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NIKI ZERVOU is a contract archaeologist in the Ephorate of Antiquities of the Dodecanese in the Hellenic Ministry of Culture. She has excavated an extensive section of the necropolis of ancient Rhodes (2022-2023 period, under the supervision of archaeologists E. Kaninia and N. Christodoulides), unearthing over a hundred interments of the 3rd to 1st century BC with numerous grave goods. She is currently engaged in the project of converting Fort St Nicholas in Rhodes into a visitor-friendly monument; in 2024 she updated the records of the funerary stelai from the Ottoman cemeteries that once surrounded the medieval town of Rhodes. She is also a graduate in German Literature of the University of Athens and a part-time teacher of that language. Niki Zervou has a BA in Archeology from the University of Ioannina and an MA from the Hellenic Open University.

Ottoman burial in the town of Rhodes 1523-1917

The state of the evidence

The proper disposal of the dead is a major issue for all societies. Setting aside the obvious need to protect the living from biological contagion, the treatment of the dead is bound to beliefs about the afterlife and anxiety about the potential hostility of the deceased, and therefore to religion. They are also inextricably linked to status– not only the status of the dead and of their living relations, families or clans, but also the status of the authority represented on the local level by particular individuals. It follows, from this, that major political or religious changes are accompanied by discontinuities in burial practices, including the choices of loci for burials.

Rhodes is a case in point, not least because its expansion in the 20th century has been accompanied by extensive archaeological exploration of land under development, in the form of rescue excavation. Yet there are major gaps in our knowledge about the local disposal of the dead: the first involves Late Antiquity, when the arrival of Christianity overlapped with the decline of the great ancient city. Evidence about Early Christian burial is patchy and largely relies on inference drawn from the spatial distribution of specific types of finds such as clay lamps. The relative obscurity of Byzantine Rhodes is largely due to its replacement by the expanding and multicultural Hospitaller town (1309-1522) which is, by and large, still standing and legally protected and is, therefore, less amenable to comprehensive exploration of its substrate. The Hospitaller period also has the advantage of plentiful written evidence to back (and sometimes confuse) the evidence on the ground. In Hospitaller times, most of the Christian inhabitants of Rhodes town were apparently buried within or around churches. Shaft and cist graves, niche and table tombs as well as sarcophagi and plain inhumations are recorded in the excavation of various churches belonging to the Orthodox and Latin rite inside the town. We also know of the Hospitaller cemetery of St Anthony to the north of the town, close to Mandraki Harbour, where most of the Knights who died in Rhodes were buried¹.

Shortly after the conquest of Rhodes by Suleiman the Magnificent (1523) all the Christian residents of the town who did not choose to leave with the Knights had to relocate to the string of urban nuclei formed around particular churches outside the fortified town², in the so-called Christian “marassia”³. Of the approximately five thousand Muslims settled inside the walls after 1523 very few were buried there, and their tombs are associated with religious foundations they had

1 A. Gabriel, *La cité de Rhodes I, Architecture militaire*, Paris 1921, 14-15.

2 Probably completed when a local conspiracy to bring back the Knights of St John was brought to light in 1529. Z. N. Tsirpanlis, *Στη Ρόδο του 16ου-17ου αιώνα. Από τους Ιωαννίτες Ιππότες στους Οθωμανούς Τούρκους*, Rhodes 2002, 37-41. N. Vatin, *L'Ordre de Saint-Jean-de-Jérusalem, l'Empire ottoman et la Méditerranée orientale entre les deux sièges de Rhodes 1480-1522*, Louvain-Paris 1994, 368-371. E. Kolovos, *The Fortress and the Town of Rhodes According to the Ottoman Survey After the Siege of 1522*, in S. D. Phillips (Ed.), *The 1522 Siege of Rhodes: Causes, Course and Consequences*, Abington 2022, 134.

