

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 C

The Intercepted Letters of the Ottoman Military Commander ('Seraskier') Reşid Mehmed Pasha, Often Known as Kiutahi or Reschid

The status of some of the intercepted letters is uncertain. It is possible that the combatants may have deliberately allowed correspondence to be intercepted as a means of misleading their enemies, or that the translated versions passed by the Greeks to the European powers were mistranslated or altered.¹ But there is every reason to accept that the following are genuine even if edited.

1. Letter Sent to Stratford Canning, Unsigned but Almost Certainly Obtained from a Member of the Provisional Greek Government²

Translation from the French

'I hasten to send you the extract of a message from the Seraskier to the Porte, which has just been intercepted; it is dated the 7th of this [lunar] Month.

'The conquest of the citadel of Athens becomes something that is all the more important and at the same time the more difficult, because it is regarded by the Greeks as their only base in mainland Greece, and

1 An example in 'Bulletin from Athens', dated 25 July 1823, no author given, but probably Gropius. Kew FO 78/116, 71.

2 Kew FO 78/145, 50.

because given the veneration that it inspires in all the unbelievers in Europe, on account of its celebrated name and of the antiquities that it contains, it has become the centre to which they think they must direct their assistance, themselves coming to fight with their Greek co-religionists and offering their impure blood as a sacrifice to the vile and mute idols that they value and worship in their deplorable ignorance. Thirty ships of Hydra surround the vicinity of Attica, and threaten raids on one place or another.

I have arranged things so that while I surround the Place very closely I have forces advantageously situated to move on threatened areas, and I hope to thwart the criminal schemes of the Giaours, but I cannot conceal the fact that all my time and all my means are taken up here and that I cannot undertake anything against any other place whatever. I therefore think it absolutely necessary that another capable and brave Vizier (and I venture to suggest as such Omer Pasha of Negropont) should be exclusively and solely responsible for the siege of this place: then, freer in my operations, I could go to the Isthmus and act against the Morea.'

The Seraskier here advises, through unnecessary and over-detailed repetitions, the necessity of the immediate accomplishment of this proposal, which he sees unachievable at a later time. If the seasoned troops of Rumelia [Area north of the Gulf of Corinth], which are still kept in the Peloponnese by dissensions and civil conflicts, finally leave the Isthmus, and hinder the communications of the besieging Army. He also notes that the conquest of the Peloponnese would become easy if Rumelia were entirely subjugated, and its belligerent inhabitants exterminated or dispersed. Returning then to the matter of the siege of the Citadel of Athens, he adds 'that the transportation of food becomes very difficult, because of the great distance of Larissa, whence he brings it, so that he can barely get food for five days at a time, that he had managed to get five or six destroyed mills repaired, but through their means he can get only half the necessary flour. That the Porte must at once send him large quantities of food and flour, since wheat is becoming useless. That he has managed to seize most of the strongholds in the town and that he has come so close to the citadel that Cannon are now useless and that he needs to use mines; but that the miners sent to him from Constantinople know nothing of their trade, and that he has had to write to Scodra to get good miners that he expects in 18 days, and that

he will then dig very deeply so as to go from one side to the other, and in a single stroke topple the whole Mountain with the citadel. (French: et qu'il a été obligé d'écrire à Scodra pour faire venir de bons mineurs qu'il attend en 18 jours, et qu'alors il fera creuser très profondément, de manière à passer d'outre en outre, et renverser d'un coup toute la Montagne avec la citadelle.)

This is where the report of the Turkish Generalissimo ends. I have tried to render faithfully the parts that seemed to me the most interesting because they can give a correct idea of the opinions and military talents of the writer. I say nothing of his exaggerations, of the thirty ships of Hydra, for example, and of the raids that threaten all the region of Attica.

Favier was preparing to go to the Piraeus and to try to seize that position, which is occupied by a few hundred enemies.'

*What appear to be other intercepted letters or heavily edited versions of the same intercepted correspondence were printed in two of the early histories of the Greek Revolution written by Philhellenes. They show wide differences from the version transcribed above and less significant differences from each other. Whether Thomas Gordon handled the actual documents is not recorded, but with his knowledge of both the Greek and the Turkish languages, he would have been well placed to understand them.*³

2. Samuel Howe's Version, Printed in 1828⁴

'The Citadel of Athens, as is known to you, was built of old on a high and inaccessible rock; not to be injured by a mine nor accessible to an assault ... It is most important because it is very old, and from it went out of yore many famous philosophers; it has works of art very old, which make the learned men of Europe wonder; and for this reason all the Europeans and the other nations of unbelievers regard the citadel

3 Gordon 'spoke both Greek and Turkish with ease, and could carry on a correspondence in the Turkish language.' Finlay, *History*, vi, 412.

