

# CULTURAL IDENTITY AND ARCHAEOLOGY: AN ETHNOARCHAEOLOGICAL CASE STUDY ON VAKIFLI VILLAGE, MUSA LER

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*In Memoriam Avetis Demircyan,  
the "last Mohican" of Musa Ler*

## **Introduction**

Ethnoarchaeology aids archaeologists in reconstructing ancient lifeways by studying the material and non-material traditions of modern societies and testing possibilities of archaeological reconstructions.<sup>1</sup> In this respect, the aim of ethnoarchaeological approach is to create a modern model for reconstruction of ancient societies. The *middle-range theory* of L. Binford (Fig. 1),<sup>2</sup> going from actual human culture to archaeological realities, demonstrates the possibilities of interpretation of the past according to the data of the present.<sup>3</sup>

Such an attempt, however with a bit different method, is applied by me within this paper towards the village Vakıflı. As a rule, for reconstruction of archaeological situation in the past through ethnoarchaeological studies, modern ethnographical descriptions are involved. However, in this case such descriptions are used to reconstruct the situation to be excavated by the archaeologists in future.

Vakıflı is the only remaining ethnic Armenian village in Turkey, which, along

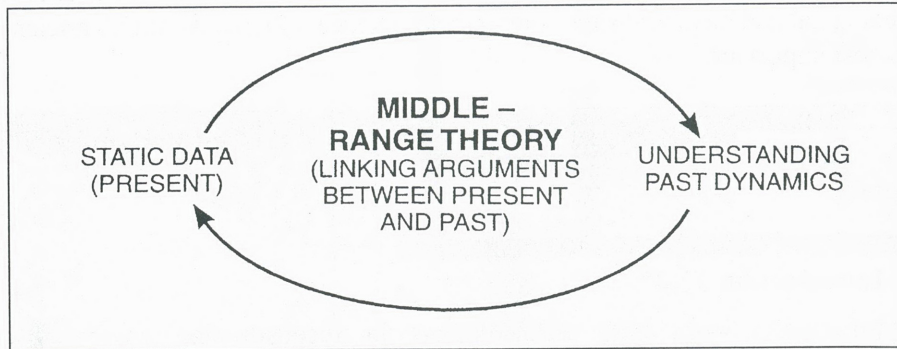
<sup>1</sup> For great hospitality and support during my Vakıflı visit in September 2003 I would like to thank very much the inhabitants of the village Mr. Avetis Demircyan and Mr. Hovhannes Babikyan. For useful considerations during the preparing of this article I thank also Dr. V. Svazlyan and Dr. A. Dabaghyan, Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, Armenian Academy of Sciences.

<sup>2</sup> All of the figures illustrated in this article are mine (→ 2003) but the Fig. 1 (→ Johnson 2002, 49, Fig. 4/1) and the Fig. 2 (→ Tayfur 2004, 117).

<sup>3</sup> For the theory of ethnoarchaeological studies and its importance cf. Hodder 1983, 28-46; Vajda 1999, 89-112; Johnson 2002, 48-63 and for its critique cf. Yengoyan 1985, 329-334.

Detailed ethnoarchaeological studies of recent years have been revealing the subtlety and complexity of correlations between material culture and human behaviour, especially at the social and symbolic levels (cf. Hodder 1982; 1982b). It has become evident that in many cases material culture does not reflect human behaviour. Instead the relationship between the two is mediated by conceptual frameworks that often may not be inferable from archaeological data alone (cf. Trigger 1992, 394).

with Anjar in Lebanon, Kessab in Syria, and Hemşin in northeastern Turkey, is the last officially recognized Western Armenian speaking settlement in the world.<sup>1</sup> From the first sight, the Armenians seem to live here “isolated” among other ethnic (Arabs, Turks, Turkmen) and religious (Muslim, Alevi, Christian) communities. In this sense, Vakıflı could be defined as some kind of “island-society”.