3 These Orthodox Christian parishes were St John, the Holy Anargyroi, St Anastasia, the Metropolis (former Paximada), St George “Ano”, St Nicholas and St George “Kato”, counter-clockwise from the SW to the SE of the walled town. The northern *Neomaras* (Greek Niochori) was associated with the operation of the fortified Ottoman military shipyard at Mandraki and was a double parish, with separate churches for Greeks and Latins.

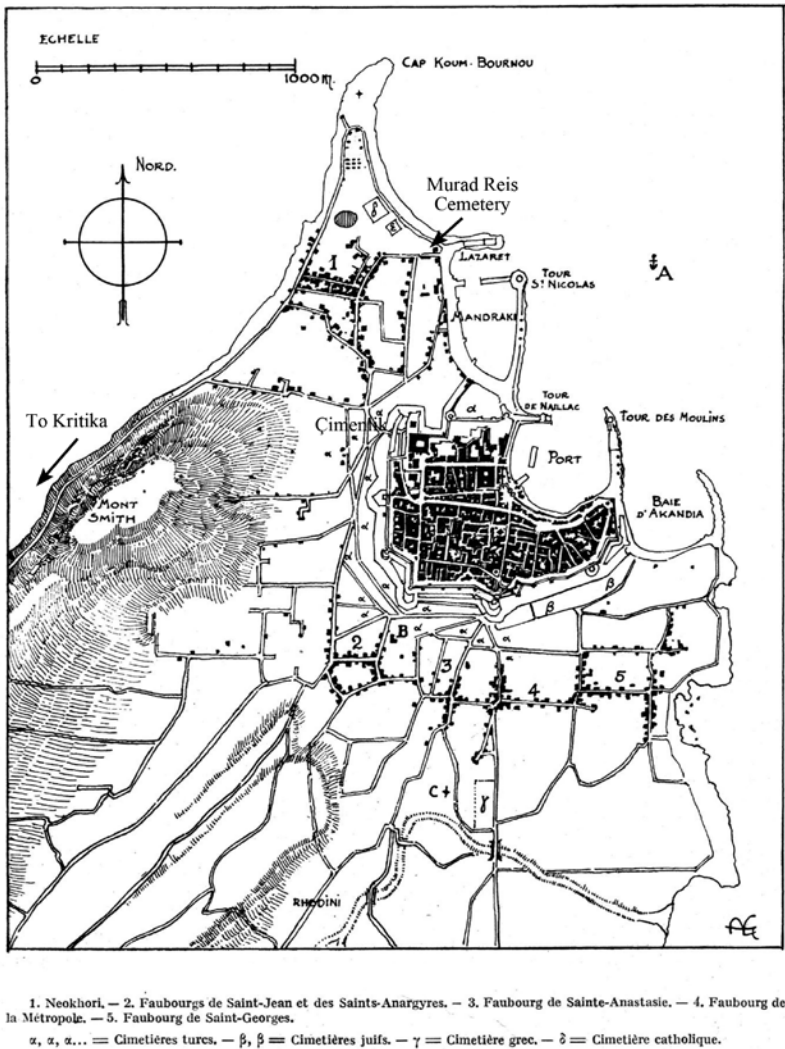


FIGURE 1: Neighbourhoods and cemeteries outside the walled city.

set up, either mosques or mesjids⁴. Outside the walls, occasional isolated burials did occur⁵. The vast majority of the Ottoman town's inhabitants were buried in extensive cemeteries outside the walls

4 Such as the mosque of Topal Recep Pasha (built in 1587/8, H. 995), associated with the family turbe of its founder: A. Kalagri, *Τεχνική έκθεση για τη συντήρηση και την αποκατάσταση των ταφικών συνόλων και των διακοσμητικών στοιχείων εντός του μαυσωλείου του Ρετζέπ Πασά στη μεσαιωνική πόλη της Ρόδου*, Rhodes 2024, 17-24. Similarly, the more modest tomb of the founder of Borouzan mesjid, a former medieval church now known as St Kyriake, survives next to the building.

