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Abidin Pasha in Ottoman Rhodes (1894-1906)

Introduction

During the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876-1909), Ottoman Rhodes was widely regarded as an undesirable post for bureaucrats; a place of exile, where officials who had fallen out of favour in Istanbul were sent. The bureaucratic environment on the island was rife with distrust, as officials sought transfers and often reported on one another to curry favour with the Yıldız Palace in Istanbul. Additionally, governing Rhodes posed significant challenges due to its complex international and local dynamics, particularly Greece’s interest in the island with its Orthodox Christian majority. This article explores these themes through the career of Abidin Pasha (1839-1906), who served as governor in Rhodes for over twelve years at the turn of the century.

Rhodes became an administrative centre in 1849 when it was designated the capital of the newly established *Cezayir-i Bahr-i Sefid Eyaleti*, a province uniting the Ottoman Mediterranean islands, the Aegean Archipelago. However, this administrative structure underwent frequent changes. In 1862, the province was reorganized into a subprovince (*mutasarrıflık*) under Mytilene. Five years later, the islands were incorporated into a *vilayet* governed from Kala-i Sultaniye (modern-day Çanakkale). In 1877, the capital moved to Rhodes, only to shift again to Chios in 1880. Finally, in 1887, Rhodes regained its status as the provincial capital, a designation it retained until 1912.¹ Abidin Pasha, a Muslim Albanian and a distinguished Ottoman statesman, played a defining role in this last phase, serving as the longest-tenured governor-general (*vali*) of the province from January 1894 to April 1906. More than a loyal servant of Abdülhamid II, Abidin Pasha was also a Sufi, a scholar (*âlim*), and an intellectual who authored numerous works during his time on the island.

The late Ottoman Empire experienced significant administrative transformations under Abdülhamid II, characterized by increasing centralization, heightened surveillance, and prolonged gubernatorial appointments. The 1890s marked an era of exceptionally long tenures for provincial governors, and Abidin Pasha exemplified this trend. He belonged to the generation of Hamidian bureaucrats whose careers were shaped by the educational and bureaucratic structures of the period. By the late nineteenth century, the older cadre of officials who had risen during the Tanzimat era—a time of extensive state reorganization and the rise of the bureaucratic elite—had largely retired or passed away.² Consequently, officials like Abidin Pasha, whose influential appointments were granted under Abdülhamid II, formed the core of the empire’s provincial administration.

Abidin ascended rapidly through the Ottoman bureaucracy, embodying the increasing professionalisation of the state’s modernising apparatus. According to his personnel register, Zeynelabidin, as his full name was, was born on the 11th of April 1843 in Preveza (in modern-day

1 For more on the provincial organization of Rhodes, see Ali Fuat Öreñç, *Yakın Dönem Tarihimizde Rodos ve Oniki Ada*, Istanbul, 2006; Neval Konuk, “Tanzimat Sonrası Şekillenen Cezâir-i Bahr-ı Sefid Vilâyet Merkezi Rodos Hükümet Konağı,” *Art-Sanat Dergisi* 9 (2018): 193-213.

2 Abdulhamit Kırmızı, *Abdülhamid’in Valileri: Osmanlı Vilayet İdaresi 1895-1908* (Klasik, 2007).

9-13.

Greece). A polyglot fluent in Turkish, Greek, French, Arabic, Persian, Italian, and Albanian,³ he epitomised the cosmopolitan nature of the empire’s ruling elite. His career began in February 1864 with a three-year tenure among the imperial riflemen at the Sultan’s palace. He then transitioned to provincial administration, serving as district governor (*kaymakam*) in Preveza and Narta, followed by postings as governor (*mutasarrıf*) in Erbaa, Tekfurdağı, and Varna. In early 1874, he was appointed as the first Commissioner of the Stock Exchange in Istanbul, with brief additional assignments before his first major provincial appointment in 1879. He served as an Imperial Reform Commissioner in Diyarbakir, Mamuretülaziz, and later Sivas, where he was appointed as governor-general (*vali*). His governorship in Sivas lasted only five months before he was transferred to Salonica in February 1880. His administrative career was briefly interrupted by a short tenure as Foreign Minister (June-September 1880) before he resumed provincial governorships in Adana, Sivas (for a second term), Ankara, and finally, the Mediterranean Islands. He died on the 19th of April 1906, shortly after arriving in Istanbul from Rhodes to attend a meeting of the Imperial Reform Commission on Yemen at the Yıldız Palace.

Abidin Pasha’s tenure as governor of the Mediterranean Islands, with Rhodes as its centre, coincided with the peak of Abdülhamid II’s centralization efforts. Despite the relative insignificance of the islands in the broader Ottoman administrative structure, Rhodes played a crucial role in the empire’s surveillance network. Several challenges marked his governorship. First, he deeply resented his assignment to Rhodes, which kept him far from his family members, social circles, and central politics in Istanbul. Second, he faced relentless scrutiny, as his subordinates frequently reported on him to the palace in the hopes of securing better positions. Lastly, he had to navigate the island’s intricate ethno-religious landscape, managing tensions among its diverse population. While doing his job, he used his intellectual depth and expanded it in the cosmopolitan world of the island. Abidin Pasha is also known for his scholarly works reflecting his academic breadth. Remarkable is his translation of and commentary on Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi’s world-renowned *Masnawi* from Persian, and the *Qasida al-Burda*, a famous ode in praise of the Prophet Muhammad, from Arabic.⁴

I will examine Abidin Pasha’s governance of Rhodes in the context of Ottoman provincial administration under Abdülhamid II, highlighting the complexities of his tenure, the bureaucratic rivalries he endured, and his role in the broader structure of Hamidian rule.

1. Rhodes as Exile

The British Consul in Ankara, Cumberbatch, reported to Sir Nicholson, the British Ambassador in Istanbul, on the 16th of December 1893, that the dismissal of Ankara Governor Abidin Pasha, although he had been appointed as the Governor of the Archipelago, with its centre in Rhodes, is nevertheless an event confirming that the Sultan is not pleased with him. The Armenian uprising in Yozgat has aroused considerable suspicion, as the matter is not merely the dismissal of him but also

3 “Türkçe ve Yunanca ve Fransızca ve Arabî ve Farisî ve İtalyan lisanlarında derece derece tekellüm ve ekserinde kitabet edebiliyor ve Arnavudca dahi söyler,” BOA, DH.SAİDd. 1/252. The personnel file, which leans on a questionnaire filled by himself, explicitly uses “Yunanca” instead of “Rumca” for his Greek language. Moreover, it mentions he wrote poems in this language: “Yunanca bazı eş’arı vardır.”