1. Middle range theory

J. Evans in an important article correctly defined the island-societies as very important for the study of culture process, because they seem to be more conservative in keeping own traditions and identity: “...islands offer us the possibility of in some sense conducting ‘experiments’. In this sense, then, it is valid to regard every island which has at some time the home of a human group as a laboratory for the archaeologists”.<sup>2</sup>

Below, looking at Vakıflı through different cultural aspects, I shall try to go from ethnography to archaeology testing the probability of archaeological interpretations. In this respect, my report consists of three parts - ethnographical reconstruction, archaeological reconstruction and synthesis. In both cases the same criteria are used for characterizing of cultural phenomena.

<sup>1</sup> No special investigations do exist towards the phenomenon of Vakıflı. The materials on Vakıflı are reflected in different journals and newspapers as well as in various internet sites, where the main statistical data brought in this article are taken from. To remember here are especially as follows: Svazlyan 1996a; Svazlyan 1996b; Svazlyan 1997a; Svazlyan 1997b; Svazlyan 1997c; Tayfur 2004; Kalkan 2005; <http://www.asbarez.com/2008/09/12/vakef-of-musa-dagh/>. Towards the geography, history, ethnography and language of the Armenians of Antioch region and Musa Dağ on the whole cf. Andreasyan 1967; Gushagchyan 1970; Svazlyan 1984; Tcholakian 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Evans 1973, 520; cf. also Rosenstock 2002, 223.

## Ethnographical Reconstruction

**The Geography:** The Mountain of Moses (Arabic Jebel Musa, Turkish Musa Dağ, Armenian Musa Ler, 1355 m) is situated in the Samandağ district of Hatay Province (formerly the Sanjak of Alexandretta), Turkey, with the centre in Antakya (ancient Antioch) (Fig. 2). It overlooks the Mediterranean Sea and is within eyesight of the Syrian border. Being populated since most ancient times, this district is rich in archaeological and historical sites among them Seleuceia Pieria, Antioch’s ancient port, is the most important.



Fig. 2. Map of Samandağ region and the Musa Dağ

Among the six former Armenian villages with ca. 6000 population on the slopes of this mountain (Vakıf = Vakıflı, Kebusiye = Kapısuuyu, Hacı Habibli = Erikliköyü, Khdrbek = Hıdırbey, Bitias = Batıyaz = Teknepınar and Yoğunoluk), Vakıflı (Armenian Վաքիֆ, Վազրֆ) is the only one currently populated by the Armenian community of about 150 persons (Fig. 3-4).

**The Name:** The word “vakıf” is the Turkish version of the Arabic “waqf” which means religious foundation or endowment. Where did the village derive its name from? According to oral tradition, the original settlers of Vakıflı were a few families from the Armenian villages of Yoğunoluk and Khdrbek who used to cultivate religious properties adjoining the Alevi village of Kurtderesi. As those households reestablished themselves

in Musa Dağ permanently, they named their new habitat Vakıflı. Since, however, the village lands were in part charitable holdings, it can be surmised with relative certainty that Vakıflı's name reflected the nature of its actual site.



Fig. 3. Entrance into Vakıflı



Fig. 4. Musa Dağ and its villages: view from Vakıflı

**The History:** Until the beginning of the 19th century Vakıflı belonged to Yoğunoluk. During the reign of Sultan Mehmed II (1808-1839), however, its ownership was transferred to a Christian Arab by the name of Muhayyile (Mukhayel). This story does not explain why Vakıflı changed hands, nor does it say how it was reverted to the Armenians. In any case, it can be maintained with relative certainty that Vakıflı emerged as a viable village in the 1880s. As such, it was the smallest of the six Armenian villages of Musa Dağ, containing four quarters, namely, Aste Karshen, Ante Karshen, Hajjelak, Manjelak, and a satellite neighbourhood called Nerke Izzir.

