



Summary :

One of the most distinguished Phanariot families. After the Independence the family's main branch settled to Athens.

Date and Place of Birth

Date and Place of Death

Main Role

Officials of the Sublime Porte, diplomats

1. The Phanariots phenomenon

The so-called [Phanariots](#), who took this name from the place of their habitation in the [Fanari](#) (Fener) quarter of Constantinople (Istanbul), located around the [Patriarchate](#), were the Christian elite of the Ottoman Empire, within the wider framework of the Ottoman elite in general. This group, which included mainly families of Greek origin, offered its services to the sultan's court, a phenomenon already observed right after the [Fall of Constantinople](#) (1453). These Christian families, due to their material wealth and their general influence, occupied important positions in the services of the Patriarchate, which they practically control. Actually, the group of the Phanariots is compiled not by isolated persons, but by families which gradually occupy and assume these offices as a tradition, with the result of the creation of a closed class of families, an unofficial aristocracy. This aristocracy is reproduced via the constant presence of its members within the Court and the Patriarchate's services.¹

The beginning of this phenomenon is traced from the middle of the 17th century onwards, whereas the period of their great bloom was the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, at least until the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence. However, the presence and the influence of the Phanariot families in the administrative mechanism of the Ottoman state, but also in the services of the Patriarchate, did not stop during the rest of the 19th century.

The Karatzas family is one of the most characteristic and distinguished cases of Phanariot houses.

2. Appearance and origins of the Karatzas family

Along with the history of the Karatzas family we can characteristically follow the appearance and evolution of the social group of the Phanariots. The origin of the family is obscure; as in every case of distinguished houses, the issue of the origin is perplexed by the invention of family myths which promote largely imaginary stories about a noble origin of the family.

In the case of the Karatzas house more than one view has been documented concerning their origin. One version wants the house to have originated in Epirus, through a possible relation with the stradioti Nikolaos Karatzas, about whom few things are known: he is mentioned as a member of the Teutonic Knights order, whereas he appears in Epirus in 1497, founding a monastery in the region of Arta. It is also sustained that the house's origin is from Ragousa (modern Dubrovnik). The abovementioned relations of the Karatzas family with this specific Nikoalos and the hypothesis for their origin from Epirus or Ragousa are mere speculations. Another version for the origin of the Karatzas family, which is considered to be the most plausible –this was the one promoted by the family too-, concerns its alleged origin from [Trebizond](#): it is believed that the house was one of the noble Trebizondian families that moved to Constantinople after the Ottoman [conquest of Trebizond](#) (1461), like the Phanariot families of [Mourouzis](#) and Ypsilantis. Thus, a noble ancestry is attributed to the family.²

In these versions concerning the origin of the family, which in their whole are no more than speculations, we can add one more. Given that the name of the family is Turkish (*karaca*, meaning "dark"), and that such names were common amongst the Turkish-speaking Christians of Asia Minor, the so-called [Caramanlis](#), which from the 15th century had settled in the new Ottoman capital, we cannot



exclude the possibility that the house originated from these circles. This hypothesis can, maybe, be supported by the reference to a certain “kyr Karatzas from the Karamaniots” in a patriarchal document of 1564, which commemorates his participation in an administrative committee of the Patriarchate.³ Obviously this is one of the notables of the Caramanli community of Constantinople. Given that the first documented representative of the Phanariot Karatzas family, Konstantinos (second half of the 17th century), held the office of chief-butcher (*kasap-başı*) of the palace and obviously came from the area of trade and of the [guilds of Constantinople](#), it is rather evident that the origins of the family and the initial promotion of its members in important positions is identified with the area of the social and guild notables. The association with the Caramanli Karatzas of 1564 can thus not be overruled, but without being able to support this hypothesis with safety, since the testimonies of sources to verify it are absent.

3. Promotion and blooming of the Karatzas family

As we mentioned earlier, the first known and definite representative of the Karatzas house is Konstantinos, who lived during the second half of the 17th century and entered the sultan’s service as the chief-butcher of Mehmet IV. With Konstantinos a typical Phanariot family inaugurates its course; its representatives, during the phase of its promotion and blooming in the 18th century, are distinguished thanks to their positions in the “triangle”: European embassies - sultan’s court - Patriarchate. Some of the family’s most noteworthy representatives during this phase are firstly the Skarlatos and Ioannis (the Patriarch Ioannikios IV) brothers, grandsons of Konstantinos. In the personality of Skarlatos Karatzas (1697-1780), the stages of the promotion of a Phanariot are located. Erudite and multilingual, with studies in medicine, which from his time constituted a tradition for the family, he served until 1730 as an interpreter in the Dutch embassy. This position opened the way of the high-ranking acquaintances and of the relations with the sultan’s court, whose foreign policy he unofficially influenced. In 1742, he resigned his former position and assumes the high patriarchal office of the [megas logothetes](#), which was now held by laymen. The further influence he had gained from this position allowed him to place to the patriarchal throne his brother Ioannikios (1761), whereas his son Georgios (1724-65) had been appointed the High Porte’s great interpreter. Between 1765 and 1768 he held the position of the great interpreter, succeeding his son who died prematurely from a disease, whereas he was recalled to this position in 1770, since his presence was considered to be necessary for the negotiations that led to the signing of the [Küçük Kaynarca](#) treaty. To him is also attributed the adoption of a series of favorable terms for the Greeks. During the last years of his life he held the title of the hospodar (prince) of Wallachia.