4 His other works will be mentioned later on. On his portrait as a Muslim scholar, see Bursalı Mehmed Tahir, *Osmanlı Müellifleri* 1299-1915, eds. A. Fikri Yavuz and İsmail Özen, Istanbul 1972, Vol. 2, 47; Abidin Paşa, “*Şarih ve Mütercim-i Kitab Abidin Paşa’nın Muhtasar Tercüme-i Hali*”, *Tercüme ve Şerh-i Mesnevi-i Şerif* (İstanbul: 1324), Vol.I, 4-6; Abdülkadir Gölpınarlı, *Mevlana’dan Sonra Mevlevilik* (İstanbul: İnkılap ve Aka, 1983), 143-145; Kemal Yavuz, “Mesnevi-i Şerif ile Alakalı Olarak Cevdet Paşa’nın Abidin Paşa’ya Yazdığı Mektup”, *TDED*, XXIV-XXV, 441-454.

the immediate dispatch of an investigative commission to the region.⁵ The decision to send Abidin Pasha from Ankara to the governorship of the Mediterranean Islands was put quite differently in the official narrative, which hid the royal scorn. Accordingly, his transfer was a routine administrative change, with his predecessor Akif Pasha retiring due to old age.⁶ This dual narrative reflects a key pattern in late Ottoman bureaucratic politics: outwardly, provincial appointments were framed as orderly and strategic, but in reality, they were often punitive measures cloaked in bureaucratic language.

Akif Pasha died quite soon in the last days of 1893 in Istanbul shortly after leaving the island and was buried in the cemetery of the Fatih Mosque; a fate that will be shared by his successor Abidin. The governor-general of Sivas, Memduh Bey (later Pasha, Minister of the Interior, 1895-1908), replaced him in Ankara.⁷

Abidin Pasha tried hard to prevent his removal by sending a detailed report not only to show his endeavours during the Yozgat events but also his general achievements in the Ankara province he served for almost nine years.⁸ His reluctance to move to Rhodes was obvious from the beginning. His appointment happened on the 13th of December 1893. In a telegram he sent on the evening of the 16th, he confirmed his departure from Ankara (*şimdi hareket eden trenle azîmet eyledim*).⁹ On Tuesday the 19th, he went to the Sultan’s Chamber to ask to be allowed to leave for his place of duty next Thursday - and a raise in payment for him and his son,¹⁰ trying to turn his reluctance to move to Rhodes into an opportunity. However, he was still in Istanbul on the last day of the year. On the 31st of December, the Sultan’s Chamber had requested to promptly proceed to his place of duty, “as it is not appropriate for the province to remain without a governor for an extended period, and it was even reported that foreign navies were on the move there.” He was also asked to see the Sultan before leaving Istanbul.¹¹ So, he arrived in Rhodes the new year, early in 1894.

At his audience, he must have politely made his reluctance felt by the Sultan, as a royal decree was issued on the 8th of March 1894, the first day of the holy Ramadan, ordering that the sum of 5.000 Piastres, which had been allocated in addition to his principal salary of 17.000 Piastres while serving as governor-general of Ankara province, be paid as before.¹² This favour silenced him for a while regarding demands for a salary increase. However, he will break his silence on that theme at the turn of the century. In a letter he wrote from Rhodes on the 4th of January 1900, he listed the services rendered by his ancestors and himself to the Ottoman State and added that,

5 *Osmanlı Belgelerinde Ermeniler Cilt 16 (25 Ekim 1893-19 Aralık 1893)*, Başbakanlık Arşiv Araştırma Kurulu Seri I-No.16, Istanbul 1989, p. XVIII. For a thick archival file on the process leading to Abidin Pasha’s dismissal, see Y.PRK.BŞK 34/70, 28 C 1311.

6 “Cezâir-i Bahr-i Sefid Valisi Akif Paşa hazretleri zaten şeyhûhatından bahisle Dersaâdet’e celbi hakkında isti’tâfta bulunmakta olduğundan müşârün-ileyhin ileride tekâüd maaşı dahi tahsisıyla sâye- i merâhim-vâye-i hazret-i padişahîde istirahat etmek üzere Dersaâdet’e celbiyle Ankara Valisi devletlü Âbidin Paşa hazretlerinin dahi Cezâir-i Bahr-i Sefid vilayeti valiliklerine icrâ-yı memuriyetleri,” BOA, İ. DH. 1310/10, 1311 C 4.

7 İbid, and BOA, İ.HUS 19/17, 1311 C 6.

8 BOA, Y.MTV 88/20, 1311 C 3.

9 BOA, Y.MTV 88/63, 1311 C 7.

10 BOA, Y.PRK.BŞK 34/41, 1311 C 10.

11 BOA, İ.HUS 19/61, 1311 C 22.

12 His total salary of 22.000 Piastres (*Kuruş*) was reduced to 19.800 Piastres in March 1897, but increased end of 1900 to 30.000 Piastres, and in October 1903 to 40.000 Piastres. BOA, DH.SAİDd. 1/252.

In the most important offices where I have continuously served for thirty-eight years, my humble actions in matters of public works, education, and other affairs are substantiated by my deeds and official documents. During the last Greco-Ottoman War, when we were unable to find imperial ships in the Aegean islands, the measures I took and my personal journey to the most perilous locations at the time ensured the security of this province under the auspices of His Majesty the Sultan. This requires no further explanation. As for my intellectual contributions, my numerous published works suffice as evidence of my service. Despite enduring various hardships for many years due to the intrigues of my enemies, not a single word contrary to loyalty and devotion has ever been uttered by my humble pen or tongue, which possess proficiency in several languages. After the warming up introduction counting his services, he comes to the main point, his demands of decorations and salary increase:

Many individuals who once served under my command now adorn their chests with decorated Orders of *Murassa Osmânî*, other decorations, and gold medals, while I have been left with only a Silver Medal. When I was Minister of Foreign Affairs, individuals were holding the position of *mutasarrıf* who earned a salary of six thousand piastres; now, they have been appointed as *vâlis* and receive more than thirty thousand piastres. Yet, despite having a large family, I, in my humble state, receive only eighteen thousand piastres as salary.¹³

The last number was impossible, but it seems that he did not hesitate to play with the numbers, as it is known from his personnel register that his monthly salary was already 30.000 Piastres for a year. However, his insisted efforts in the next two years will work out as his salary increased to 40.000 in October 1903. But in the short term, he used many tactics to persuade the Sultan, in vain. A week after the complaint above, on the 13th of January 1900, he expressed his desire to return to Istanbul or its vicinity. He wanted either to be transferred to Bursa, or the Imperial State Council, or to retire and live with his family in İstanbul.¹⁴

