

Who Saved the Parthenon?

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



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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.

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Appendix B

The Firman of 1821

Primary Documents relating to the vizieral letter of 1821 that gave orders for the preservation of the ancient monuments of Athens.

1. Lord Strangford, British Ambassador to Foreign Secretary Lord Londonderry¹

‘Constantinople, Saturday August 18th 1821.

My Lord, Having learned that the successes of the Turks in the Negropont, had enabled the Porte to detach a Body of Troops against Athens, I thought it right to make an effort to save from their fury, the sacred Monuments of Antiquity with which that illustrious City abounds.

I humbly hope that His Majesty will not disapprove of the manner in which I have presumed to employ His Majesty’s Name in the accompanying Note to the Reis Effendi — I wished that Literature and the Sciences should owe an additional obligation to His Majesty, and that He should have the Glory of protecting a City, endeared to them by so many recollections.

I have the honour to be with the highest respect, My Lord Your Lordship’s most obedient and most humble Servant. Strangford.’

‘L’Ambassadeur d’Angleterre apprenant que les troupes victorieuses de sa Majesté Impériale sont sur le point d’occuper Athènes, ose recommander à la bienveillance et à la protection du Gouvernement

¹ Kew FO 78/100, 134.

Ottoman les fameux monumens d'antiquité et Chefs d'œuvres d'art qui ont depuis tant de siècles rendu cette ville l'objet de l'admiration universelle de l'Europe. Son Auguste Souverain qui se distingue par son goût et par son attachement aux sciences et à la Littérature, dont Athènes fut le berceau, verroit avec une satisfaction inexprimable cette preuve d'un sentiment analogue, de la part de son Ancien Ami et Allié, l'Empereur Ottoman; et comme l'Ambassadeur se persuade que la Sublime Porte n'a rien de plus à cœur que de faire tout ce qui puisse être agréable à Son Souverain qui de son côté, ne cesse de lui témoigner l'amitié la plus réelle il a l'honneur de prier Son Excellence le Reis Effendi de vouloir bien faire émaner des Firmans, adressés au Commandant des Troupes Ottomanes, et au Voivode d'Athènes, pour la conservation de cette Ville, et des beaux monumens de sa gloire antique.

L'Ambassadeur saisit cette occasion pour renouveler à Son Excellence l'assurance de sa plus haute considération.

signé / Strangford, Le Palais d'Angleterre, Ce 15. Août 1821.'

Translation

'The English Ambassador, having been informed that the victorious troops of His Imperial Majesty are on the point of occupying Athens, ventures to recommend to the benevolence and protection of the Ottoman Government the famous monuments of antiquity and Masterpieces of art that have for so many centuries made this town the object of Europe's universal admiration. His August Sovereign, who is noted for his taste and his fondness for sciences and Literature, of which Athens was the cradle, would see with indescribable pleasure this proof of a similar penchant from his Old Friend and Ally, the Ottoman Emperor; and as the Ambassador is convinced that the Sublime Porte cares for nothing more than for doing all that can please his Sovereign, who in return does not cease to express his most sincere friendship, he has the honour to ask His Excellency the Reis Effendi to arrange for the issue of Firmans, addressed to the Commander of the Ottoman Troops, and to the Voivode of Athens, for the preservation of the Town and the beautiful monuments of its ancient glory.

The Ambassador seizes this opportunity of renewing to His Excellency the assurances of his highest esteem.

Signed / Strangford, The English Palace, 15 August 1821.'

2. Lord Strangford, British Ambassador, to Foreign Secretary Lord Londonderry.²

'Constantinople, Saturday August 25th 1821.

My Lord, I have great satisfaction in communicating to Your Lordship the enclosed Translation of a Viziral Letter addressed to the Turkish Authorities at Athens, (in consequence of my Note to the Reis Effendi,) recommending to their protection, the various Monuments of Art and Antiquity, which are contained in that City.

Your Lordship will permit me to observe, that this proceeding is of a character quite unknown to the Ottoman Government: and I am perfectly assured that it would never have consented to a demand so foreign to its usages and opinions, had it not been for the sincere desire of doing something that might be agreeable to His Majesty.

On this ground, I will own that I should feel very happy if Your Lordship would authorize me to say to the Reis Effendi, that this mark of Attention and Respect had been acceptable to His Majesty.

I have the honour to be with the highest respect, My Lord, Your Lordship's most obedient and most humble Servant. Strangford.'

'Traduction d'une Lettre de S.A. le Grand Vizir au Gouverneur Général de la Morée, ainsi qu'au Commandant et au Juge d'Athènes.

L'Ambassadeur de la Cour d'Angleterre résidant près la Sublime Porte, ayant entendu que les Troupes Ottomanes (que la victoire suit partout) sont en marche pour aller purger la Ville d'Athènes des brigands qui s'y sont montrés en force, a présenté une note officielle dans laquelle il a exposé que ce seroit faire un plaisir à Sa Majesté le Roi de la Grande Bretagne que d'ordonner, en cette circonstance, qu'on ait à épargner et à conserver les restes d'Antiquités, et les monumens anciens qui existent dans la Ville et dans les environs d'Athènes, de cette Ville à laquelle l'Europe entière a, de tout tems, pris un si vif intérêt.

Comme la dite Majesté témoigne de l'Amitié envers la Sublime Porte, et que la parfaite et sincère affection qui existe entre les deux Cours augmente de jour en jour; et comme les antiquités et les monumens anciens d'Athènes ont toujours mérité l'attention générale de l'Europe,

2 Kew FO 78/100, 164.

il appartient à la dignité de la Sublime Porte de prendre les mesures nécessaires pour laisser exister et pour conserver, dans leur état actuel, ces monumens antiques, dans la vue de faire quelque chose d'agréable à la dite Majesté.