A well-known representative of the next generation of the Karatzas house is Nikolaos, a side relative of Skarlatos, who later became known for his very rich library. However, the most distinguished representatives of the house come from the descendant line of Georgios Skarlatos Karatzas, starting with his sons Ioannis and Nikolaos. The former (1745-1791), who was also a scholar, became great interpreter (1777-1782) and hospodar of Wallachia (1782), whereas his son Ioannis (1769-1808), the so-called *beyzade* (son of the [bey](#)), was appointed as interpreter of the fleet (1802-1806) and as great interpreter (1808). However, much more distinguished –probably the most famous after Skarlatos–, was the aforementioned Ioannis Georgios Skarlatos (approximately 1760-1845), the so-called Geron (Old) or Prince Karatzas, with an especially long lifetime, analogous to the lifetime of his grandfather, during which he played a central role in great events.

Ioannis Karatzas assumed a series of important positions of the Sublime Porte and during his service he gained the trust of the sultan Mahmut II. In 1812 he was appointed as the hospodar of Walachia, an office in which he greatly distinguished himself, and administrated the position of the Danubian Principalities in the complex international environment created by the Napoleonic Wars, the Russian expansionism and the Serbian uprising. In 1818 he left this position and, being in the know concerning the movements for the preparation of the Greek uprising, did not return to Constantinople, but settled in Pisa, from where he coordinated the Philhellenic movements and worked for the preparation of the Revolution and then for its support.⁴

4. The house’s Greek phase

In 1830 Ioannis “Geron” Karatzas settled in Athens, where he lived until his death. In Greece also his two sons settled, with which the Greek descendant line of the family was inaugurated. The first son, Georgios, was before the Greek War of Independence the great interpreter of the High Porte. He went to the revolted Greece after the beginning of the uprising. The second son, Konstantinos, remained near his father in Pisa, from where he was sent to Greece as a leader of a military corps. In Greece, Konstantinos Karatzas



participated in the political procedures, whereas in the National Assembly of Epidaurus he was against Dimitrios Ypsilantis. Disappointed, he left Greece and returned only after the end of the War along with his father. The representatives of the Phanariot families who had settled in Greece were by definition the ideal personnel for the manning of the newly-founded diplomatic service of the young state, thanks to their knowledge of foreign languages and their education in general, their cosmopolitan experiences and their family tradition in similar duties. Thus, the later descendants of the Karatzas house in Greece inaugurated a family tradition of a career in the diplomatic corps.⁵

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2. Karadja, C., "Sur l'origin des Karadja", *Revue Historique du Sud-est Européen* 7-9 (Bucarest 1938) ; Sturdza, M.D., *Dictionnaire historique et généalogique des grandes familles de Grèce, d'Albanie et de Constantinople* (Paris 1983), p. 257.

3. Αποστολόπουλος, Δ.Γ. – Μιχαηλάρης, Π.Δ., *Η Νομική Συναγωγή του Δοσιθέου. Μία πηγή και ένα τεκμήριο* (Athens 1987), p. 347.

4. "Καρατζάς", *Μεγάλη Ελληνική Εγκυκλοπαίδεια* 13, p. 810.

5. "Καρατζάς", *Μεγάλη Ελληνική Εγκυκλοπαίδεια* 13, p. 810 ; Sturdza, M.D., *Dictionnaire historique et généalogique des grandes familles de Grèce, d'Albanie et de Constantinople* (Paris 1983), pp. 257-258.

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Glossary :

	bey The title of bey means actually "chieftain," and was traditionally applied to leaders of Turkish tribal groups, in the Ottoman Empire also to administration or military officials. The regions or provinces where beys ruled or which they administered by them were called beylik.
	megas logothetes The head of the civil Byzantine administration. Megas logothetes was a title used at the end of the 12th century during the reign of Isaac II Angelos (1185-1195), replacing the "logothetes ton sekretou", an office which was created during the reign of Alexios I Komnenos (1081-1118) to bring the entire civil administration under the control of a single individual.