Throughout his tenure, Abidin Pasha sought transfer to more prestigious posts or retirement, citing insufficient salary and challenging living conditions. He continuously complained about inflation in prices, which made it hard for him to live with the same salary. For example, in a letter written from Rhodes in October 1901, he lamented once again that his salary had not kept pace with inflation. This time he added the problem of delays in salary payment:

Under the auspices of His Majesty the Sultan, those who served as *mutasarrıfs* with a salary of five to six thousand piastres while I was Minister of Foreign Affairs, now receive more than twenty-five to thirty thousand piastres. In contrast, after the deferral [of payments of salary portions], I have remained with a salary of only eighteen thousand piastres. Everything is expensive in the Archipelago, and since my family is large, my salary is insufficient to cover my

humble expenses. If I were in the imperial capital and solely engaged in my own affairs, there is no doubt that I could earn enough money each month to sustain myself. Therefore, in light of my previous petitions, I humbly request either my appointment as a member of the Council of State or my retirement. If neither of these options is granted, then, out of necessity, I respectfully plead for an increase in my salary so that I may properly manage my affairs.¹⁵

All officials faced financial difficulties. Their salaries went unpaid for months. Abidin Pasha, observing that the officials had not received their salaries for months, inquired about the possibility of a payment in honour of the imperial enthronement celebration.¹⁶ Requests for funds can be viewed as an ironic element of the enthronement celebrations.

Another trump that Abidin Pasha used was his age and health conditions. In a telegram to the Sultan’s office in February 1899, he complains about his health, and asked to live his remaining years with his family in Istanbul. When not answered, a couple of days later, he sends another telegram. This time he spoke of his fatigue and rheumatic pains resulting from 38 years of state service. He complained about the humidity in Rhodes and that it is exacerbating his suffering from discomfort, with swollen feet for several months, and experiencing aches and pains throughout various parts of his body. He expressed that he could not perform even the simplest duties, let alone governorship, and that since he was unable to work, both the state suffered losses, leaving him feeling guilty about his inability to fulfil his obligations. He stated that if he returned to Istanbul, he would not meet with anyone, local or foreign, and would devote himself solely to worship. In a telegram sent ten days later, he mentioned that a medical report had determined a four-centimetre swelling in his right foot. The doctors advised Abidin Pasha to visit a hot spring. For this reason, he requested a meeting with Halil Bey, the governor of Bursa, who was ‘famous for its hot springs.” He stated that if his request were granted, he would go directly to Bursa via Ayvalık without delay.¹⁷ On another occasion, he pleaded for a pension due to the illness of his eyes.¹⁸

“Due to having served for thirty-eight uninterrupted years under the auspicious shadow of His Majesty the Sultan in numerous arduous and demanding official positions, both my mind and body have naturally become weary (akıl ve beden yoruldu),”

he uttered in a telegram he wrote in November,

13 BOA, Y.PRK.UM. 49/45, 1317 N 3.

14 “Ya Hüdavendigar valiliğine ya Şura-yı Devlet azalığına tayin-i acizanemin veya evlad u ahfadımla beraber Deraliyye’de bulunub deavat-ı hayriyyet-ayat-ı hazret-i padişahî ile meşgul olmak üzere tekaüdlüğümün icrası zımnında, bugün Mâbeyn-i Hümayun Başkitabet-i celilesiyle Bâbıâlî’ye takdim eylediğim telgrafname-i acizanemin is’afını merhamet-i bî-nihayet-i hilafetpenâhîden hassaten tazarru eylerim”, BOA, Y.PRK.UM 49/50, 1317 N 13.

15 “Rodos’tan Şifre: Sâye-i hazret-i padişahîde çâkerleri Hariciye Nazırı iken beş altı bin kuruş maaş ile mutasarrıflıkda bulunmuş olanlar şimdi yirmi beş otuz bin kuruşdan ziyade maaş alub çâkerleri tecilatdan sonra on sekiz bin kuruş maaşla kaldım. Cezayirde [Adalarda] her şey bahalı, ailem kesir olduğundan, maaşım masârif-i acizaneme kifayet etmiyor. Deraliyye’de bulunub kendi işlerimle münhasıran meşgul olacak olsam ayda idareme kafi akça kazanacağım çâkerlerince şühhesizdir. Binaenaleyh bâ-maruzat-ı sâbika-i acizanem vechile, Şura-yı Devlet Azalığı’na tayinimin veya tekaüdlüğümün icrası ve bu iki surete müsaade buyurulmadığı takdirde idare edecek yolda maaşımın tezyîdi hasbezzarure müsterhamdır”, BOA, Y.PRK.UM 57/48, 1319 C 25.

16 BOA, Y.PRK.UM 55/78, 1319 CA 23.

17 BOA, Y.PRK.UM 45/8 BAK, 16 L 1316

18 BOA, Y.PRK.UM. 59/64, 1320 CA 9.

“Therefore, I humbly request, like my peers, to be appointed to a suitable position with an appropriate salary as a member of the Council of State.¹⁹

Abidin Pasha did not give up for years. He requested at different times to be taken from the islands with different excuses. He asked to be appointed to Salonica.²⁰ He repeated his demand for retirement in a kindly manner, years after, in October 1904.²¹

When after all these fluttering he did not get even permission to visit Istanbul, he asked for his son to come to the islands. Such wishes seem to be mostly rejected. In his first months in Rhodes, he asked for permission for his son, Rasih Bey, then a member of the Imperial Customs Council, to come to the island for three months to see his unwell mother, which got no allowance.²² But a dozen years later, Rasih got the allowance because mother’s illness got serious. This is known from a communication dated the 27th of March 1904:

As my wife, whose illness is well known, has become bedridden and, according to the doctors here, is not expected to live more than forty days, and as her severe suffering deeply distresses us all, we are plunged into a state of helpless sorrow. Moreover, my son, Rasih Bey, is also in poor health. Despite his own condition, he has not left his ailing mother’s bedside for a single moment. However, as we all consider it the greatest honor to sacrifice ourselves for the execution of the imperial decree and to demonstrate our loyalty and service, he will set out for the Imperial Capital in four days by boarding the postal steamer that will stop at Rhodes, in full compliance with the sovereign will, despite both his mother’s critical condition and his own frail health.²³

Writing from Mytilene on the 9th of September 1904, Abidin Pasha wishes Rasih back in the islands, probably after the death of his wife:

