

Story 1428 (1976 Tape 33) Narrator: Arif Sevgin

Location: Hıdırlar village,
Beypazarı kaza,
Ankara Province

Date: June 20, 1976

Köroğlu,¹ Bolu Bey,² and Yürük³ Hıdır Ağa

Köroğlu was the son of a ulema⁴ man who had been Bolu Bey's horse trainer. When this trainer had selected a horse for Bolu Bey that the bey did not like, he had the

¹Originally named Rushen, he was later called Köroğlu, which means Son of the Blind Man. Köroğlu is the epic hero of a large cycle of stories. He became a bandit and noble outlaw--similar to Robin Hood and Jesse James in that he reputedly robbed the rich in order to give to the poor. There is historical documentation of a bandit so named in the area of Gerede in Bolu Province in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, for several imperial decrees were issued ordering his capture. Nearby Köroğlu Mountain was named after him. Whatever historicity he may have had, many of the qualities and activities of Köroğlu seem to be those of a mythical figure who emerged from the Jelali Revolts of that era.

²A bey of Ottoman times and earlier was roughly equivalent to an English baron or lord. He was a landed aristocrat, usually wealthy, and often possessing considerable political power.

³Yürüks (or Yörüks) are the last large year-round tribe of nomads in Turkey. With their huge flocks of livestock, they live largely in the Taurus mountains during spring, summer, and early fall, and they then pass through the Cilician Gate southward to winter near the Mediterranean.

⁴The narrator is confused about the meaning of this term. The ulema (plural of âlim) were learned men who were specialists in Islamic law. Clearly, Köroğlu's father was not that. The narrator also, erroneously, credits ulema men with "divine powers," as if they were saints.

Story 1428

trainer blinded. Bolu Bey had then placed the trainer the back of the horse and had him driven away. Inasmuch as the trainer was a ulema man, he had divine powers. Before becoming Bolu Bey's horse trainer, he had been a member of the Janissary Corps,⁵ and he taught Koroğlu of the military skills of Janissaries so that his son could take vengeance for him against Bolu Bey.

When he was eighteen or nineteen years old, Koroğlu went into the nearby mountains to live, and from there he raided the property of Bolu Bey and other rich landholders. Most of what he took from them he gave to poor people. After a while he decided to build a castle there in the mountains to protect himself and the men who had gathered around him. Because of his generosity to them, the common people liked Koroğlu and helped him whenever they could. He built his castle on a rocky pinnacle at a place called Çamlıbel.⁶ That castle is still there on that very steep hill.

⁵An elite military organization, at once famous and infamous, that was founded as a palace guard in the fourteenth century. They became so powerful and so flagrantly abusive that they were surrounded in their İstanbul barracks in 1826 and largely exterminated by a coalition of regular military units and numerous citizen volunteers.

⁶Çamlıbel means mountain pass with pine trees.

Story 1428

Bolu Bey did not, of course, accept peaceably the plundering of his flocks and other property. He struck back in various ways, and that was the main reason that Köroğlu needed a castle. Sometimes Bolu Bey sent some of his own men to harass Köroğlu, and sometimes he found others willing to do this work. For example, he once bribed a Yürük called Hıdır Ağa⁷ to change his allegiance with Köroğlu to an allegiance with himself.

This Hıdır Ağa had eight wives and fourteen sons. He was an intelligent man whose great wealth was in his large herds of all kinds of farm animals. Sometimes when Köroğlu and his men were without enough supplies and were hungry, this Yürük would give them food. Köroğlu became acquainted with him and his family, and Köroğlu liked especially one

⁷An ağa (English, agha) is a rural landowner, sometimes wealthy, often powerful. The word does not indicate an official title but describes an economic status. They are often the principal employers of farm workers, and they are often viewed by their employees as harsh, driving, and abusive. The term ağa is also used in a complimentary way, as an honorific, for a distinguished or just older person than the one using the term. Thus an older brother is called ağa bey by his younger siblings. Ağa bey may be used as a deferential term to one older or more prestigious than the speaker. A taxi driver may refer to his passenger as ağa bey; a salesman speaking to a male customer may call him ağa bey. In this tale, ağa is appropriate for Yürük Hıdır only after he acquires land and becomes sedentary.