4 Transcribed from Howe, Samuel, *An Historical Sketch of the Greek Revolution* (New York 1828), 343, note; quoted also by Allinson, Francis Greenleaf, and Allinson, Anne C.E., *Greek Lands and Letters* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1910), 75, although without citing any authority. A modern edition, *Samuel G. Howe, An Historical Sketch of the Greek Revolution*, by George Georgiades Arnakis, published by the Center for Neo-Hellenic Studies (Austin, TX: 1966), covers only the first four books until 1824 before being discontinued.

as their own house, and because they regard it as a place of pilgrimage and worship, all the Europeans and all the nations of unbelievers called Christians, labour to prevent its being taken from these apostate dogs. But we hope to beat them with the assistance of divine Providence, and the wonder-working prayers of our king, the Ruler of the surface of the world, &c &c.'

3. Thomas Gordon's Version, First Printed in 1832⁵

'Extracts from the correspondence of Reschid Pasha, intercepted by the Greeks in September 1826.

No. I.—Letter to the Grand Vizier.

The citadel of Athens (as is well known to your Excellency) was built in old times upon a high and steep rock, which defies equally mines and assaults; it is distant six hours journey from the borders of the Morea, and is near to the islands. As the said castle is so ancient, and contains many monuments, and many philosophers have gone forth from thence, it fills with admiration the learned men among the Franks; and all the nations of Infidels, called Nazarenes, venerate it as a holy place, and look upon it as their own property. Wherefore they have conspired, promising to assist each other, and to exert themselves to the uttermost, that it may never pass out of the hands of the unbelievers. Hitherto they are divided into two parties, here and on the confines, and fifty Hydriote vessels are for ever encircling the coast, [*in a footnote here Gordon noted 'A monstrous exaggeration! Kutali had seen only two Psarrian brigs, and a schooner'*] (twenty or thirty together,) with a design, as it seems, of doing some injury to the property of our tributary subjects, who have submitted to us. We are guarding the plain towards the sea, and your servant hath forgotten sleep, giving himself up entirely to the care of watching the apostate rebels. If the Greek infidels unite, and march against us, we trust in God to be able to confound their execrable devices, through the protection of Divine Providence, and the wonder-working prayers of our Emperor, who inherits the glory of the earth.

5 Gordon, Thomas, *History of the Greek Revolution* (Edinburgh and London, 1832), ii, 353.

In our present circumstances, it is very necessary that one bold and skilful Vizier should be destined solely to the siege of Athens, and that to him the whole direction of it should be committed; because if even for a single day, the presence of such a Vizier were wanting, the state of the country round us would be turned upside down, and since your servant is burdened with many cares, it is proper that Omer Pasha of Negropont be immediately appointed to that charge. I swear to you by my faith, as a true slave of his Highness, that although from the hour I came before Athens, I have laboured with my whole soul, by day and by night, in wresting the houses and convents out of the power of the infidels, yet, after a thousand difficulties, I have only cleansed half the city from the evil odour of their domination. The miners sent me from Constantinople are worthless, and therefore, by the advice of intelligent persons, I have written to Scopia [*sic*] for ten diggers of saltpetre, who promise to come here in eighteen days; if they keep their word, and are really capable, the business may be brought to a conclusion. It is incredible what trouble we have had in procuring provisions, but as yet we have succeeded, by buying from the soldiers at any price the booty they on several occasions took from the unbelievers. I have set the mills at work round Athens, which grind daily 5000 okes of corn: this does not suffice, but what can we do? the camp is pinched with hunger, and our only hope rests on the supplies expected from Larissa.'

The fact that Gordon's version prints 'Scopia' whereas the intercepted letter sent to Canning mentions 'Scodra' is likely to have been a misreading by the printer.⁶ However, Scopia, modern Skopje, was also among the many sources of saltpetre, and therefore of miners, available to the Ottoman Empire at this time.

6 For an example of 'Scodra' used to mean the Pasha of Scodra, Finlay, *Journals and Letters*, i, 34.

4. Thomas Gordon on the ‘trumpery’ Firman⁷

‘As the fruit of his negotiation during the year 1826 Mr Stratford Canning obtained a trumpery firman, forbidding Kutahi [Reschid] to injure the monuments of Athens; an injunction the Pasha could not obey unless he had silenced his artillery; it was granted, however, with that sort of animus, which sometimes prompts a nurse to soothe with cakes children who are crying for the moon.’

7 Gordon, *History*, ii, 367. The remark by Jurien de La Gravière, le vice-amiral, *La station du Levant* (Paris: Plon, 1876), ii, 93, written much later, that appears to be mainly derived from Gordon’s *History* is noted here for completeness. ‘En apprenant qu’Athènes allait être assiégée, l’ambassadeur d’Angleterre s’était empressé d’intervenir en faveur des monuments dépouillés jadis par lord Elgin. Un firman du Grand Seigneur fut accordé à ses instances. Le lendemain du jour où ce firman lui avait été remis par le consul d’Autriche, M. Gropius, le séraskier lançait ses premières bombes et tirait ses premières salves sur la citadelle. De la colline du Musée, les projectiles atteignaient sans peine le Parthénon. Impuissants à déplacer les solides assises de marbre, ils en faisaient jaillir à chaque coup quelque éclat. Inutile sacrilège!’