“Since I am staying in the countryside (taşra), leaving my children and grandchildren behind, I beg you to please allow my son Rasih Bey, who is my regular guest (ber-mu’tad), to come here with permission, to be with me for at least a while. I beg you to please ease the pain of my humble heart.”²⁴

When Galib Pasha, the governor (*mutasarrıf*) of Mytilene, was afflicted with cancer and departed for Istanbul for treatment, it became clear, given his health condition, that he had no intention of

returning. Abidin sought to take advantage of this situation and proposed his son for the position on the 23rd of April 1905:

My devoted son, Rasih Bey, with his exceptional intelligence, competence, and extraordinary ability, as well as his meritorious service of fifteen years as a member of the Board of Revenues, his status among the high-ranking officials, and above all, his unwavering loyalty to His Imperial Majesty, has earned the right, like his peers, to be appointed as a governor under the auspicious patronage of the Sultan. However, as he wishes to remain close to me and to be honored with the opportunity to serve His Majesty on a broader scale, he has agreed to accept the position of Mutasarrıf of Mytilene. Therefore, if Rasih Bey were to be appointed in place of Galib Pasha to the governorship of Mytilene, this would not only restore order in the region but also ensure that Rasih Bey, being well-versed in Turkish, Greek, and French, would render exceptional services in such an important location as Mytilene. I personally vouch, beyond my position, for his ability to fulfil this responsibility with great distinction.²⁵

However, his move did not echo in Istanbul.

His correspondence with Istanbul was always aimed at winning the Sultan’s favour so that he could return to the main stage of politics in Istanbul. This is why he wrote about general political or international issues not specifically related to his province. At the end of 1903, he submitted urgently requested reports, pages long, on the Balkan Question and the politics of the Great Powers in Ottoman Europe.

Since he was unable to secure a transfer elsewhere, his last resort was to try to make Chios or Lesbos the provincial capital instead of Rhodes. Abidin Pasha constantly sought opportunities to leave Rhodes and found various reasons to justify his departures. Two months after he arrived in Rhodes, Abidin uttered about security issues in the province, assuring on the one hand the Sultan that he works “day and night to make sure nothing bad happens.” However, he needs to going round and inspect the islands for which he needs at least two fast steamers. One, named Hanya, he provided from the Navy, and asks for an additional one.²⁶ From the times and places of his reports, one can say that Abidin was often away, in Chios or Mytilene, mostly from early April to mid-September.²⁷ But he seems not using the mentioned steamer(s) for longer stays, at least not on his way back to Rhodes. From his report on the 22nd of August 1895, we learn that he was in Mytilene and that “a postal steamer stops at Rhodes from Mytilene every 15 days. But after this season, due to adverse weather conditions, weeks may pass without a steamer arriving. Therefore, I will return to the provincial capital tomorrow with the postal steamer that will stop here.”²⁸ In the same report, he states that British Navy Vice Admiral Vanvil [Walwyn] visited the government office and visited him. A while later, he and the district governor of Mytilene went to the admiral’s ship to return the visit.

In his last years, he exaggerated his stays in Mytilene. He seems not to bother himself anymore

19 “[A]kranım misillü münasip maaşla Şûrâ-yı Devlet azalığına tayin-i âcizânem,” BOA, YA.HUS, 401/39, 14 B 1317

20 BOA, Y.PRK.UM 62/2, 1320 ZA 20.

21 “Tekaüdlüğüm icra buyrulduğu halde, mütebaki ömrümü müftehıran de’avât-ı hayriyet-ayât-ı cenab-ı hilafetpenâhî ile ikmal etmiş olurum”, BOA, Y.PRK.UM 71/97, 1322 Ş 8.

22 “Keyifsiz bulunan validesini görmek üzere...”, YA.HUS 293/21, 6.10.1311.

23 “Harem-i çâkeranemin malum olan illetinden esir-i firaş olması ve kırk günden ziyade yaşaması ğayr-i mümkün bulunduğu burada bulunan etibba tarafından tahmin edilmesi,” BOA, Y.PRK.UM 69/52, 1322 M 21.

24 “Çâkerleri evlad u ahfadımdan dur olarak taşrada kaldığımdan, hiç olmazsa mahdum-ı acizanem Rasih Bey kulları bir müddet nezd-i çâgerânemde bulunmak için, ber-mu’tad müşarünileyh Rasih Bey’in mezunen buraya gelmesine müsaade ile kalb-i mahzun-ı acizanemin bu suretle tesirini istirham eylerim”, BOA, Y.PRK.UM. 70/117, 1322 C 28.

25 BOA, Y.PRK. UM 75/26, 1323 S 17.

26 “[H]iç bir fenalık çıkmamak için çâkerleri leyl ü nehâr çalışmakdayım. Bu vilayetde ara sıra adaları geşt ü güzâr için ekalli iki seri’ vapurun vücudu muktezi olub,” BOA, Y. MTV 92/11, 1311 N 3.

27 BOA, Y.PRK.UM 69/52, No. 2 and 3, 1322 M 21.

28 BOA, Y.PRK.UM 32/91, 1313 RA 1.

with directions from Istanbul. On the 17th of September 1904, the Ministry of the Interior asked him to return to Rhodes after a long stay in Mytilene: “Since Your Excellency has been residing in Mytilene for the past five or six months, and as it is not appropriate for the provincial centre to remain vacant for such an extended period if there is no reason necessitating your continued stay there, it is required that you indicate when you intend to return to the centre.”²⁹ At first he answered the next day, a Sunday, that “if the Austrian Postal Steamer operating to Rhodes stops by Mytilene next Tuesday, I will return to the provincial centre.” But then on Monday, he decided not to:

There is intelligence that some Greek agitators will enter Mytilene illegally. Given the significance of this intelligence and the fact that, as confirmed by the shipping agencies yesterday, there will be no steamer to Rhodes for another ten days, and since there are currently no urgent matters at the provincial center, it has been deemed necessary, as a matter of expediency, that I extend my stay in Mytilene a little longer, as I hereby report.³⁰

Only one month later, on Tuesday, the 18th of October 1904, he left for Rhodes. His message to the palace brought up old themes like mentioning enemy intrigues (what makes him look more paranoid), his years of service (forty-two by now) and asking for retirement:

I have now boarded the steamer and set out towards the provincial center. Although, in proportion to my great loyalty and devotion to our most exalted and sacred benefactor, I become the target of the pursuits and intrigues of enemies and malicious individuals, I entrust my thoughts to the Almighty God and the justice of my most exalted benefactor. Moreover, due to my service of forty-two years to the Eternal and Everlasting Ottoman State, and the distinguished favors I have previously received from His Highness, the Shadow of the Caliphate, I find solace and peace of mind.