After the World War I, Musa Dağ and the surrounding province of Hatay became part of French-administered Syria. The end of Turkish administration in the area enabled the Armenian inhabitants to resettle their six villages on the slopes of Musa Dağ. So, Vakıflı with other five villages, was under the rule of France for 20 years, between 1918 and 1938. Following an agreement between France and Turkey and a plebiscite, the district reverted to Turkey on June 29, 1939. After this move the main Armenian villages immigrated out of Hatay settling in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley, especially in Anjar where they built the town of Anjar, naming its six wards after the six villages of Musa Dağ. Some of them migrated to Soviet Armenia, establishing here the village Musa Ler, by Ejmiatsin. The reason why Musa Dağians of Vakıflı refused to leave is they believed that they could live peacefully in republican Turkey, which, according to them, undertook a new course. Besides, it was psychologically difficult to abandon ancestral lands. The prospects of acquiring additional real estate was also important.

**The Population:** Hatay was and is one of the most cosmopolitan provinces of Turkey, home to communities of various background and religions including Turks, Arabs and Armenians, Sunni and Alevi Muslims as well as Christians of many denominations. The Arabs formed the majority in three districts out of the twelve in Hatay: Samandağ/Suwaidiyyah (Alevi), Altinözü/ Qusair and Reyhanlı/ Rihaniyyah (Sunni). The districts and the villages of Alevis, Sunnis and Christians were at different places. The Sunni Turks, who had huge amount of land, were the notables of the city. The Christians were involved in commerce and handicraft. The Alevis were suppressed by the government; they were patient and hardworking and generally worked with landowners.

Those Armenians who stayed behind in Musa Dağ and nearby Zeytuniye in the plain of Svedia numbered 68 families or 384 persons, who constituted about 6 percent of Musa Dağ's total population. The breakdown was as follows: Bitias - 4 families or 12 persons; Hacı Habibli - 1 family or 8 persons; Yoğunoluk - 4 families or 28 persons; Khdrbek - 4 families or 27 persons; Kebusiye - 3 families or 15 persons; Vakıflı - 41 families or 232 persons as well as Zeytuniye - 11 families or 64 persons. In March 1940, the government took a census of Vakıflı and granted Turkish citizenship to its inhabitants. On this occasion, many last names were turkified. Thus, Manjian became Manca, Babigian became Babek, Canian became Canoğlu, Kartunian became Kartun, Silahlıan became Silahlı, Shemmassian became Aydın, etc. Only a few surnames retained their Armenian "-y/ian" ending such as Kadiyan and Emlikian. Similarly, 23 individuals, having regretted leaving Musa Dağ in 1939, returned within a year,

as follows: 13 from Vakıflı; 7 from Yoğunluk and 1 from Bitias, Hacı Habibli and Kebusiye each. However, with exception of two mothers, 21 had once again left for Syria and Lebanon by 1945. During the 1946-1947 relocation of the Armenians from the Diaspora to Soviet Armenia, the inhabitants of Vakıflı petitioned to go to Syria and Lebanon in hopes of joining Armenia-bound caravans.

In 1964 the number of the Armenians still living in Vakıflı amounted to 66 families with a total of 291 members, of whom 158 female and 133 male. Nearly 80 percent of the residents were young, under 43 years of age. In 1987, the number of the Armenians living in the district had dwindled to 40 families or 169 individuals, as follows: Bitias - 1 family with 5 members; Zeytuniye - 15 families with 59 members, and Vakıflı - 24 families with 105 members. The rest had migrated to the following destinations: Istanbul - 47 families or 165 persons; Iskenderun - 10 families or 40 persons; Antakya - 4 families or 20 persons; Ankara - 1 family or 13 persons; Soviet Armenia - 5 families or 19 persons; Lebanon - 4 families or 20 persons; as well as Europe and the USA - 15 families or 60 persons, for a total of 86 families or 337 persons. Recent estimates of Armenians found in Vakıflı vary between 25 and 38 families or between 135 and 150 individuals, mostly middle-aged and old. Young people move away. During the summer season, thanks to families returning to visit relatives, the numbers rise to 250-300 persons. An estimated 500 former residents of Vakıflı live in Istanbul.

In addition to the Armenians (Fig. 11-12), Vakıflı is home to one Kurd and one Turk(men) Muslim families.