5 As in the late case of Mercan Dede, the founder of the Abdul Hamid Mosque at Kritika, whose mausoleum still stands below the brow of the Monte-Smith hill. Kritika was originally a coastal settlement for Turkish refugees founded after the Cretan uprising of 1896/7 drove many off the larger island to Rhodes. Ch. I. Papachristodoulou, *Ιστορία της Ρόδου από τους Προϊστορικούς Χρόνους έως την Ενσωμάτωση* (1948), Athens 1972, 478. The area of Monte Smith near the tomb was marked in Italian maps as “Merqium” Tepe.

which gradually developed in two principal locations: one was the zone of the *glacis*⁶ outside the medieval moat⁷ and the other the tekke of Murad Reis which replaced the cemetery of St Anthony (FIGURE 1). The association of St. Anthony's church with the tekke is supported by the reported custom of local Christian women in Ottoman times to take candle offerings to the tekke, as Anthony was an important healing saint⁸.

The problem with research on the Ottoman period *in situ* is principally due to the surgical tactics applied on the landscape by the colonial authorities under Italian rule (1912-1943)⁹. With the political objective of enhancing past ties of Rhodes with Western Europe, they summarily disposed of the Ottoman and Jewish cemeteries which surrounded the walled town¹⁰ and embarked on extensive urban development in the zone between the historic centre and the Christian *Marassia*. Former aspects of the monumental zone are preserved in 19th century engravings (FIGURE 2)¹¹ and early photographs. We cannot estimate the extent of the losses, because the wholesale Italian interventions were not properly documented. Nevertheless, a great deal may be gleaned in various ways through the study and collation of other sources, despite the technical barrier of different scripts, languages and priorities.

Muslim burial in the zone outside the walls began immediately after the Conquest of 1522, and the first to be buried there were casualties of the siege. Two such burials were unexpectedly discovered by the author in 1993¹²; they were actually located inside the bulwark flanking the gate of St John¹³ from the SE, then under restoration. The deceased were regularly laid out on top of a stout ancient revetment, which had later been encased in the Hospitaller fortifications. T1 was a cist burial covered by a row of six slabs, with a long axis oriented NW-SE. T2, a plain inhumation, lay to the north of the cist and parallel to it.

6 *Glacis*: the outer bank of the counterscarp.

7 Gabriel 1921, 1-2.

8 V. Strumza, Il “Tecchè” di Murad Reis a Rodi, RIVISTA DELLE COLONIE ITALIANE VIII, 7, 1934-XII, 4. For other examples of Christian veneration of Muslim holy men and sites, cf. F. W. Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam Under the Sultans*, NY1973, Chapter VII.

9 M. Livadiotti- G. Rocco (eds), *La presenza Italiana nel Dodecaneso tra il 1912 e il 1948. La ricerca archeologica. La conservazione. Le scelte progettuali*, Catania 1996, 217-219.

10 According to Gabriel 1921, p. 3, Fig. 3, Ottoman burials in the *glacis* spread to the north, west and southwest of the medieval town, with the Jewish cemeteries located to the southeast towards Acandia Bay, east of the axis of the modern Pythagora Street inside the walls.

11 See esp. B. E. A. Rottiers, *Description des monuments de Rhodes*, Brussels 1830, Pl. 13-17.

12 *Archaiologikon Deltion* 48 (1993), Chronika, p. 571. Hitherto unpublished details from Excavation Diary “Medieval Fortifications of Rhodes Town II”, 197-203.

