

Who Saved the Parthenon?

A New History of the Acropolis
Before, During and After the
Greek Revolution



WILLIAM ST CLAIR



<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

© 2022 William St Clair. © 2022 Preface by Roderick Beaton



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the work for non-commercial purposes, providing attribution is made to the author (but not in any way that suggests that he endorses you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

William St Clair, *Who Saved the Parthenon? A New History of the Acropolis Before, During and After the Greek Revolution*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0136>

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of many of the images included in this publication differ from the above. This information is provided in the captions and in the list of illustrations.

In order to access detailed and updated information on the license, please visit <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0136#copyright>. Further details about CC BY-NC-ND licenses are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0136#resources>

Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

ISBN Paperback: 9781783744619

ISBN Hardback: 9781783744626

ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781783744633

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 9781783744640

ISBN Digital ebook (mobi): 9781783744657

ISBN XML: 9781800642997

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0136

Cover image: Figure 2.7. 'View of the Acropolis from the banks of the Illysus, Sep^r 1824.' Chromolithograph from a contemporary amateur picture. From: William Black, L.R.C.S.E., Surgeon, H.M.S. Chanticleer, *Narrative of Cruises in the Mediterranean in H.M.S. "Euryalus" and "Chanticleer" during the Greek War of Independence (1822–1826)* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1900), frontispiece. The chromolithograph was made by McLagan and Cumming of Edinburgh c.1900. Public domain.

Cover design by Anna Gatti.

11. The Siege of 1826 and 1827

At the end of 1822, events appeared to have turned in favour of the Greeks. The suppression of the revolts by the Ottoman forces had caused innumerable humanitarian disasters, and had ruined much of the economy, but it had not won the war. In the campaigning season of 1822, the Ottoman Government had mounted a large-scale expedition of 30,000 men with a baggage train carried on pack animals, including camels, but it had been ambushed as it entered the narrow passes into the Peloponnese and again when it tried to retreat across the mountains to Corinth and was almost totally destroyed. Soon authors were writing as if the war was over.¹

In 1825 and 1826, however, the Ottoman Government embarked on more patient strategy for the re-conquest of Greece that, given the immense disparity of resources between the warring parties, seemed likely to succeed. While the Ottoman navy recovered control of many of the islands, the Ottoman army began systematically to roll up the whole area of continental Greece north of the Isthmus, village by village, town by town, province by province. They allowed some communities to return to allegiance in return for being spared the full force of Ottoman law and custom. At the same time the Viceroy of Egypt, a territory only nominally a dependency of the Ottoman Empire, was invited to send an army by sea with the promise that the whole province of the Morea/Peloponnese would be ceded to him, to be religiously cleansed of Christians and resettled with Muslims from North Africa.

The blockade, siege, and capture of Missolonghi in western Greece in 1825/1826 by the Ottoman army and its newly arrived allies, conducted

1 For example Raffenel, M.C.D., *Continuation de l'histoire des événemens de la Grèce: avec des notes critiques et topographiques: témoin oculaire des principaux faits: formant, avec la première partie publiée en 1822, une histoire complète de cette guerre; par M.C.D. Raffenel, ouvrage orné de quatre portraits* (Paris: Dupré, 1824).

in accordance with the Ottoman norms of the time, confirmed its reputation for patient siege warfare.² Soon after the town fell to Ottoman forces on 23 April 1826, Reschid reported to Constantinople that he had put 2,750 men to death.³ For years, visitors to Missolonghi saw a pyramid of human skulls and bones, a trophy of victory and a display of Ottoman power. Over time the pyramid gradually diminished as visitors took mementos, another means by which, in accordance with Ottoman preference for display and performance, the body parts of the dead disseminated news and ideas.⁴

Most of the women and children who were captured and enslaved were sold to dealers at temporary slave markets at Preveza and Arta, and many were taken to the permanent markets in Egypt. According to Charles Deval, an interpreter at the French Embassy, who visited the scene of war in the Peloponnese in 1826, one of the senior Ottoman commanders had in his harem eighteen women and a dozen children aged from ten to fifteen, all from Missolonghi.⁵ A large sum (51,000 francs), raised in Italy, Switzerland, and other western European countries, was spent, with the help of an agent in the Ionian Islands, on redeeming about two hundred women and children. However, such humanitarian interventions, by driving up the prices, also increased the