**The Settlement:** The village is built on the slope of the mountain in terraces. The houses are constructed by stone architecture typical for the Armenians, which is totally different from the mud-brick architecture of other peoples inhabiting Musa Dağ. This Armenian architecture is present also in other villages, where now Alevi and orthodox Muslims live. It goes about 2-3 stored well-preserved houses made by stone-bricks. New houses of the Armenians are also stone made and well elaborated (Fig. 5-6).

**The Cemetery:** A tiny graveyard is situated across the main road of Vakıflı. Here we can meet graves of Armenian Christians buried mainly during the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. The type of the main graves can be considered on the whole as Armenian, characteristic especially for the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries. Also new fashioned graves of white marble are present, however not typical for traditional Armenian tombs. All of them bear inscriptions in Armenian and Turkish demonstrating Armenian names (with or without “-y/ian”) and life dates (Fig. 7-8).

**The Temple:** The Surb Astvatsatsin (Holy Mother of God, Meryem Ana) Armenian Apostolic Church of Vakıflı was established in 1910 (Fig. 9). The structure consists of two long rooms and is not very typical for Armenian church architecture. For the past seven decades it has had two resident priests, both native sons (Fr. Ghevont Kartun and Fr. Seroype Gulian), who passed away in 2002. The parishioners have since petitioned the Patriarch of Istanbul for a replacement, however this request was not satisfied because of the lack of sufficient clergymen. As a result, a visiting priest celebrates mass in Vakıflı only occasionally. The church and community are run by a parish council, a council of elders,

and the *Church-Loving Women's Guild*. Despite the problem's urgency, the government failed to grant permission for repairs for the next seventeen years, that is, until 1996, when the church, then almost in ruins, was restored (the plaque on the wall tells the church was renovated in 1994-1997 with assistance from the Turkish government).



Fig. 5. A house of traditional Armenian type in Vakıflı



6. A new constructed Armenian house in Vakıflı



Fig. 7. Traditional Armenian graves in Vakıflı



Fig. 8. New fashioned Armenian graves in Vakıflı

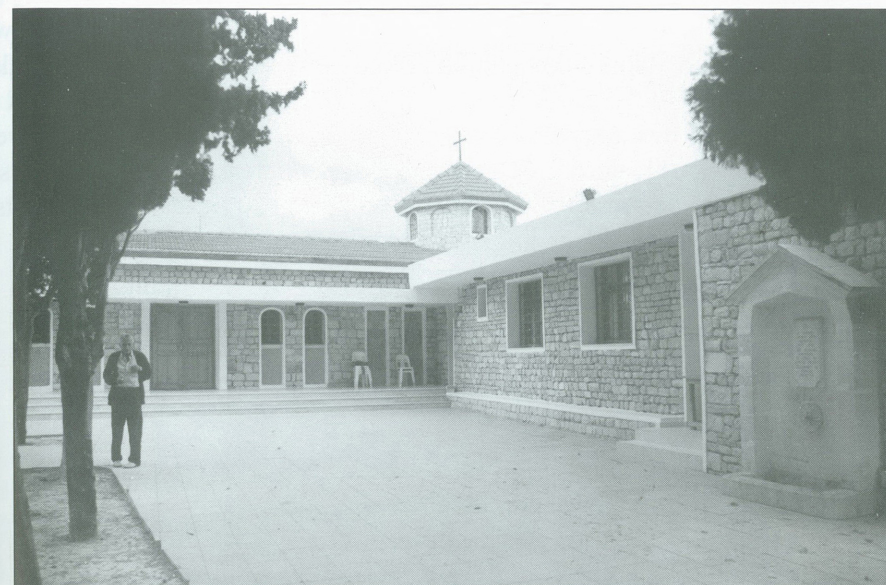


Fig. 9. Armenian church Holy Mother of God in Vakıflı

**The Material Culture:** The population of Vakıflı lives according to the same principles as in nearby villages of Musa Dağ and other Turkish villages, so the common material culture (pottery, service) has no any distinctive peculiarities. Only in the church and in some houses which still bear old Armenian artefacts, are supposed to be found special objects helping to define the identity of its bearers.