13 In Ottoman times this gate was known as Kizil Kapu.

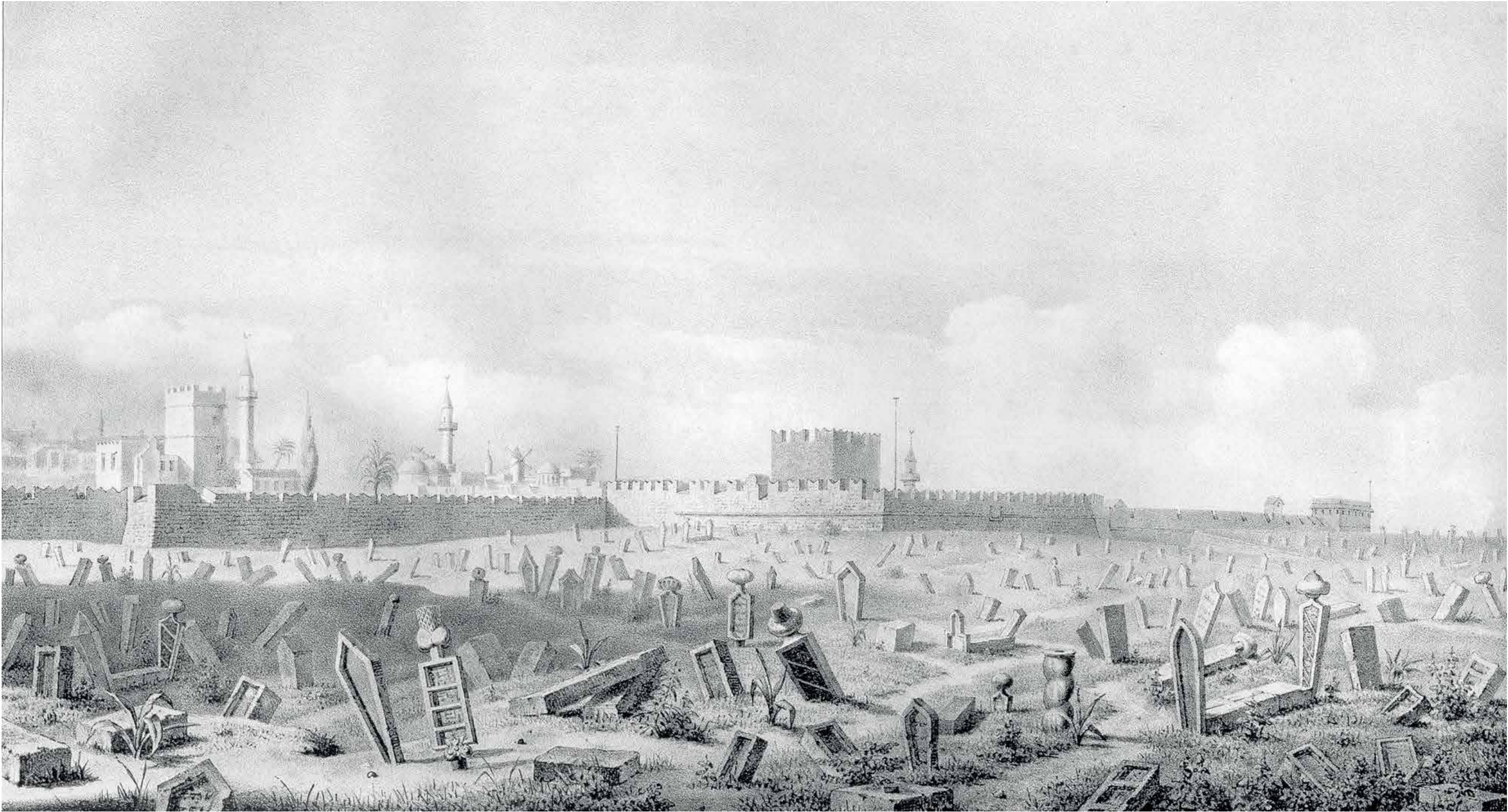


FIGURE 2: Bernard Eugène Antoine Rottiers, *Description des monuments de Rhodes*, Brussels 1830.