2 For example: 'The Ottomans, who are the best soldiers in the world for a siege'. Madden, i, 75.

3 Erdem, 69, from Ottoman archives.

4 For example, David Urquhart, visiting in 1830, took away a skull he picked out from the heap, 'grazed across the forehead by a pistol-ball; behind, on the right side, two back-hand sabre strokes had ploughed, but not penetrated the bone, and a deep cleft gaped over the left brow.' Urquhart, *Spirit*, i, 50. Urquhart, who found the skull a nuisance to carry, later abandoned it. The pile of skulls at Missolonghi and the fact that they were being taken by western visitors was also noted in 1836 by Prince Pückler-Muskau, *Entre l'Europe et l'Asie ...* (Paris: Werdet, 1840), i, 11. The Ottoman preference for technologies of display and performance over those of inscription was discussed in earlier chapters, picking up on the introduction to the usefulness of the terms in Chapter 1.

5 'Pendant mon séjour à Modon, Mehemet-Ali-Aga, oncle d'Ibrahim, et un des chefs de l'armée, vint à mourir. Cet homme avait dans son harem dix-huit femmes, enlevées à Missolonghi, et une douzaine d'enfants grecs, tous âgés de dix à quinze ans, qui lui servaient de pages'. Deval, Charles, *Deux années à Constantinople et en Morée, 1825-1826, ou Esquisses historiques sur Mahmoud, les janissaires, les nouvelles troupes, Ibrahim-Pacha, Solyman-Bey, etc.; par M. C..... D....., élève interprète du roi à Constantinople; ouvrage orné d'un choix de costumes orientaux soigneusement coloriés, et lithographés par M. Collin, élève de Girodet* (London: R.G. Jones, 1828), 202. According to Deval, when the master died they were due to be liberated but instead his heirs sent them to the local slave market.

economic incentives for the Ottoman army, and the individual soldiers of which it was composed, to repeat what they had done at Missolonghi as they prepared to reconquer the rest of central mainland Greece, including Athens.⁶

When the defenders of Missolonghi realised that they were certain to be overwhelmed, many of the women chose to immolate themselves rather than submit, killing their children and blowing themselves up. Figure 11.1 reproduces a picture that follows the contemporary written accounts.



Figure 11.1. The Greek women exploding the mine at Missolonghi. Print of a picture by Peter Johann Nepomuk Geiger, first put on sale in 1840.⁷

The provisional Greek Government, in so far as it was able to co-ordinate the actions of local Revolutionary leaders, considered how it could best

6 Bouvier-Bron, Michelle, *Jean-Gabriel Eynard et le Philhellénisme Genevois* (Geneva: Published by Association Gréco-Suisse, 1963), 41–42, from primary contemporary documents in Geneva University Library.

7 Private collection.

deploy its forces to forestall the new threat. In February 1826, while Missolonghi was still holding out after many months of siege, after considering the possibility of sending their forces across the devastated country to offer relief, the government decided instead to try to cut off the Ottoman supply line in eastern Greece by seizing the Ottoman naval post on the island of Negropont (modern and ancient Chalcis). The French philhellene Charles Fabvier, an experienced and tireless middle-ranking Napoleonic officer who had spent months training a force of Greek soldiers and philhellenes in the methods of the most modern European armies, may have appreciated that, from a strategic point of view, the Acropolis of Athens was of little value.

Instead, a raid against Negropont by a well-led modern force would, Fabvier calculated, secure central Greece, including Athens, against invasion. His force consisted of regular infantry, cavalry, and artillery, with supporting irregular forces; around 1,200 to 1,400 men set out in February 1826.⁸ An unpublished manuscript in French that has survived among the papers of the philhellene Edgar Garson, and has some of the characteristics of an eyewitness account intended for a book, recounts the difficulties that the expedition encountered: cannon that burst when fired for the first time; replacements obtained from Athens whose calibre did not match the balls; days without food except from occasional tortoise meat; and dread of being wounded and dealt with according to Ottoman custom.⁹ Fabvier's force was fortunate to be taken off by Greek ships a few weeks later with the loss of more than a third of its men. As the pre-Revolution topographers had reported, of the three hundred villages on the island, most were inhabited by Muslims, whose families were thought to have changed their religious affiliation, including from Roman Catholicism and Judaism, long before, and whose lands had also been devastated and who were unlikely to have been universally or wholly sympathetic to the Revolutionaries.¹⁰

8 Discussed by Debidour, A., *Le général Fabvier: sa vie militaire et politique* (Paris: Plon, 1904), 276–300, drawing on Fabvier's papers and reports by Admiral de Rigny in the archives of the French Ministry of Marine.