Nevertheless, if the statements, exaggerations, and insinuations of my enemies become so excessive as to disturb His Sacred Highness, then rather than allowing my most exalted benefactor to be troubled on my account, I would prefer that my retirement be enacted. In that case, I would complete the remainder of my life with pride, offering prayers and blessings for the well-being of His Highness, the Shadow of the Caliphate.

However, my enemies have not been satisfied with the intrigues they orchestrated in Istanbul. According to the reliable information I have now received, they have sought, through deceitful and scheming individuals aligned with their temperament in Rhodes, to arrange the composition of a slanderous denunciation. They have presumed that this will serve as a pretext for my humble return to Rhodes and cause harm to my person.³¹

29 “Zat-ı asafanelerinin beş altı aydan beri Midillü’de ikamet buyurmalarından ve merkez-i vilayetin tul müddet hali kalması maslahaten muvafık olmamasından naşi orada ikameti mucib esbab bulunmadığı surette ne vakit merkeze avdet buyuralacağıının iş’arı,” BOA, Y.PRK. UM 71/11, 1322 B 9.

30 “İstihbarat-ı mebhusenin ehemmiyetine ve zaten on günden evvel Rodos’a vapur olmadığı dün acentalardan bittahkik anlaşıldığı gibi, merkez-i vilayette şimdilik hiçbir müstacel iş olmadığına binaen biraz daha Midilli’de temdid-i ikamet-i çâkerânem hasbe’l-maslahat zaruri görülmüş olduğu maruzdur,” ibid.

31 BOA, Y.PRK.UM 71/97, 1322

2. Under Constant Surveillance: The Politics of Journals

The increasing pressure of surveillance and intimidation made the governors uneasy in their provinces. They could not afford to make mistakes, and when they did, they could not afford to let the informants know, as they forwarded any such information to the court. Any movement of the governors was immediately informed to the palace, even by the pettiest officials.³² Those governors who were ex-ministers and sent to governorships to be removed from İstanbul, were especially observed and denounced to the palace through *journals*, the written reports of informants. These *journals* reflected the precariousness of governance under Abdülhamid II’s regime, where personal loyalties and rivalries often shaped bureaucratic relations. Denouncers engaging him in financial matters included the harbour master of İstanbul who once reported that Rasih Bey was buying the steamer “Sakız” for six thousand liras. If the steamer was in fact bought by his father it was a mystery to be solved and reported later.³³

Like many provincial governors, Abidin Pasha also faced persistent scrutiny. His assistant governor, Sururi Bey, acted as an informant on him, forwarding numerous complaints and allegations to the palace. When his efforts to get rid of him by dismissal did not come to a result, the governor changed his tactics. On the 3rd of October 1896, he reported to the palace that the English and Greek consuls were trying to manipulate the local Greeks to demand a Christian assistant governor. Abidin Pasha advised İstanbul either to abolish the assistantship of this province or to appoint a Christian assistant-governor and change the present assistant’s office to another vilayet.³⁴ Indeed, İstanbul will use this argument to dismiss Sururi. Abidin triumphed over his assistant on the 9th of December 1896 when, “As part of the reforms whose implementation had been decided, the appointment of non-Muslim officials as deputy governors in certain provinces became necessary, and since the aforementioned individual had already been designated for employment in a district governorship, he was dismissed from the said deputy governorship.”³⁵

However, in the two months until his dismissal, Sururi became a big headache for Abidin. End of November, Abidin Pasha wrote to the palace that his assistant, in connection with exiled officials, prepared a letter of complaint with fake seals, describing this act as “one of his endless tricks.”³⁶ Sururi, as predicted by the governor, reported two weeks later that the French dragoman wanted his dismissal and it would be seen as a failure to act on the wishes of a foreigner. A friend of Sururi heard this and surprisedly told that there was not such a plot. Sururi supposedly answered, “I did not write the truth, but I write things to cause an impression on the Imperial Chamber.”³⁷ Some days later,

32 “Elyevm hareket eden Nemçe’nin Apollo vapuruyla zat-ı vilayetpenâhînin Lazistan’a azimet ettiği maruzdur, ferman 25 Mayıs 1321 Trabzon İskele memuru Kolağası Necib”, BOA, Y.PRK. ASK 230/2, 1323 R 1.

33 “Reji İdaresi’nin elyevm Çeşme’de bulunan Sakız vapurunun Cezayir-i Bahr-i Sefid valisi Abidin Paşa’nın mahdumu Cemiyet-i Rusumiye Azasından Rasih Bey tarafından altıbin liraya satın alınmak üzere bulunduğu”, BOA, Y.PRK.ASK. 169/88, 1319 S 3.

34 “İlerude mucib-i tasaddî’ât olmamak ve saye-i asayişvâye-i cenab-ı cihanbanide cari olan itaate halel gelmemek ve ahaliyi şikayâta alışdırmamak için işlerin zaten sıhhati hasebiyle ya vali muavinliğinin bu vilayetde lağvi veya kıl’üş-şikaye bu vilayete bir Hristiyan muavinin ve burada bulunan muavinin dahi başka mahalle tayini mukteza-yı hikmet ve maslahatdan olduğu,” BOA, Y.PRK.UM. 35/108, 1314 R 25.

35 Only on 21 April 1898, Sururi got a new appointment, this time as the Governor of Hama (Hama Sancağı Mutasarrıflığı’na), BOA, DH.SAİDd. 76/199.

36 “Muavin Sururi Bey’in nihayetsiz olan manevralarından biri”, BOA, Y.PRK.UM. 36/41, 1314 C 23.