**The Language and Script:** The Vakıflı Armenians speak the Musa Ler dialect (*kistinik*) of Armenian language. The villagers use Turkish in public and Armenian at home and in the village. Not all of them are fluent in Armenian. While the older generation can read and write in Armenian, most of the younger generation can not. The Armenian spoken by them is full with Turkish and less Arabic words.

While all school instructions, news media, and public signs are in Turkish as prescribed by the Turkish Constitution of 1982, Vakıflı's Armenians are undergoing gradual linguistic assimilation. Those who want to learn Armenian have to go to an Armenian boarding school in Istanbul, where they are taught in Turkish but attend lessons in Armenian as a foreign language. In any case we can find in the village Armenian inscriptions put in different occasions (**Fig. 10**).

Vakıflı Armenians had always been zealous about the education of their children. Soon after Musa Dağ was evacuated in 1939, the Antioch government asked the Armenian leadership of Vakıflı to pay the salary of a Turkish teacher as well. Since, however, the shrunk community could not shoulder the extra expense for a new hire, the school was closed. Its furniture and other belongings were gifted to the school at nearby Jireyri village,

and children began to attend the public school at Büyük Zeytinli village some two miles away. This situation continued for seven years, until the 1951-1952 academic year, when the government provided Vakıflı with a teacher. Because in 1943 the old school building had been sold by the *Directorate General of Foundations*, a two-story house located next to the church was rented by the same Directorate. The *Atatürk Primary School* moved to a new facility in 1955. Due to the decrease of school-age children in subsequent years, the school closed its doors in the early 1990s, never to reopen. In 2005 Vakıflı restored its old school building, turning it into a bed-and-breakfast.