9 Garson papers, copy kindly supplied by Ian Watson.

10 For example, Dodwell, *Classical and Topographical Tour*, ii, 350. Dodwell, who, like the other topographers, experienced the landscape directly on foot or on horseback, also plausibly suggested that it was because, in ancient times, an enemy controlling the port could prevent imports of food reaching Athens, so the Athenians had attempted to reduce their vulnerability by opening up sources of supply in the Black Sea that they could control by planting settlers there.

But if the capture of Missolonghi was a victory for the Ottoman forces, and a demonstration of the effectiveness of their age-old methods of putting down uprisings, to others the events carried other messages. As Samuel G. Howe, the American philhellene, historian, and philanthropist wrote on 1 August 1826, Missolonghi had only been captured after many months of struggle against a starving population behind mud walls. Reschid, he went on, whose army was already encamped near Athens, would be unable to capture a well-prepared and well-stocked Acropolis.¹¹ But it was when reports reached European countries a few weeks later that the events at Missolonghi had their effect on the course of the Revolution. The more sacks of heads and ears that were displayed at Constantinople, the Ottoman authorities may have assumed, the greater the terror they may have instilled in the local populations, whether Greeks or others, including Muslims. But when translated into print and picture and carried abroad in fixed form, the more intolerable did the policies of the three powers appear to their own publics. One leading French newspaper, for example, painted a word picture of their ambassadors making their way through the gate of the sultan's palace, on which the body parts were exposed on specially designed niches, to offer their congratulations and to pay their homage to the triumph of legitimacy.¹² Although, in the western European countries there had been a steady flow of images of the war, almost all composed by artists reliant on written accounts and not personal experience, the news from Missolonghi produced an immediate surge. Some pictures were in heroic mode, others allegorical.¹³ The salons of Paris exhibited pictures by the famous artists of the day, and there were numerous prints. Dramatic versions were hurriedly put on stage, and poets produced occasional

11 Summarized from an unpublished letter to Garston among the Garston papers, copy kindly provided, with permission to make use of it in this book, by Ian Watson.

12 Described with summaries and quotations by Dimakis, Jean, *La Presse française face à la Chute de Missolonghi et la Bataille navale de Navarin* (Thessaloniki: Institute of Balkan Studies, 1976), with the remarks about the ambassadors at page 70. The Gate, with the niches, is shown as Figure 6.2. Canning's letter of 4 June to Reschid, that refers to his 'success, enough to preserve the diplomatic niceties before offering a bargain about preserving the monuments of Athens' is transcribed in Appendix D.

13 Many images of the siege of Missolonghi and its aftermath are reproduced by Tsoulios, G. & T. Hadjis, *Historical album of the Greek war of independence, 1821. An illustrated chronicle. (Award of the Academy of Athens)*, English translation by K. Psyllides and P. Stavrou (Athens: Melissa, n.d., 1971).

verses with the proceeds going to relief funds and to the philhellenic committees mobilizing arms and volunteers for the Greek cause.¹⁴

When Reschid announced that his next target was Athens, the Greek forces who had taken over the town and Acropolis in 1822 knew what they and their families could expect. Some reports of Reschid's army on the march towards Athens, with its killings, enslavements, and laying waste, that were believable because they were normal, picked out the sexual element that the western ambassadors were sometimes reluctant to make explicit, as for example: '... many a beautiful village was surprised, and shared the usual fate—the butchering of its old men and women; the brutal usage, and unnatural abuse of the women and children; their mutilation and torments, and their being obliged to end by becoming the slaves of the soldiery who would load them with the spoils of their own homes, and make them follow like beasts of burden.'¹⁵