37 “Ben hakikati değil, Mâbeyn-i Hümayun’a tesir edecek şeyleri yazdım demiş olduğu bera-yı malumat arz olunur, li 20 Teşrinisani 1312, Abidin”, BOA, Y.PRK.UM. 36/50, 1314 B 7.

the governor denounced his *muavin* with other intrigues: Sururi claimed that the governor gave a certain political fugitive, “Fîrârî” Ahmed Bey, now an exile in Rhodes, a book as present, with a dedication “a souvenir from the Governor Pasha” (*Vali Paşa’nın yâdigârıdır*). However, the inspector determined that the dedication was written by a senior clerk in Rhodes, the *Mektubi Mümeyyizi* Tahir Bey. The governor also denied denouncements of Sururi, i.e. that he bought all his necessities from Paris, or that he had a conversation with the exiled Redif Pasha. He made a counterattack, claiming Sururi’s correspondence with and help in the escape of the exiles.³⁸

Abidin seems to have been obsessed with his assistant governor and did not stop sending reports on him. Three days after the dismissal, on the 12th of December 1896, he wrote that after new findings of further investigations of the inspector on Sururi’s case, the latter was now close to being sentenced. He supposedly told some consuls and other foreigners that he was employed by the palace and killed two Armenians during former uprisings in İstanbul. Abidin Pasha, added that though Sururi shocked these people with his fabricated slander to the Sultan’s Chamber, he luckily convinced the French consul’s dragoman, who forwarded him this “treacherous expression,” that his assistant had mental health issues, and was sometimes not able to control his speech. On his request, the consul gave his word, that he would not talk or write to anyone on this matter.³⁹

Abidin Pasha’s trouble with Sururi did not come to an end even after he achieved his dismissal.⁴⁰ Supposedly, his ex-assistant provoked a certain Salih Efendi, who was dismissed by Abidin from the post office in Rhodes, to bribe the governor. Salih Efendi, with a signature as director of an oppositional newspaper in Egypt, the *Kanun-i Esasi*, declared that he is about to publish a treatise praising him, denigrating and slandering Sururi Bey, and speaking against the state dignitaries, and that “if I do not send Fifty Liras within fifteen days, he will publish the treatise against me.”⁴¹ Rhodes was quite often receiving such letters from Egypt. A letter recently arrived by post, on the 7th of July 1902, bearing a Cairo postmark and addressed to his name. Inside, a postcard was found featuring an image, purportedly of the Sultan. Beneath the image, a caption was inscribed, and on the reverse side, there was a curse written in the name of the Sultan, with what was falsely claimed to be his signature.⁴²

Such a universe of distrust prompted governors to seek trustworthy subofficials they knew from previous posts. This trend also reflects their dependence on personal relationships, loyalties, and connections, as well as a lack of adequately trained personnel. For instance, upon arriving in Rhodes, Abidin’s successor requested Captain Zekeriyya Efendi from the Syrian gendarmerie regiment.⁴³

38 “[F]irarilerin firarı keyfiyetinde Surûrî Beyin desayis ve ledünniyatı meydana çıkacağı şübhesiz olduğu maruzdur,” BOA, Y.PRK.UM. 36/50-2, 1314 B 7.

39 “Hilmi Bey’in muavin Surûrî Bey’e bu defa vaki olan sualleri üzerine tezahür eden seyyiatı hasebiyle Surûrî Bey tecessün edecek bir raddeye gelmiştir. Firariler içinde olan seyyiat-ı elîmesinden fazla olarak Hilmi Bey’e vaki olan bir ihbara binaen hafiiyyen icra-yı tahkikat olundukda...”, BOA, Y.PRK.UM. 36/55, 1314 B 13.

40 Sururi Bey did not cease spying on his superiors in future positions. He attempted to denounce the governor-general of Aleppo, where he was later assigned. At the end of May 1902, he implored the Sultan for intervention so that Enis Pasha would not dispatch him to Urfa to collect the tithe. He asserted that the vali was sending him to obstruct his direct correspondence with the palace. His absence from the vilayet centre would hinder the Sultan’s access to information regarding the province. “Ber-mukteza-yı sadakat ve ubudiyet buranın ahvalinden arz-ı malumat etmekde olduğumdan huylanıldığı cihetle...”, BOA, Y.PRK.UM 58/77, 1320 S 21.

41 BOA, Y.PRK.UM. 42/105, 1316 Ra 4.

42 BOA, Y.PRK.UM 59/34, 1320 Ra 29.

43 BOA, Y.PRK.UM 78/112, 1324 Ra 24.

Abidin himself asked for the change of some of his subordinates, including the governors of Chios and Limnos, as soon as he arrived in Rhodes.⁴⁴

3. Local Dynamics and Ethno-religious relations

The Mediterranean Islands’ diverse population required careful navigation of intercommunal tensions. Local dynamics and ethno-religious relations bothered Abidin Pasha. Reports suggest that foreign consuls exerted influence on local governance in favour of the Christian majority, complicating the administration’s efforts to maintain imperial authority in many ways.

The Ottoman government had to show off its muscles in state architecture, at least: the construction of a modern government building beginning in 1888 was only completed during Abidin Pasha’s term.⁴⁵ The first thing as governor he did after taking office was to move the Muslim cemeteries next to the churches and build more structures than ever before: Turkish schools, military hospital, warehouses in the port and his residence, etc.⁴⁶ On the other hand, the Muslim population was shrinking. Once Abidin Pasha requested that the Muslim population, who were once settled in the villages of the island, be temporarily exempted from military service, on the grounds that they were apostatizing in order to escape military service. Because of the diminishing Muslim population, he found it necessary to settle about a hundred households of Rumelian immigrants in villages here.⁴⁷

During the war with Greece (February to December 1897) Abidin Pasha was mainly in Chios, where he landed on 31 March. The governor-general provided intelligence for Istanbul from the Archipelago. He reported, for example, on the 26th of April 1897, that “It is understood from the content of a telegram, received and copied yesterday at alafranga 6:45 PM via Vienna from Athens, that the Greeks (*Yunânîler*) have decided to retreat and regroup at the location of Farsala.” He was sure about the “complete destruction and dispersal of the Greek forces, preventing them from regrouping in a fortified position, as they are already defeated and scattered everywhere.”⁴⁸ The same war caused Muslim immigration from Crete whose burden of housing and care landed on his shoulders as well.⁴⁹

In his extensive report dated the 22nd of August 1902 on the reform efforts in the province, he begins by stating, “During my ten and a half years as governor of this province, I have worked with the utmost sincerity and devotion.” He had compiled and submitted a concise summary of the progress achieved as a result of his continuous efforts and reported that within the province, he constructed 342,000 metres of new roads, 326 bridges, 3,065 culverts, and 526,000 metres of retaining walls, in addition to repairing 264,500 metres of roads and 53 bridges. Regarding finances, he boasted about what he has accomplished, with comparisons: “Such extensive revenue collection has not been

44 BOA, Y. MTV 92/11, 1311 N 3.

45 Konuk 203.

46 Konuk, ibid.

47 BOA, DH.MKT. 219/15, 1311 N 15 and BEO 388/29069, 1311 L 15.

48 BOA, YEE 145/12, 1314 ZA 24. For his other wartime correspondence, see BOA, 110-9-1-4, 18/46/37, 16.5.1897; 18/46/42, 30.6.1897; 18/46/43, 1.9.1997.