Ainsi, vous aurez soin, d'après la sagacité qui vous caractérise, d'ordonner à tous ceux qu'il appartiendra d'épargner et de conserver les antiquités et les monumens dont il s'agit, faisant en sorte qu'il n'y ait pas des plaintes, à ce sujet, de la part de qui que ce soit.

C'est à cette fin que la présente Vous est adressée. — le 22. Août 1821. — '

Translation

'Translation of a letter from His Excellency the Grand Vizir to the Governor General of the Morea, and to the Commander and Judge of Athens.

The Ambassador of the English Court resident at the Sublime Porte having heard that the Ottoman Troops (who are victorious everywhere) are on their way to purge the Town of Athens of the bandits who have forcibly occupied it, presented an official note where he set out that it would be much appreciated by His Majesty the King of Great Britain that in this situation the order be given to spare and preserve the remains of Antiquities and the ancient monuments extant in the Town and in the surroundings of Athens, that Town in which the whole of Europe has in all ages taken such great interest.

As the aforementioned Sovereign displays Friendship towards the Sublime Porte, and as the perfect and sincere affection extant between the two Courts grows every day, and as the antiquities and the ancient monuments of Athens have always deserved the attention of Europe as a whole, it behoves the dignity of the Sublime Porte to take the measures necessary for these ancient monuments to survive and be preserved in their present state, in order to give pleasure to the said Sovereign.

Hence you will take care, in accordance with your characteristic wisdom, to order all relevant addressees to spare and preserve the relevant antiquities and monuments so that no-one at all can have any complaints.

It is for that purpose that this note is sent to You. — 22 August 1821. — '

3. Sir William Gell's Sardonic Comment

'The newspapers, not long ago, stated that the British ambassador at the Porte had procured an injunction to the Pasha of the Morea, commanding him to spare the temples of Athens, which, taking into consideration the means of the parties, would be like sending a mission to the Emperor of China, to beg him to abstain from the sack of Persepolis, Athens not belonging to that pashalic, and he having no means of getting there.'³

Gell's sneer was out of place. As the document itself shows, the vizierial letter was addressed, among others, to the Pasha (in the French version 'gouverneur-général') of the Morea, who was in command of the Ottoman army charged with putting down the revolt in southern Greece.

4. Confirmation from Ottoman Archives

Thanks to the researches of H. Şükrü Ilicak, we now have a record from the Ottoman archives that the firman that Strangford had asked for was actually delivered and acted upon, with the Governor of the Morea reporting to the Ottoman Government in Constantinople on 17 November 1821 that his forces had recovered possession of Athens without causing any harm to the antiquities.⁴

5. Rev. Robert Walsh's Account, 1836

The only other reference to a firman of 1821 that I have found is in a printed book of 1836, written by an attaché to the Embassy. It is now validated as a genuine, although incomplete, account. Walsh evidently knew nothing of the correspondence about the firman in 1826 discussed in Appendix D.

'With respect to the remaining monuments of art in the city, it was generally supposed their doom was fixed, and that none of them would

3 Gell, William, Sir, *Narrative of a Journey In the Morea* (London, 1823), 165. I have not found the newspaper reference, but given the date of Gell's book, it must refer to the firman of 1821.

4 Noted by Ilicak, H. Şükrü, 'Revolutionary Athens through Ottoman Eyes (1821–1828): New Evidence from the Ottoman State archives.' Page 2, Forthcoming at time of writing, copy kindly provided by the author, quoting a letter from the Governor of the Morea to the Sublime Porte, 17 November 1821. Ottoman State archives, BOA, and imperial decrees, HAT, 855/38228 –C.

escape the convulsion. Within the walls of the Parthenon the Turks had erected a mosque, and within the Temple of Theseus the Greeks a Christian church, in the precincts of which some travellers had been buried, particularly Mr. Tweddell, who died at Athens. There was every reason to apprehend that the violence and bigotry of the contending parties directed against the places of worship of their opponents would infallibly cause the destruction of the edifices in which they were respectively situated; but this was not the case. Lord Strangford, whose judgment and feeling in every thing that relates to the fine arts are well known, exerted his influence at the Porte on this critical occasion, and procured a firman, directed to the Turkish commanders, that they should permit no violence to be offered to these temples, but carefully preserve them from injury. It is to the credit of the Turks that they have strictly complied with these orders, and to the Greeks that they have followed their example: these venerable remains have been preserved, though the combatants have had alternate possession of them; and it is not too much to say, that as the arts have been indebted to one of our Ambassadors at Constantinople for the preservation of part of them at home [Lord Elgin], so they have to another for what remains of them abroad. The Turks did indeed enter the Greek church, but they only opened the graves of the buried travellers, particularly that of Tweddell, in search of some treasure, of which they had heard a rumour, and supposed it was buried there; but they left the rest of the church and temple untouched. The only ancient edifice, I believe, which sustained any injury, was the Lantern of Demosthenes [*Monument of Lysicrates*]. The Catholic chapel, built against it, took fire in the conflagration, and part of the external sculpture of this beautiful little edifice was destroyed.⁵

5 Walsh, Rev. R., *A Residence in Constantinople during a period including the commencement, progress, and termination of the Greek and Turkish revolutions* (London, 1838), i, 144.