The position of the bodies described in the excavation diary is worth quoting and was the principal identifying factor¹⁴, alongside the context. For T1 (FIGURE 3 A-C)

“The back seems to rest on the north side of the tomb, the body turned southwards. The cranium rests on the right side, as does the whole body: ribs, hip, long leg bones. The mandible nearly touches the right humerus, the left scapula among the ribs... the right radius and ulna extend towards the pelvis, where the small bones of both palms are concentrated... the left ilium lies edgewise, the lower limbs superimposed: the femurs cross each other, while the tibiae and fibulae are parallel... The spine is strongly curved”; for T2 (FIGURE 4) “The skeleton, supine and similarly oriented, survives down to the ankles, only traces of the long bones of the legs surviving. The cranium is raised with the neck strongly curved, slightly turned to the left. The arms are parallel to the body and the palms of the hands half-hidden by the pelvis... Teeth in good condition... Bones in very bad state, with multiple cracks... From the left side of the ribcage in the region of the heart was recovered a corroded iron fragment, probably spherical originally (artifact AE 79) ...”

Both burials were covered with earth carried there for the purpose and containing a substantial quantity of ancient pottery fragments, a fact which initially confused the dating of the burials. The dead were probably laid to rest where they had fallen when the conquerors were clearing the fortifications of debris and corpses, immediately after the siege. No evidence of a marker on top of the burials has survived.

In recent times, the most organized part of the periurban cemeteries was the Çimenlik, on the site of the modern “Hotel Soleil”, surrounded by a fence and planted with trees and flowers. Next to it lay an open space with venerable plane trees where the Kurban Bayrami was celebrated¹⁵. The Italian authorities stripped the zone around the moat of practically all funerary structures in order to create a monumental zone and showcase the Hospitaller fortifications. The only monument to escape was the tomb of Inat Pasha, chief of the besiegers’ artillery in 1522, who fell in action; it is located at the junction of Dimokratias and Komninon streets¹⁶. It is likely that many of the burials belowground still remain *in situ* under the cypresses of the present parkland. The funerary stelai removed by the Italians were, for several decades, kept in the modern Gani Ahmed Muslim cemetery¹⁷. However, the space available there gradually dwindled as the cemetery filled up; eventually, about 400 funerary stelae, most of them inscribed, were handed over to the local bureau of the Greek Archaeological Service where they were catalogued and photographed. The oldest dated stele among them is from 1599 (H. 1008) and the most recent from 1898 (H. 1316).



FIGURE 3 A-C



FIGURE 4, 5

The second Ottoman interment area developed around the tomb of Murad Reis (FIGURE 5, next page), a focus of grace of more than local appeal¹⁸. Murad Reis was a corsair who distinguished himself serving in the Ottoman fleet during the reign of Suleiman I (1520-1566) and his successors Selim II (1566-74), Murad III (1574-95), Mehmed III (1595-1603) and Ahmed I (1603-1617). He is supposed to have sailed in various expeditions alongside three celebrated Ottoman seamen of the 16th century: Hayreddin Barbarossa (d. 1546), Piri Reis (d. 1553) and Dragut, also known as Turgut Reis (d. 1565)¹⁹. He himself died half a century later, in action against the Knights of Malta in 1609/1610 (H. 1018). At his own wish he was buried in Rhodes. His venerable age and renown as a leading warrior of the Faith made his tomb a focus of *bereket* which endures to this day. A mosque was built nearby in 1636/7 (H. 1046) by Ebu Bekr Pasha²⁰ and was restored by Murabit Hasan Bey in 1797/8 (H. 1212). Nobility from various parts of the Ottoman Empire who died on Rhodes came to be buried nearby; this cemetery fortunately survives and the entire compound, measuring about 0.7 hectares, is today a listed monument. A brief presentation of the Murad Reis site was published in Italian by Vitalis Strumza in 1934, but it is of limited use to modern scholarship²¹.