When compared with the military situation that they had faced at the time of the outbreak in 1821, the people of Athens were better prepared. Under the energetic leadership of Gouras, a local commander who was as much warlord as nationalist, the cisterns on the Acropolis were cleaned and filled with potable water. The villagers in the surrounding countryside, although themselves on the verge of starvation, were compelled to hand over provisions, enough, it was reported, to resist a siege of many months.¹⁶ Odysseus Androutsos had already turned the mosque inside the Parthenon into a food store stocked with enough grain to supply the garrison for two years.¹⁷ The Frankish Tower was heightened so as to give lookouts a wider and longer field of view and to enable the defenders to communicate with friends outside by signalling with mirrors and fires. Much of the town itself had not been repaired since the events of 1822 and was still in ruins.¹⁸

14 Discussed, with many pictures reproduced, by Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, Nina M., *French Images from the Greek War of Independence (1821–1830): Art and Politics under the Restoration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 66–83. Many images of the siege of Missolonghi and its aftermath are reproduced by Tsoulios and Hadjis.

15 Howe, *Historical Sketch*, 326.

16 'The pale and trembling figures of women, who stand like spectres by the walls of their falling habitations; the half-naked and starving infants, who shiver at their breasts ...' Letter dated from Athens, February 1824, in Waddington, *Visit*, 95.

17 Raybaud, ii, 435.

18 In April 1824, for example, the surgeon on a British warship noted that most of the streets were deserted and untrodden: 'here and there an aged woman or solitary

When Reschid's army arrived outside the town wall of Athens and a blockade began, the Greeks of Athens announced their intention of fighting to the end, and of following, if necessary, the example of Missolonghi. And since by this stage in the war, the Parthenon and other ancient monuments had become symbolic of the neo-Hellenic cause, they declared that in immolating themselves, they would destroy the monuments as well. As their leaders declared: 'But, if God abandons his children, if our fellow-countrymen fail to help, if Europe is content with her role as spectator, then, and we call as witnesses those we have called on for help, then death, as we make a sortie from the debris of the Propylaia, will bury us under the ruins of the Parthenon, [and] the temples of Neptune and Erechtheus.'¹⁹

On 15 July Reschid's army duly began a bombardment. In the month of August 1826, Gordon, who was present for much of the time, noted: 'Kutahi's [Reschid's] artillery discharged against the town and castle [Acropolis] 2120 cannon-balls, and 356 bomb and howitzer shells; the garrison returned 76 bombs, and 854 round shot.'²⁰ 'From the 1st to the 25th of September, the besiegers threw 2,015 projectiles, the garrison 521.'²¹ At some times during the 1826/27 winter months, Reschid's firing was sporadic, 'pouring in daily a few vollies from his batteries.'²² On one occasion in October 1826, Gordon counted a thousand shots fired in a single day.²³

Nor were the Ottoman weapons inadequate for the task. In a full report dated 19 October, based on information he had received from the Ottoman army encamped in Athens, Consul Meyer mentions that 'some of the ordnance brought from Negropont is of a very high calibre', using the word to mean able to be fired with accuracy.²⁴ In the battles near Athens the Ottoman army manoeuvred 'four long

female with her child crossed the street; and in some places an old grey-headed man was seen dragging out from the mass of rubbish the half-burnt beam or piece of wood for his fire'. Black, *Narrative of Cruises*, 154.

19 The texts are given in Appendix C.

20 Gordon, ii, 339.

21 Figures from Gordon, ii, 339, 340, 341, 376. Numbers for lesser number of shots fired by the defenders from the Acropolis are also given.

22 Gordon, ii, 376.

23 *Ibid.*, 341.

24 Transcribed by Prousis, Theophilus C., *British Consular Reports from the Ottoman Levant in an Age of Upheaval, 1815–1830* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 2008), 94–97.

five-inch howitzers'.²⁵ During the siege the army included an artillery train 'of twenty cannon, four large mortars, and two howitzers; among his battering guns were forty-eight and forty-two pounders, and his fieldpieces were harnessed, equipped, and manoeuvred in a way that would have done no discredit to Europeans.'²⁶ Although, seen from the west, the Ottoman Empire appeared to be disintegrating, and western providentialists were inclined to welcome the working out of some pre-ordained divine plan, many among the Ottoman leaderships were military modernizers and innovators. It was the Ottoman army that developed both hot shells and howitzers, before they were adopted by western armies.²⁷

Among the most commanding sites were on the Hill of the Muses, near the monument of Philopappos and from the nearby Church of Demetrius 'the Bombardier'.²⁸ Figure 11.2 shows an artilleryman's view of the Parthenon on the Acropolis from this military vantage point.