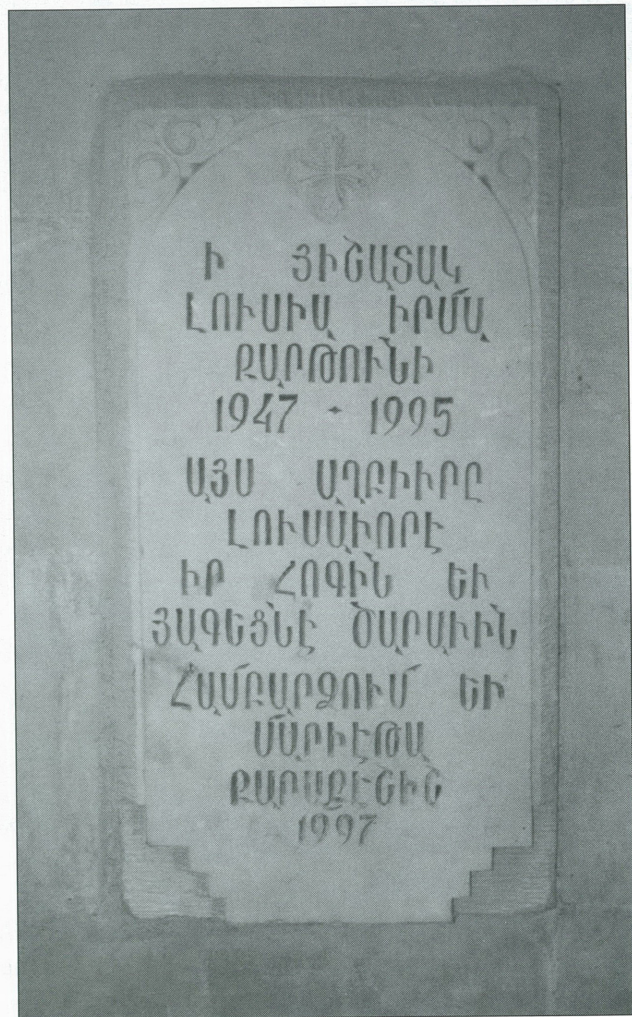


Fig. 10. Armenian inscription on erection of a fountain in Vakıflı



Fig. 11. Old and new inhabitants of Vakıflı

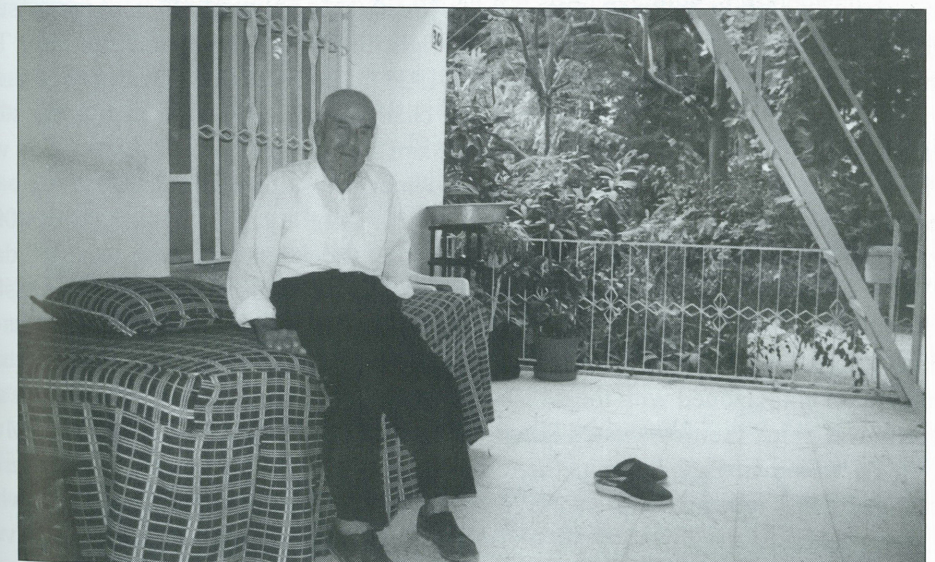


Fig. 12. Avetis Demircyan, the oldest inhabitant of Vakıflı

**The Economy:** As soon as the Armenians left Musa Dağ in 1939, the *Directorate of State Properties* took charge of their abandoned properties. At the same time, the Vakıflı Armenians began to claim those holdings as their own. The hassle to grab land caused enmity. Within two years the other Armenian villages were occupied, at least partially, by Turks and Turkmen from surrounding villages. In 1940, the Antakya

government auctioned off the crops once again. As a result, a number of Armenians from Vakıflı migrated to Antakya beginning with 1944, as was the case with several households from the Horoz clan, or to Iskenderun, Kirik Khan, and Istanbul during the 1950s in the case of households from the Canoğlu, Babek, and Silahli clans. They now worked as mechanics in factories, directors of movie theatre box offices, dealers of old ware, and so on. Still others toiled as seasonal workers in Adana, Tarsus and Mersin. Some were able to purchase land in their adopted towns, others returned to Vakıflı after saving money. Now the villagers are generally involved in agriculture, bee-keeping and production of citrus fruits which they have during 12 months of the year from the trees of terraces constructed by their ancestors.

**The Communication:** The Armenians of Vakıflı have good relationships with population of other villages and districts of the region. They have virtually no contact with the Musa Dağ Armenian diaspora, which, in addition to Lebanon, is spread out over Armenia, Austria, Britain, France, Canada, Venezuela, Australia and the USA. The communications are just with those villagers who work in Europe and come home on vacation, as well as with the Armenians in Istanbul.