The two structures that dominate the cemetery, spiritually as well as spatially, are the turbe of Murad Reis and the mosque of Ebu Bekr twenty metres to the south. Apart from the small enclosed *hazire* east of the mosque, with the turbe of Shahin Giray at the farthest corner, all the other tombs are concentrated to the west of the line joining the two major monuments. Further away to the north and northeast are scattered six other mausolea, four of which are regular octagonal *turbe*²²; the other two are the square mausoleum of Mehmed Redif Pasha and the hexagonal pillar mausoleum of Mehmed Shekib Pasha, both supplied with open arches exposing the tombs inside to the air and rain. The plan of the cemetery shows that the orientation of most graves was toward the east, or slightly to the northeast. Thus, if the dead inside was laid on his/her right side they would be facing towards the southeast, i.e. the rough direction of Mecca.

14 T. Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam*, Oxford 1999, 170-173.

15 Papachristodoulou, 512.

16 ARCHAIOLOGIKON DELTION 42 (1987), B2 Chronika, 658.

17 The Gani Ahmed opened in 1925. J. R. Barnes, *The Place of the Ottoman Past in the History of Rhodes in DODEKANISSIAKA CHRONIKA* 25 (2012), 453-454 (448-471).

18 Barnes 2012, 450-454. For the influence of a “focus of grace” in the evolution of Muslim cemeteries see Insoll, 173, after J. Dickie, *Allah and Eternity: Mosques, Madrasas and Tombs*, in G. Michell (ed.), *Architecture of the Islamic World*, London 1978, 46.

19 As early as 1538 he is supposed to have had an active role in the Ottoman victory against a large Christian fleet near Preveza, along with Barbarossa and Dragut. If so, in 1609 he must have been about a hundred years old.

20 Barnes 2012, 464.

21 Strumza 1934. See n. 8 above.

22 Those of Ali Safi Mirza, Sincar Hevvash Bey, Chanbek Giray Khan and Memi Pasha.

Three main types of tomb are distinguished by observation aboveground: I) Headstone (inscribed marble stele, *şahide* or *baş taşı*) and footstone (usually also of marble, often decorated with a cypress symbolizing the soul, or occasionally a palm tree or vine scrolls) fixed on the ground without visible evidence of any other feature. They may signal either a cist or inhumation below, but this cannot be ascertained without disturbing the dead. II) A low masonry border barely emerging from the ground outlines the burial, with slots at the narrow ends for fixing the head and foot stelai. The stone border may occasionally be the visible rim of a cist without a lid. In a few poorer graves the stelai are replaced by squarish low stones. III) A masonry or marble-clad rectangular “box” (*sanduka*)²³, sometimes set on a low plinth, with the head and foot stelai set at the narrow ends, often with a hollow between for planting. Most of the tombs set inside the mausolea are more or less elaborate versions of this type. The majority of the head stelai are of the typical, so-called “anthropomorphic” Ottoman type, with a variety of headgears representing the status of males.



FIGURE 6

The Murad Reis tombs provide a concentrated visual guide for what the better-quality tombs in the periurban cemetery must have looked like; although judging from 19th-century engravings they were much more widely scattered across the landscape. The possibility comes to mind that, for the less well-to-do, markers could have been made of wood; however, no such evidence survives and the temptation to steal such a resource must have discouraged its use in unprotected areas. Most finely-carved tomb stelai were presumably bespoke and imported from major Ottoman centers of artistic production; but an unfinished specimen also points to the existence of a local workshop (FIGURE 6).

Although a protected monument, it should not be assumed that the Ottoman cemetery of Murad Reis has not been interfered with in recent times. The unfortunate idea of planting a grove of eucalyptus trees among the tombs in the Italian period has caused considerable trouble since. Several tombs have suffered structurally from spreading roots, while breaking branches have damaged or overturned tomb stelai. Many tombs were consolidated at various times from the Italian period onwards using modern materials. Other interference includes interventions during the Italian occupation of Rhodes connected to the development of the waterfront to the northwest of Mandraki harbour, including the opening of new roads and the construction of public buildings. These apparently resulted in the relocation of certain tombs that lay on the margins of the cemetery towards the new roads²⁴. Further relocations were the result of damages caused by Allied air-raids during World War II.