Story 1428

of his sons, a young man named Çakır⁸ Hasan. Köroğlu asked Hıdır Ağa if he would let this son join him at Çamlıbel, and the Yürük agreed to this. Köroğlu soon discovered that Çakır Hasan was not only very strong but also a very competent fighter. When Bolu Bey sent the chief of his wrestlers to attack Köroğlu, Çakır Hasan intercepted the wrestler and cut off his head. After this, even Köroğlu himself was somewhat intimidated by Çakır Hasan, whose fame began to spread near and far. In fact, his reputation as a fighter became so great that he left Köroğlu behind in his shadow.

This alarmed Bolu Bey, and one day he sent a message to Yürük Hıdır Ağa saying that he would soon come into the mountains to visit him. A few days later, the ağa and his wife went to the Yürük tents, where they ate and drank and then talked for some time. Bolu Bey asked Hıdır Ağa, "How can you manage to survive without owning any land?"

In the meantime, Bolu Bey's wife was in another tent with the Yürük women. When she asked for a cup of water they brought her one which had some earth in the bottom. Unable to drink that water, she asked for another cup of

⁸Çakır refers to blue-gray eyes.

Story 1428

water, but again there was some soil in the bottom. This time, however, the oldest of Hıdır Ağa's wives explained, "Let us ask the bey to give your husband some land."

Back in the men's tent, Yürük Hıdır Ağa said to Bolu Bey, "If you give me a piece of land, I shall withdraw my son from Köroğlu's forces, and if Köroğlu comes to me for help, I shall send him away. I shall also do anything you ask me to do

After he had given Hıdır Ağa a tract of land, Bolu Bey one day called the Yürük to him and gave him a gun, a weapon that had only recently been invented. "Take this," he said, "and shoot Köroğlu with it." Hıdır Ağa took gun into the mountains and fired the gun at Köroğlu, he missed him.

In one of his poems, Köroğlu sang,⁹ "An iron stick with a hole in it has been invented, and valor has been laid aside." Those lines were composed after this incident occurred. Realizing that it would no longer be safe to remain in the mountains near Yürük Hıdır Ağa, Köroğlu was

⁹Somewhere in most of the tales about him, Köroğlu is revealed to be an âşık, a minstrel who composes and sings poems to the accompaniment of a lutelike instrument called a saz.

Story 1428

forced to move to the vicinity of Sivas.¹⁰

Bolu Bey gave Yürük Hıdır Ağa twenty or thirty square kilometers of land encircling what had been Köroğlu's castle. During the summer he went to Hıdırlar village, and he liked it so much there that he asked Bolu Bey to give him that place, too. Bolu Bey gave him that village,

Hıdır Ağa encountered difficulty in moving his people and his flocks to and from Hıdırlar. The roadways leading to and from Hıdırlar were owned by other people, and they would not allow use of them without a heavy toll payment. This difficulty was overcome, however, for then Bolu Bey gave the Yürük Ağa title to the roads as well as to the village of Hıdırlar.

This Hıdır Ağa that I have been telling you about was of my ancestors. I still have the titles for the village, the roads, and the mountain pastures. As recently as the time of Abdul Hamid¹¹ these titles were

¹⁰It is interesting that in this tale Köroğlu is said to have moved to Sivas. Some scholars contend that Sivas Province, not Bolu Province, was the site of all of Köroğlu's activities.

¹¹There were two sultans of that name. Abdul Hamid I ruled from 1774 to 1789 and Abdul Hamid II ruled from 1876 until he was deposed in 1909. When any contemporary Turk refers simply to Abdul Hamid, he is usually referring to Abdul Hamid II.

Story 1428

reconfirmed. On the road title, Abdul Hamid added a note written in his own hand saying, "Anyone who tries to interfere with the Yürük Ağa's rights to the use of these roads will be beheaded."