mineral wealth of the Pontic land, already known from Antiquity, was the main reason of the region's economic growth; metal mining and processing were one of the primary occupations of the Greek Pontic people until they were forced to leave their homeland in the early 20th century.

During Byzantine rule, and mainly in the period of the Grand Komnenoi, [Trebizond](#) became the centre for the development of the silver/goldsmith's trade, establishing a tradition that was to continue over the following centuries. This growth was not accidentally achieved. As the capital of the Empire of the Grand Komnenoi, Trebizond was an important commercial city and a busy seaport serving the international trade between East and West, which evolved into a major commercial station along the caravan route connecting the Black Sea with the Persian town of Tabriz.

In the following years and until the late 18th century [Trebizond](#) started to decline. However, this situation seems to have had no effects on the development of the silversmith's trade. There is evidence that in this period there were more goldsmiths and silversmiths in the city than in the years of the Grand Komnenoi, proving that the tradition either was preserved in the province of Trebizond or thrived during Ottoman rule.¹

According to Evliya Çelebi, who visited Trebizond in 1640, the city's Christian goldsmiths and silversmiths were the best in the world, famous for the exceptional aspersories and the bottles they manufactured. Their skill is evidenced by the fact that Selim I and Süleyman the Magnificent (Kanuni) apprenticed there at an early age, preserving an Ottoman custom, according to which Ottoman princes should learn a trade.² Süleyman was probably apprenticed by the famous Greek silver/goldsmith Konstantinos. Both princes were raised in Trebizond, where, according to Evliya, Süleyman built a workshop and a drinking fountain for goldsmiths, while Selim founded a centre for controlling the quality of metals.³

Most of the vocational prospects the capital offered, given the stress the palace put on luxury, seem to have attracted many silver/goldsmiths and coppersmiths from Pontus as early as the mid-16th century. They either settled there permanently or visited the capital regularly to receive more orders. According to hagiology, in the mid-17th century two craftsmen from Pontus were martyred in Constantinople. Our sources mention *St. Symeon the Goldsmith* and *St. Iordanis the Boilermaker* as professionals.⁴

The foundation of [Argyroupolis](#) (a 19th-century Greek translation of the city's Turkish name *Gümüştane* meaning "city of silver") towards the late 16th century in the mountainous region of [Chaldia](#) boosted the silver trade. The prosperous mines of the city, and the tax exemptions the metallurgists were granted by the Ottoman mine managers, attracted people from the wider area of [Pontus](#). The gradual development of the city reached its heyday in the 18th century, when the mines of *Gümüştane* and the dependent mines



became the most important source of metals in the entire Ottoman Empire. This economic growth included the development of trades, and especially the silversmith's trade. New churches were rebuilt and earlier ones were decorated with silver liturgical implements of high art. In the centre of the city, the silver/goldsmiths' workshops were a special market; thus the centre of the Pontic silverwork was transferred from Trebizond to Gümüşhane .

The economy of Trebizond as well as the local tradition of silverwork recovered; after the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca in 1774 and the Treaty of Adrianople (Edirne) in 1829, the city was re-established as an important hub of the international commerce between East and West. In the meantime, the formerly glorious town of Gümüşhane declined dramatically due to the exhaustion of metal deposits in the area, causing the greater part of the population to [immigrate](#) to central Asia Minor. After the **Tanzimat** reforms abolished the privileges of metallurgists in the mid-19th century, the city suffered a demographic collapse. Silverwork workshops ceased operation. The lush silver dedicative offerings of the churches, partially sold in 1871 to fund the new city school, were the only living memory.

2. Ecclesiastical Silverwork: Artistic Trends and Influences

The study of the Pontic silver/goldwork is necessarily restricted to the heirlooms the refugees managed to salvage, later included in the collections of the Benaki Museum, the Byzantine Museum as well as the Museum of Greek Folk Art.

The skill of the Pontic silver/goldsmiths is mainly reflected in the ecclesiastical implements manufactured in workshops of Trebizond, Gümüşhane, [Kaisareia](#) and Constantinople. They include communion cups, crosses, cherubim, ecclesiastical collection plates, censers, Gospel bindings etc., offered to churches by Orthodox Christians. The ecclesiastical silverwork was a field of artistic creation par excellence from the post-Byzantine period until the early 20th century, given the prestige of the Church as an important institution for the Greek Orthodox of the Empire.