23 In the relevant English bibliography this is often misleadingly called a sarcophagus or pseudosarcophagus, as the body of the dead is never placed inside it.

24 Such as the mausoleum of Mehmed Shekib Pasha who died in 1894 (H. 1312). The structure, which collapsed in 2013 during a storm, did not exist in its present location in 1927. Cf. Excavation Diary of 2023 and Ministry of Culture Document No 607020/14-12-2023 related to the project for its restoration.

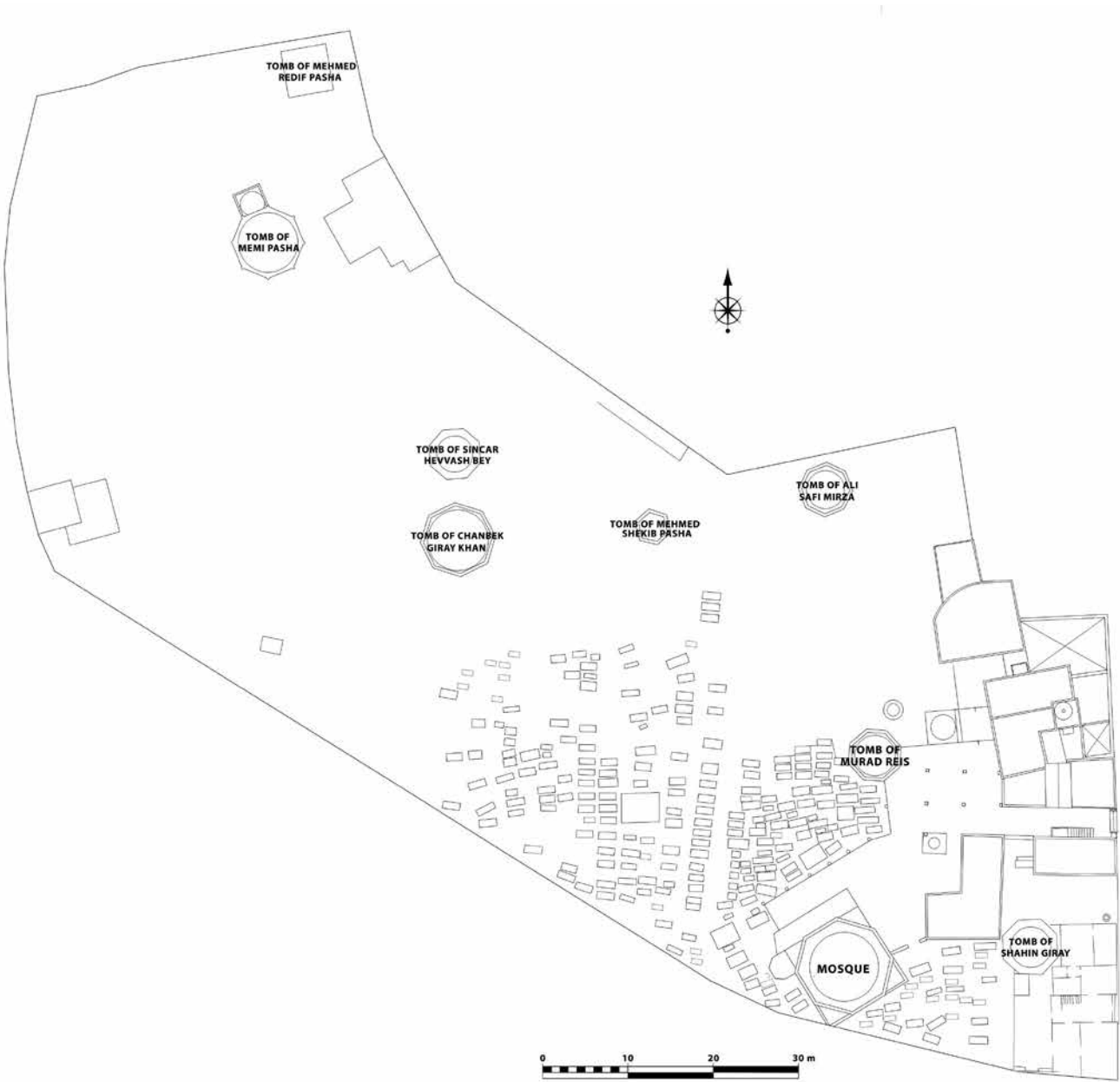


FIGURE 7: Murad Reis Cemetery layout

Between 1979 and 1981, the 4th Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities²⁵ engaged the services of Mehmed Rauf Kalaycioglu²⁶, who could read the Ottoman script, to transcribe and translate, among others, the inscriptions of the Murad Reis compound. Between 2000-2007 a much more systematic undertaking of the recording and study of the rich epigraphic evidence on the site was entrusted to Ottomanist Dr. John Robert Barnes, who submitted the finished work in 2007. This study, although it remains unpublished, has proved of great assistance to various restoration projects on the site and provides a wealth of information on the history of its monuments and function down to the Italian period, as well as the correct identification of many of the individuals buried there²⁷.

In his 2012 article²⁸ Dr Barnes has included a discussion on the shifting policies of the Italians regarding the cemetery, and the degree of their interference with the extant tombs. On the present evidence, since no archaeological excavation on the site has taken place barring a limited number of trial trenches to gauge the condition of the foundations of buildings under restoration, it is hard to determine whether the Italian administration actually relocated tombs in order to reduce the scattering of the graves. In any case, it should be kept in mind that the families of some at least of those buried at Murad Reis were still residing and active in Rhodes, and piecemeal repairs of particular tombs by private individuals cannot be ruled out. In one case at least, that of the mausoleum of Mehmed Shekib, the relocated tomb was designed in the eclectic style of the mid-war years, definitely by an Italian architect then