49 “Ahali-yi İslamiyyenin Gird’den öteye berüye hicret etdikleri sırada Rodos’a dahi sekiz-dokuz yüz nüfus gelmişti.” BOA, A.MKT.MHM 510/26, 1318 CA 16.

recorded in any other part of the empire, as confirmed by financial records. In neighbouring Izmir, collecting the Greek subjects’ income (*temettü*) tax has led to numerous difficulties and complaints. However, thanks to the measures I implemented, this tax was collected from the Greek subjects in this province without any disturbance.” Concerning political matters, he states that “the interference of consuls, to which they had become accustomed under my predecessors, has been entirely prevented.” Additionally, he reports that “Thousands of Greeks who claimed a Greek identity were reinstated to their original Ottoman nationality.”⁵⁰

Here, we may also count Abidin Pasha’s notable contributions to Ottoman literature and intellectual culture in Rhodes. Upon his arrival in Rhodes, Abidin Pasha had the sanjak printing house in Chios, which had previously been purchased from Brussels, transferred to Rhodes and began publishing a bilingual newspaper in Turkish and Greek. One side of this newspaper was published in Turkish under the name *Bahri Sefid*, and the other side was published in Greek under the name *Egeon* (Aegean).⁵¹

As a highly prolific author, Abidin Pasha experienced his most productive years regarding intellectual output on the island of Rhodes, where he produced or published several of his works. An Arabic grammar book with a new method, titled *Ber Tarz-ı Nevîn Nahv-i Arabî*, was written during his tenure as the governor here and published in 1894 by the Rhodes Provincial Press as a 61-page work. *Saâdet-i Dünya*, also composed during his governorship, is a piece of advice, ethics, and reflection. It was published twice: firstly by the Rhodes Provincial Press in 1894 and later by Kitapçı Arakel in Istanbul in 1899. *Meâlî-i İslamiyye* (The Glories of Islam, 1900) is a partial exegesis (*tafsir*), interpreting 236 verses selected from 61 different Qur’anic sûrahs.⁵² He also authored a refutation, *Alem-i İslâmiyet: Müdâfa’a* (The Islamic World: A Defence, 1897), against a priest in Egypt. Both the last two works were published at the *Tahir Bey Matbaası* in Istanbul.

The well-known artist and pioneer of modern Turkish painting Abidin Dino (d. 1993), the Pasha’s grandson, interpreted his grandfather’s years as governor of the Mediterranean Islands as follows:

The deep blue beauty of the Mediterranean distracted the governor Pasha a little. True, he was living far from Istanbul—this governorship was even considered a form of exile. Yet, among the ruins of ancient times, accompanied by his entourage and family, he would occasionally interpret the Masnavi facing the sea, passionately recite Greek love poems to the island ladies he was so fond of, and read Voltaire.⁵³

50 “Yunanlılık iddiasında bulunan binlerce Rumları tabiiyyet-i asliyeleri olan Osmanlığa ırca,” BOA, Y.PRK. UM 66/32, 1321 CA 28.

51 Konuk, 203; Sadi Nasuhoğlu, *Rodos (Anılar ve Tarihçe)*, Muğla 2008, 44.

52 Orhan Güvel, “Âbidin Paşa’nın Me’âlî-i İslâmiyye Adlı Tefsirinin Yazım ve Yayım Serüveni, Muhtevası ve Hakkındaki Literatür,” *Tefsir Araştırmaları Dergisi* 8/1 (April, 2024), 80-102.

53 Fulya İbanoğlu, “Abidin Paşa’da Terakki ve Saadet Tasavvuru,” *Divan: Disiplinlerarası Çalışmalar Dergisi* 29.56 (2024): 90.

Conclusion

Rhodes, like many provincial posts in the Ottoman Empire, functioned as a bureaucratic exile for those who had fallen out of favor with the Sultan. Abidin Pasha’s appointment to Rhodes was a demotion rather than a reward. Despite his personal reluctance, Abidin Pasha held onto his post for over a decade, marking one of the longest gubernatorial tenures of the period. His survival was not passive; he employed numerous strategies to navigate the intricate web of court politics and bureaucratic surveillance.

A defining characteristic of Abdülhamid II’s administration was its surveillance system. Governors, particularly those exiled from Istanbul, were under constant scrutiny through a vast network of informants. Even minor officials in Rhodes had the ability to report directly to the palace, often bypassing their superiors. Abidin Pasha was a frequent target of these reports, facing allegations from his own subordinates, particularly his assistant governor, Sururi Bey. Abidin Pasha, in turn, sought to undermine Sururi, accusing him of fabricating complaints, colluding with exiles, and even forging documents. The Sultan eventually dismissed Sururi, but the incident underscores how Ottoman provincial rule was increasingly shaped by internal surveillance and bureaucratic rivalries rather than governance efficiency. The intense surveillance culture created an environment of paranoia and instability among provincial governors. Any misstep—real or imagined—could result in dismissal or worse. The fear of denunciation contributed to the reluctance of governors like Abidin Pasha to make decisive policy moves, further complicating provincial administration.

The Mediterranean Islands’ diverse population required careful navigation of intercommunal tensions. The island’s Orthodox Christian majority had close ties with Greece, while European consuls often acted as unofficial protectors of local Christian populations.

Abidin Pasha, like many Ottoman administrators, saw foreign interference as a direct challenge to imperial sovereignty. He reported attempts by British, French, and Greek consuls to manipulate local affairs. His reports to Istanbul emphasized that he successfully curbed consul influence—though whether this was the case remains debatable. The 1897 Greco-Ottoman War further heightened these tensions.

Beyond his administrative duties, Abidin Pasha left a notable intellectual legacy. He was a prolific writer and translator, particularly of Islamic texts. During his governorship, he also established a bilingual printing press in Rhodes. This initiative demonstrates his awareness of the need for imperial legitimacy through media and education.