**The Myth:** For existence of any community, and especially for an insular one, is especially important to have myths which justify this very existence. Among such myths first of all the story about the heroic fight in 1915 is worth mentioning. The Viennese writer Franz Werfel wrote a novel in 1933 based on this resistance: "The Forty Days of Musa Dağ". Werfel took the liberty of changing certain details to give the story biblical dimensions - 53 days became 40 days, and six villages became seven. This was the first step in mythologizing of a real story which was told to me once more by the oldest inhabitant of Vakıflı Avedis Demirci (Avetis Demircyan, 90 years old in 2003) (Fig. 12) who was baptized on the mountain during the resistance as he was "40 days old". The true events are the inhabitants of six villages of Musa Dağ chose to resist in 1915 and set up fortifications on the mountain. For 53 days they repelled onslaughts by Turkish troops until French sailors sighted a banner the Armenians had tied to a tree on the mountain emblazoned with the words: "Christians in Distress: Rescue". French and British naval ships then evacuated some 4200 men, women and children from Musa Dağ to Port Said in Egypt. From there groups of these refugees settled in different places, and many returned after World War I, only to leave permanently in 1939 when this area was transferred from Syria to Turkey. The story of Musa Dağ became a very important myth of not only the local people but for the Armenians on the whole.

In this sense, another myth is circulating among the Armenian population of Vakıflı historically justifying their presence in that region. During the interview with me (30.09.2003) Avetis Demircyan told: "Our king Tigran reigned Antioch four years".

The next myth is the story about the "Hıdırbey Plane Tree" a *platanus orientalis* in neighbouring village Hıdırbey. This is the most famous tree of Musa Dağ. The villagers believe that it is 2000 years old (the researchers estimated its age as 800-900 years). The tree was used as a barbershop before because of the vacuum in it. Today there is a small

area and a cafe of the village under it. This tree is an old witness of the past, hence of identity of the villagers.

**The Festival:** Festivals are the most important precondition uniting the Vakıflı people. No matter where they are, if festival they visit their village. The church of Vakıflı celebrates the Holy Mother of God feast in mid-August of each year. This also coincides with the traditional blessing of grapes. On these occasions, a ritual food called *harisa* is cooked and served to the numerous visitors. In September, the Holy Cross feast is likewise celebrated.

**The Value System:** From the first sight, the Armenians of Vakıflı both at the beginning of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century should be isolated from Moslem communities of surroundings keeping their identity and having a unique value system. However, this is right only from the first sight. Samandağ still keeps its importance as a region where many people of different ethnic groups live and get on well with each other. The people of various religions sometimes celebrate the same festivals which are usually at the same day. Many religious places (e.g. tombs) are accepted as sacred by these people of different religions who sacrifice for these holy places. Except for their beliefs, people visit each other in some "special days". They don't open their shops in the festivals which is a good example of tolerance.

All of these peoples have their own symbols (e.g. the Armenian symbol is the cross reflected on their church or graves (Fig. 13), however, they share the state symbol reflected e.g. in Atatürk's statue in all villages of Musa Dağ (Fig. 14).

A symbiosis of architectural traditions and symbols are also discernible as it is the case in the nearby village Yoğunoluk, where within the old Armenian church St. Apostle Thomas we see the new Turkish wall (Fig. 15) and the new state symbol (Fig. 16).

So, we can insist that the people inhabiting Musa Dağ, independent on their religious and ethnic belonging, act within the same cultural system and have similar, however not the same value systems. The differences in this system and intolerance of mutual values appear with politics such as it was in 1915 by the games of imperialistic states in this region.

**The Museum:** Repeating once more, it should be noted, that Vakıflı is the only officially recognized Armenian village in the world still speaking a dialect of Western Armenian. Because of it many tourists from Europe and the USA visit Vakıflı, a museum for a disappearing species. The last Armenians on the slopes of Musa Dağ face an uncertain future as they gradually lose the ability to communicate in their mother tongue. Their lifeline remains as a holiday retreat for Istanbul's insular Armenian community.

### Archaeological Reconstruction

Now let us go some thousand years ahead, when the archaeologists are supposed to excavate the ruins of Vakıflı. They have not found yet the archive of Vakıflı where the history of the village is told. So, they should rely mainly upon the data of material culture. What kind of evidence they could gain on identity of the villagers?



Fig. 13. Armenian symbols on the walls of the church of Vakıflı



Fig. 14. State symbol (statue of Atatürk) in Vakıflı



Fig. 15. New constructed wall within the old Armenian church of Yoğunluk



Fig. 16. State symbol (star and crescent) in the context of the old Armenian church of Yoğunluk