The liturgical implements of the church until the mid-16th century cannot be studied, as only a few of them have been preserved from the catastrophes that followed.⁵ The church received fewer dedicative offerings in this period. It is very likely that Christians donated the Byzantine implements left to them or even offered objects not initially intended for the Orthodox worship.⁶ Preserved ecclesiastical implements of the Serbian silverwork give a picture of the Orthodox silverwork of the time, which are characterised by a creative mixture of Byzantine typology, Ottoman style and western European influences.

From the 16th century onward, the various artistic trends influencing all art forms in Constantinople evolved into common constituent features, forming a single, dominant style. The seasonal immigration of silver/goldsmiths from rural areas to the capital was the main reason for this development. Similarities in style were often so strong that local traditions were abandoned and, finally, it was difficult to tell the difference between local workshops.

The Byzantine tradition was the starting point for the new artistic trends in silverwork and goldwork in post-Byzantine years. The Byzantine silver/goldwork is characterized by a combination of purely Byzantine imperial features, influenced –already from the 14th century– by features or styles from the tradition of the countries to the east and, mainly, to the west of Byzantium and from Gothic art.

The goldsmiths and silversmiths of Pontus come into a tradition that, as regards style, is summarized in a tendency towards colorfulness, mainly by using precious and semiprecious stones as well as enamels and precious metals, which produce different colours when mixed. At the same time, they are based on patterns from Orthodox iconography, thus depicting austere faces of saints, angels, prelates and dragon-like animals among vine and spike leaves, eschatological symbols (i.e. the winding snake) and ideograms (i.e. the unsleeping eye instead of the expression 'of God').

From the 16th century onward, the different artistic trends influencing all art styles in Constantinople permeated the previously existing stylistic elements, thus gradually forming a single, dominant style. In this way, the Byzantine tradition is influenced by both the Ottoman art, for example the paintings of the Ottoman manuscripts and the famous 'arabesque' motifs, and the style adopted by jewellers and clockmakers from Geneva in Galata. The jewellers introduced new features, such as the perforated or swollen flowers, often painted



in the purely European style of painted enamel.⁷

In the 18th century art workshops are influenced by rococo style, whose power was greater and duration proved longer in the East than in Europe. Helices, roses and festoons, in combination with the western-inspired religious iconography, are now the typical features in the decoration of ecclesiastical implements. Neoclassical features, such as Caryatids or palmettes, were added to the motifs in the 19th century.

Unlike Gümüşhane, few samples of Trebizond silverwork samples from the Late Byzantine and the Ottoman period have been preserved. Accordingly, our picture of the local tradition is far from clear; however, the preserved samples show the high level of craftsmen's training, their knowledge of the artistic trends of the time and their devotion to the imperial Byzantine tradition. Research on ecclesiastical silverwork in Pontus, the major expression of the area's silverwork, has a long way to go until it reaches a "final" evaluation. Systematic studies and publications on treasures still 'hidden' in ambries of churches and monasteries may contribute decisively to the resolution of many disputed matters concerning the post-Byzantine Greek ecclesiastical silverwork in general.

3. Dedicative Inscriptions on Ecclesiastical Offerings

The donation of valuable ecclesiastical implements to the Church is a complex process, which cannot be interpreted in the context of the Christian faith only. It is typical of a standard practice used by prominent people, mainly superior prelates, wealthy merchants, state officials and local rulers, who aimed to further promote their public image and strengthen their role in local societies. Thus, ecclesiastical silverwork certainly belongs to upper social levels.

Most of the preserved ecclesiastical offerings-heirlooms of Pontic silver/goldwork are made from silver. The material was not randomly selected. The Church preferred donations of implements from precious materials for economic security. Silver, for example, was a good economic investment, easily sold in emergencies.⁸

A common feature of such offerings from the 17th until the 19th century are the dedicative inscriptions, which offer a wealth of information and help the formation of a general picture of the historical, political and social background of each offering. The inscriptions bear standard phrases, similar to the Byzantine ones, most of which mention only the donor's name, while less often they mention the object offered, the motivation for the donation, the place, the date and the manufacturer's name.