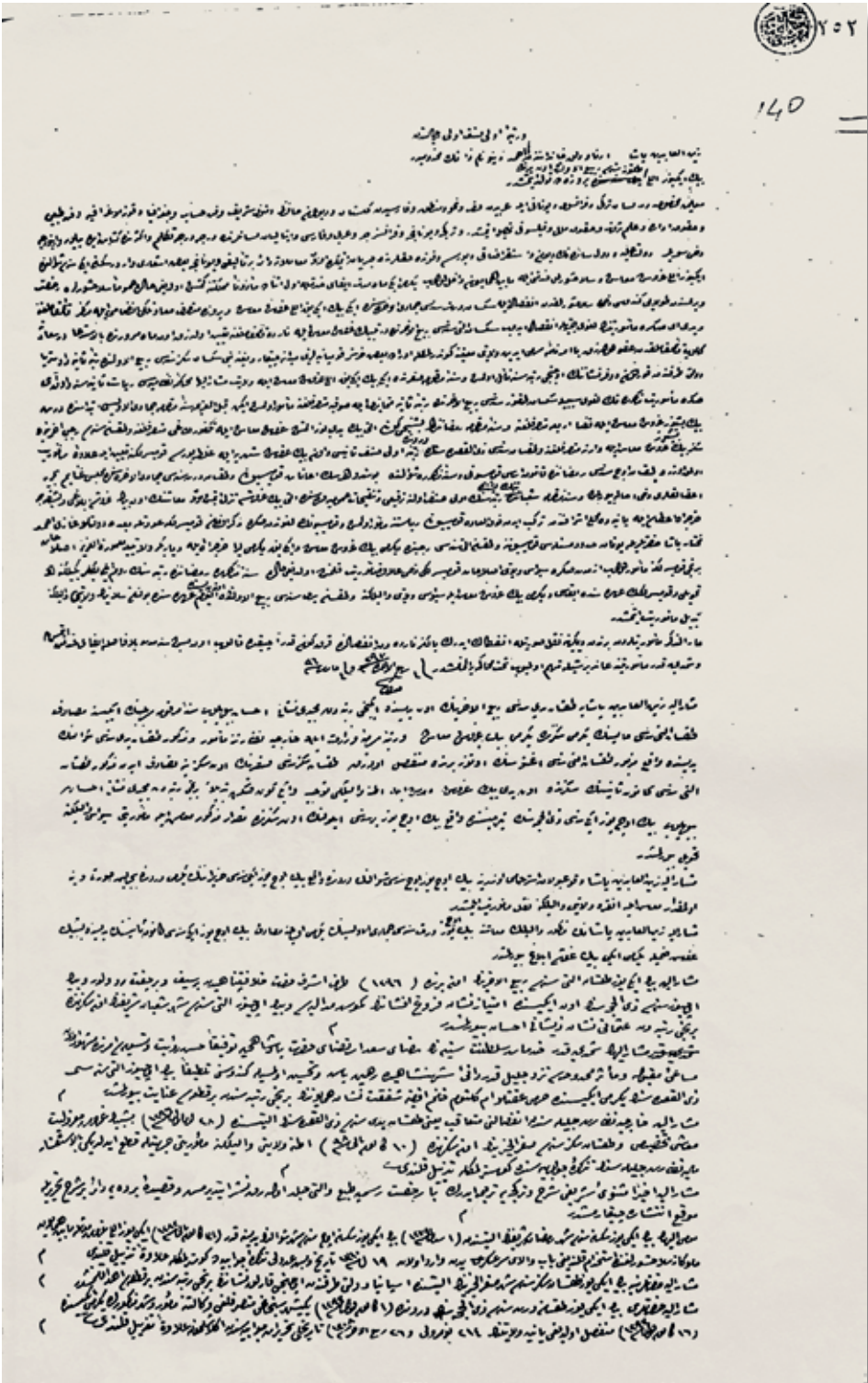
Abidin Pasha’s long, reluctant tenure in Rhodes encapsulates the paradox of late Ottoman provincial governance. On the one hand, he wielded significant power in a strategically sensitive region. On the other, he spent much of his time attempting to escape his post, petitioning for transfers, salary raises, and even retirement—only to be repeatedly denied. His career exemplifies the precarious nature of Ottoman bureaucratic service under Abdülhamid II, where officials were both indispensable and disposable. Despite his achievements, he was never able to fully reintegrate into the political center. His story is not just that of a provincial governor but a case study in the politics of bureaucratic exile and the personal struggles of Ottoman statesmen in the twilight of the empire. In the end, Abidin Pasha’s career was shaped by the very forces that defined the late Ottoman state: surveillance, exile politics, and the balancing act of provincial administration in a crumbling empire.

His death in April 1906, shortly after returning to Istanbul, marked the end of an era for Rhodes as well. The governorship of the Aegean Islands after Abidin Pasha would be carried out by deputies for a considerable time. Nazım Pasha had been appointed as the last deputy two months after Abidin Pasha’s death; thereafter, he became the new governor. Abidin Pasha’s governorship of the

Mediterranean Islands exemplifies the complexities of late Ottoman provincial administration. During a transformative era in Ottoman history, his career offers insights into the interplay of local governance, imperial oversight, and personal ambition. While his tenure in Rhodes was fraught with challenges, his enduring contributions to Ottoman bureaucracy and culture highlight the multifaceted role of provincial governors in the Empire's final decades.

NEXT PAGE: Excerpt from the *Sicill-i Ahvâl Defteri*, the personnel record of Abidin Pasha, which begins with the following sentences: “Zeynelabidin Pasha is the son of a certain Mîr Ahmet Dino, a member of the Albanian dynasty and one of the statesmen of the first class of the highest rank. He was born in Preveza on the 11th of Rabi’al-awwal in the year 1259. He received education from private tutors in the Turkish, French, and Greek languages, and Morphology, Syntax, and Logic in Arabic. In Persian, he studied *Gülistan*, *Divan* of Hafez, and the *Masnavi-i Sharif*. He received education in arithmetic, geography, cosmography, natural sciences, administrative law, political economy, international law, and philosophy. He is able to speak, to varying degrees, Turkish, Greek, French, Arabic, Persian, and Italian, and can write proficiently in most of them. He also speaks Albanian. He has authored a work on the debts, loans, and financial transactions in the stock markets and funds of the Ottoman Empire and other states, and he has also composed some poetry in Greek.”

BOA, DH.SAId.1. 1/252.



Ἐν ἔτει ἀπ'δ'

Ἐπὶ τῆς βασιλείας

Σουλτὰν Ἀβδοῦλ Χαμίτ Χὰν Β΄.

Νομάρχου Αἰγαίου Ἀβεδὶν Πασσᾶ
Χορηγούντων Δημητρίου καὶ Μίνως
Βενετοκλέους
Ἀπηλλάγησαν αἱ συνοικίαι τῆς ξηρῆς δίψης

In the year 1904

In the reign of

Sultan Abdul Hamit Khan II.

Under Governor of the Aegean Abidin Pacha
With the contribution of Dimitrios and Minos
Venetokles
The quarters were relieved of dry thirst.

Inscription in Greek and translation by
Anastasia Tsapanidou



Saint Anastasia
the Pharmakolytria Orthodox Church

Rhodes

Fountain donated to the neighborhood
by Rhodian brothers Venetokles
during the governorship of
Abidin Pasha in Rhodes
1894-1906

Photos: T. Tuten