Figure 11.2. 'Monument of Philopappus at Athens, Greece.' Steel engraving with captions in English, French and German. 'Drawn by Wolfensberger Engraved by R. Brandard.'²⁹

25 Finlay, *Greek Revolution*, ii, 132.

26 Gordon, ii, 333.

27 Described by Chesney, a colonel in the British Royal Artillery, 387, drawing on the professional military histories and manuals of the early nineteenth century.

28 'The Turks had gun emplacements and strong points all round the place and kept up a fire with cannons, mortars, grenade-throwers, and small arms'. Makriyannis, *Memoirs*, Lidderdale edition, 100.

29 Wright, ii, 65. As far as I know, the Rev. G.N. Wright, who supplied the words that accompanied the pictures, never visited Athens.

The image is an engraving of a drawing made by Johann Jakob Wolfensberger, a professional artist from Switzerland, who was in Athens in November 1832 while the Acropolis was still in Ottoman occupation.³⁰ The Parthenon is just over five hundred metres away, within easy range.³¹ In 1829, the highly experienced French diplomat, the Baron de Beaujour, in his published survey of the military strength of the Ottoman Empire, declared that the Acropolis of Athens, being within easy range of artillery of the surrounding hills, had no value as a fortress. The only way it could be defended, he added, was for a network of defended towers to be built, armed, and garrisoned on at least four of the hills, a cost, he implied, that no-one would ever be willing incur even if they had the resources.³²

On 28 June 1826, when Haseki's town wall was breached, the town of Athens was taken by Reschid's forces, with Reschid personally leading a charge against a battery during which he was wounded.³³ His army, closely investing the Acropolis from all sides, was now able to fire at the Acropolis from ground level in all directions, at a range of fifty metres or even closer. In 1825, the only way in which the Revolution could reasonably expect to save the Acropolis was by mounting a force able to relieve the siege by land. In terms of the military aims of the war, it was debateable whether the Greek Revolutionary forces and their philhellenic allies and funders were right to choose to do this, when compared with other choices open to them that might have brought more important military gains. In January 1827, the American philhellene, Samuel Howe, described what he saw: 'Athens seems to be

30 Lacour, 163 and 172, records meeting Wolfensberger in Athens in November 1832.

31 That the Parthenon was within easy range was confirmed explicitly by Admiral de Jurien. Jurien, ii, 95.

32 'Athènes ne mérite plus aucune considération comme place de guerre, parce que ses murs ne pourraient pas résister à de l'artillerie, que sa citadelle est mal armée, qu'elle est dominée vers le nord-est par le mont Anchesme et que vers le sud-ouest elle peut être battue du mont Musée, qui n'en est éloigné que de 300 toises, et même du plateau du Pnyx et de la colline de l'Aréopage, qui en sont encore plus près. Il faudrait, pour la défendre, construire sur tous ces monticules de petits forts et les lier au corps de la place'. Beaujour, L. Felix, Baron de, *Voyage Militaire Dans L'empire Othoman, Ou: Description De Ses Frontières Et De Ses Principales Défenses, Soit Naturelles, Soit Artificielles, Avec Cinq Cartes Géographiques* (Paris: Didot, 1829), 112.

33 Reported by Meyer, the British consul in Arta, from information sent to him from Athens by the Ottoman authorities. Kew FO 352/15 B, part 6, 513. An extract from the letter from Athens is at 525. Other sources give a slightly later date for the taking of the town.

in a worse condition than I had imagined it. They have not a stick of wood to burn, are deficient in clothing, and a violent disease is raging among them. The Turks seem to have come to a fixed resolution not to abandon the siege; during the winter they have partly encircled Athens with a ditch, cut down all the olive-trees, and formed with them a sort of fence for their ditch. They have about ten thousand troops, including servants, etc. Letters from within call loudly for relief, and government, feeble in means, is doing all that is possible for them [*letter breaks off*].³⁴ The military case, reinforced by the silent presence of the ambassadors of ancient Athens, was regarded as overriding, and it was decided to attempt to mount an operation to relieve the siege.

34 Howe, *Letters and Journals*, i, 199.