The following inscription, engraved on the handles of a pair of cherubim from Gümüşhane in 1745, states of all the necessary information:

Object: THE PRESENT CHERUBIM WERE OFFERED

Donor: BY THE HOLY ARCHBISHOP OF CHALDIA
LORD IGNATIOS

Place: TO THE CHURCH OF THE VIRGIN MARY THE
KANIOTISA

Motivation: FOR THE SALVATION OF THE SOULS OF HIS PARENTS DIMITRIOS THE PILGRIM AND EVGENIA

Date: IN MARCH OF THE YEAR OF OUR LORD 1745

Manufacturer: ELABORATED BY IOANNIS, SON OF CONSTATAS GEORGIOS⁹

The main motivations for such offerings were the salvation of the donors' souls, the remission of their sins and the commemoration of



their name by God on the Day of Judgement.¹⁰ In this way, their offering functioned as a clear proof of gratitude and, at the same time, imposed a moral obligation between the donor and God, the ultimate receiver. The Church intervenes between these two protagonists and strives for the salvation of souls through prayer.

In Orthodox ritual, the ceremonies concerning the commemoration of alive and dead people were common practice among the believers; moreover, they represented a source of income for the Church, since they were usually accompanied by some kind of donation (offering, money for charities, etc.). The Church and the authors of ecclesiastical texts encouraged charities and promoted them as the greatest social service. In this way, petitions and donations were guided by the Church, which was directly benefited.

The use of silver implements donated by worshippers during ecclesiastical ceremonies aimed at both increasing the prestige and the glory of the church or the monastery and at promoting the donor's (and sometimes the contributing parties') image, which was proportionate to the manufacturing materials and the embellishment of the offering.

However, such donations highlighted the religious and local identity of Christians in the Ottoman Empire. Through dedicative inscriptions, the worshippers aimed to manifest their dedication to Church and, on the other hand, they commemorated their homeland.¹¹

4. Manufacturers

The professional silver/goldsmiths who signed their works wished their name to be commemorated and, on the other hand, to indirectly promote their craftsmanship and skill. Eugenia Chatzidakis and Eugene Dalleggio studied the inscriptions on ecclesiastical implements from Asia Minor and Pontus in the collection of the Benaki Museum and included a full catalogue reporting the names of silversmiths who signed their work both in Greek and in the [Caramanli](#) script. Among the male manufacturers there are women who specialised in the gold embroidery of ecclesiastical fabrics.¹²

5. Donors

Donations were usually made by an individual, although sometimes they were made by more than one person, members of the same family or members of the same guild.

A great number of donors had already made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and, thus, had the title of *chatzis* (pilgrim). The journey to Jerusalem made the pilgrim respectable among the rest of the Christian community members. Donors holding special social positions are highlighted in the inscriptions by their titles.¹³

Most of the implements from individual donors are of outstanding style and quality. The elaborate decoration and the wealth of pictures on a silver, gilded communion cup (1726) with a lid (1727) from Gümüşhane signify the intention of the donor Stefanos Fytianos to make a large donation. Fytianos was a master metallurgist in the rich [mines](#) of Torul in Chaldia and one of the powerful members of the community of metallurgists, known for his charities.¹⁴

Implements donated by the clergy vary depending on the office and the personal property of the priest. Some are mere liturgical implements bearing inscriptions with common patterns and the office of the donor. However, there is a special category of particular importance, which includes remarkable donations by metropolitans or other prelates. Through their dedicative inscriptions they widely advertise their social position as well as the wealth and prestige of both the Church and the donor. These are valuable ecclesiastical implements, such as mitres, ecclesiastical jewellery and lots of brocaded canonicals, indicating the rank of each prelate. These implements were the personal property of the prelates, who bequeathed them to the Church or the monastery after their death.¹⁵

A wide range of professions appear on the inscriptions, such as furriers, clockmakers and painters. Many professions concern craftsmen and people with special virtues or skills. So, silversmiths and jewellers could be manufacturers and donors at the same time.



