

## Digging Up Troy – The Story of Kâni

Carl W. Blegen read a paper to the Cincinnati Literary Club on January 25, 1954, and it bore the simple title “Johnny” (1). In his paper, written long after his last season at Troy in 1938, he talked about the dig’s most important worker – Kâni Barin, who was nicknamed “Johnny” by the Cincinnati staff because of the similar sounds of the names (2).

According to Blegen’s tale, Kâni was born shortly before the turn of the 20th century to Muslim Albanian parents in southwestern Macedonia. While young, he attended an Ottoman Turkish school, and, because of the cultural milieu of the region, he acquired fluency in a number of languages, including Greek and possibly Bulgarian and/or Serbian. Around the age of 12 or 13, he emigrated to America, first to Toronto and then to Akron, Ohio. During his time in the Americas, he gained a proficiency in not only English, but also in Russian and Polish. Blegen noted that Kâni was a “remarkable polyglot” – he spoke at least seven languages and wrote in at least two (Turkish in both alphabets and English).

Kâni eventually returned overseas, probably in 1921 or 1922, but the consequences of the Balkan Wars and World War I meant that his homeland had fundamentally changed. Lack of work in Albania forced him and his young family to seek refuge in Greece shortly before the 1923 Compulsory Population Exchange between Greece and Türkiye. Like many others, their claims that they were Albanian did not spare them. Blegen writes that they and other Muslims – considered “Turks” because of their religion – were “herded together, conveyed to Saloniki [Thessaloniki], and deposited aboard a rusty ship.” After delays in port, the ship sailed across the northern Aegean, and the family was “allotted a ruined house in the nearby empty village of Erenköy, which had once been occupied by a flourishing Greek community.”

Blegen’s concludes the story of Kâni’s pre-Troy life by noting that their extreme poverty led to the death of Kâni’s wife from starvation. He later married an Albanian exchangee, and they “managed to struggle along for some years, making little or no headway.”

Kâni first appears in the Troy records in 1932. He was Worker #62 according to the Workers’ Payroll record, kept by the foreman of the excavation. He is still listed as a regular worker, Worker #8, in 1933. Because Blegen’s choice of foreman died unexpectedly before the 1934 season, this meant that the foreman’s duties that year were split first among the senior Cincinnati staff. As the season progressed, Blegen writes that “much useful assistance was rendered also by Emin Kani [*sic*], who was in charge of the vase-mending department in our pottery workroom.” The team had excavated so many nearly-complete vessels that they established a vase-mending area in their pottery shed, and they placed Kâni in charge at the beginning of 1934 (3).

In April 1935, John L. Caskey began writing the Workers’ Payroll, but the change in handwriting (from entry #16 to #17) indicates that Kâni took over (4). Clearly, the Cincinnati team held Kâni in high enough regard to promote him to foreman, while he still ran the vase-mending department. He would maintain the Workers’ Payrolls and the Foreman Accounts – “competently and faithfully” according to Blegen – through the final season at Troy in 1938.

The Cincinnati staff took several photographs of the workers during the seven seasons they were at Troy, but, curiously, only one photograph focusing specifically on those workers was published in *Troy I*. Even Kâni – mentioned specifically by name in the introduction of the book – does not appear. In the unpublished photographs, however, he is a common figure, such as overseeing the construction of the guard's house in 1935 (5).

On top of all of the other tasks he performed, Kâni also served as a translator. He does not appear to have received any extra payment for this service, and while we know that Blegen and a few other team members acquired various levels of proficiency in Turkish, we can assume that they relied on Kâni extensively to convey their stated – and unstated – wants to the other workers.

Blegen finishes his 1954 paper noting that he and Kâni continued to correspond, even if the latter's English had grown difficult to understand through general lack of use. None of these letters survive, however, and that is the last reference to Kâni in our records.

### **List of Exhibits**

- (1) Draft of “Johnny” delivered to the Cincinnati Literary Club on January 25, 1954
- (2) Kâni posing for a formal photograph in 1937
- (3) Kâni in his role as “chief pot-mender” repairing a stirrup jar in June of 1934
- (4) 1934-1935 Workers' Payroll for April showing John L. Caskey's and Kâni's handwriting
- (5) Kâni, at left, with the builders of the guard's house in 1935

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