Collective donations are a broad category indicating social attitudes and motivation. Guilds, parishioners or worshippers from a specific city, either Greek-speaking or Turkish-speaking ([Caramanlis](#)) make their offerings.¹⁶ Collective offerings from the members of a guild indicate the important economic, administrative and social role the guilds played in the Christian communities of the Ottoman Empire.

The inscriptions on the ecclesiastical collection plate of Neophytos, [Metropolitan of Chaldia](#), are a typical example of collective donation, involving different categories of donors:

The inscription on the rim of the disk reads: "I, the gold disk, was made by all [the people] in the years of the prelate Neophytos at his expense. King, write his good name, the best of all worshippers' names, in all your sacred books. Year of our Lord 1668". Around the central point it is written: "This plate belongs to [the church of] the Virgin Mary Kolykarya [and is donated by] the furriers". On the back of the plate it is inscribed: "Karamanlis Karatzas carved the plate when Aggelis, Michos and Constantas were [church] wardens". It seems that the plate was offered to the church of the Virgin Mary Kolykarya with the financial help of Metropolitan Neophytos, the guild of furriers, the churchwardens Aggelis, Michos and Constantas and the manufacturer Karatzas. The reference to 'all the people' may indicate the guild of furriers, who patronized the church of the Virgin Mary and financed the manufacture of the disk, at the centre of which they ordered the engraved picture of Prophet Elias, their patron Saint. Manufacture was under the responsibility and supervision of the churchwardens. The silversmith Karatzas seems to have preferred to inscribe only his name, without additional information about his craft. In any event, the powerful metropolitan Neophytos prompted the manufacture of the plate; the inscription bearing his name dominates the disk's rim.¹⁷

Churchwardens are not accidentally mentioned in dedicative inscriptions. They coordinated and supervised the donation. Until the early 18th century their rights were restricted to managing and auditing the church, as well as managing donations and benefactions. However, from the second half of the 18th century onward, the title of the churchwarden is mentioned more frequently. This is due to the gradual strengthening of their position and the political role they assume in local societies, thus transforming the spiritual character of the donation into an action of social and communal function. In the 19th century donations were made to charities and to the propagation of Greek culture through the building of schools. This change in the ideological framework is reflected in dedicative inscriptions as well. 'For the common school, on the 5th January of the year 1850'.¹⁸ Donations to churches had now assumed a secular character and a different social and ideological content.

1. Ballian, A., "Christian Silverwork from Ottoman Trebizond", in Center for Neohellenic Research – NHRF (ed.), *Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue – Maritime Route Expedition. Cultural and Commercial Exchanges between the Orient and the Greek World – Seminar Papers* (Athens, Greece, 25-28 October 1990) (Athens 1991), p. 124.

2. Ballian, A., "Christian Silverwork from Ottoman Trebizond", in Center for Neohellenic Research – NHRF (ed.), *Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue – Maritime Route Expedition. Cultural and Commercial Exchanges between the Orient and the Greek World – Seminar Papers* (Athens, Greece, 25-28 October 1990) (Athens 1991), p. 125.

3. Allan, J. – Raby, J., "Metallwork", in Petsopoulos, Y. (ed.), *Tulips, Arabesques and Turbans: Decorative Arts from the Ottoman Empire* (London 1982), p. 20. According to the authors, Elviya's testimony can be considered trustworthy as he was a goldsmith himself, while at the same time he was the son of the leader of the goldsmiths' guild of Constantinople.

4. Ballian, A., "Christian Silverwork from Ottoman Trebizond", in Center for Neohellenic Research – NHRF (ed.), *Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue – Maritime Route Expedition. Cultural and Commercial Exchanges between the Orient and the Greek World – Seminar Papers* (Athens, Greece, 25-28 October 1990) (Athens 1991), p. 130.

5. See Μητροπολίτης Τραπεζούντος Χρυσάνθος, «Η Εκκλησία της Τραπεζούντος», *Αρχαίον Πόντου*, vols. 4-5 (1933), p. 523.



6. Μπαλλιάν, Α., «Εκκλησιαστικά ασημικά από την Κωνσταντινούπολη και ο Πατριαρχικός Θρόνος του Ιερεμία Β΄», *Δελτίο Κέντρου Μικρασιατικών Σπουδών* 7 (1991), p. 52.
7. The style of perforated floral motifs is common among Muslim and Christian craftsmen, while it is often used in cherubim, which traditionally had perforated plates with floral motifs: Μπαλλιάν, Α., «Αργυρούπολη – Gümüşhane: η πρωτεύουσα των ποντιακών μεταλλείων», στο Κορομηλά, Μ. (επιμ.), *Οι Έλληνες στη Μαύρη Θάλασσα. Από την Εποχή του Χαλκού έως τις αρχές του 20ού αιώνα* (Αθήνα 1991), p. 235.
8. Μπαλλιάν, Α., «Εκκλησιαστικά ασημικά από την Κωνσταντινούπολη και ο Πατριαρχικός Θρόνος του Ιερεμία Β΄», *Δελτίο Κέντρου Μικρασιατικών Σπουδών* 7 (1991), p. 52.
9. Χατζηδάκη, Ε., «Χριστιανικές Επιγραφές Μ. Ασίας και Πόντου στο Μουσείο Μπενάκη», *Μικρασιατικά Χρονικά* 8 (1959), pp. 11-12, no. 42; Ballian, A., «Dedications and donors of the 17th to the 19th century church silver», περιοδική έκδοση *Μουσείο Μπενάκη* 1 (2001), p. 88, pl. 1.
10. Ballian, A., "Dedications and donors of the 17th to the 19th century church silver", περιοδική έκδοση *Μουσείο Μπενάκη* 1 (2001), p. 91.
11. The inscription on a silver vessel from Trebizond (1670), written in a form that is near to ancient Greek, testifies the existence of high education in Trebizond. Education was further organised in the city after the foundation of the *Frontistirion* in 1683. Delivoria, A. (επιμ.), *Greece and the Sea, exhibition catalogue* (Athens 1987), p. 371, pl. 280.
12. Χατζηδάκη, Ε., «Χριστιανικές Επιγραφές Μ. Ασίας και Πόντου στο Μουσείο Μπενάκη», *Μικρασιατικά Χρονικά* 8 (1959), pp. 77, 80.
13. Ballian, A., "Dedications and donors of the 17th to the 19th century church silver", *Μουσείο Μπενάκη* 1 (2001), pp. 98-99.
14. Anna Ballian mentions that Fytianos had contributed to financing rebuild and repair works at the Choutoura monastery, to the foundation of the church in Fytiana and the foundation of a school in Gümüşhane. The family name Fytianos indicates origin from the village Fytiana in the area of Torul, a village that was the homeland of many master metallurgists and church prelates. Μπαλλιάν, Α., "Αργυρούπολη – Gümüşhane: η πρωτεύουσα των ποντιακών μεταλλείων", στο Μ. Κορομηλά (ed.), *Οι Έλληνες στη Μαύρη Θάλασσα. Από την Εποχή του Χαλκού ως τις αρχές του 20ού αιώνα* (Αθήνα 1991), p. 235.
15. Ballian, A., "Dedications and donors of the 17th to the 19th century church silver", *Μουσείο Μπενάκη* 1 (2001), p. 99.
16. Ballian, A., "Dedications and donors of the 17th to the 19th century church silver", *Μουσείο Μπενάκη* 1 (2001), p. 102.
17. Ballian, A., "Dedications and donors of the 17th to the 19th century church silver", *Μουσείο Μπενάκη* 1 (2001), pp. 103-104, pl. 3; Δεληβοριάς, Α., *Οδηγός Μουσείου Μπενάκη* (Athens 2004), p. 141, first picture (not numbered).
18. Ballian, A., "Dedications and donors of the 17th to the 19th century church silver", *Μουσείο Μπενάκη* 1 (2001), p. 105.

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Glossary :

tanzimat

The 19th-century reforms in the Ottoman Empire, which were inaugurated in 1839 with the edict of Hatt-i Şerif and came to an end with the Constitution of 1876. The reforms, which were considered an effort for the modernization and liberalization of the state, concerned every aspect of the political, social and economic life in the Empire. Of particular importance were the ones that equated legally Muslim and non-Muslim subjects.