active in Rhodes, who used state-of-the-art technology of the period to produce a remarkably elegant structure. Similarities displayed by certain interventions, such as the use of concrete cast in forms, may be due to the execution of the work by particular workmen engaged by relatives of the dead or those responsible for the site. Displacements of epitaphs, on the other hand, are likely to be the result of more recent repairs after damage caused by the falling branches of the eucalyptus trees. These, however, cannot have been moved too far from the grave they originally belonged to.

The dates of the inscribed stelai surviving on most extant graves have permitted us to trace the development of the cemetery (FIGURE 7). It is clear that the early burials were scattered, the density of the graves increasing with time, probably mostly due to the desire for the dead to share in the beneficent aura of the tomb of Murad Reis. A secondary cause of the eventual crowding of particular patches, which makes a number of tombs difficult to access, could be the desire to concentrate burials of related individuals since the sharing of a grave by different individuals is not generally acceptable to Muslims.

The tomb of Murad Reis is, apparently, not the oldest Ottoman burial on the site. Ahmed Abdullah, standard-bearer of Suleiman I, who died in the siege of 1522, was probably also buried there²⁹, indicating that the use of the site as a cemetery passed from Latin Christianity to Islam without a break. It is quite likely that other casualties among the besiegers of 1522 were buried there, although no commemorative inscription survives. Presumably, before the siege of 1522, the

25 Later merged to the XXII Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities to form the current Ephorate of Antiquities of the Dodecanese.

26 Mehmed Rauf Kalaycioglu (1915-1983) was a teacher at the 13th Primary School of Rhodes Town.

27 J. R. Barnes, *A Visit to the Tekye of Murad Reis: A study of the Epigraphy in the Tekye and Cemetery of Murad Reis on the Island of Rhodes*, Rhodes 2007 (unpublished study).

28 See n. 17 above.

29 *Op. cit.*, MRPN 153, 324. The inscribed stele is incorporated in a concrete *sanduka* of the Italian period; it might be possible to argue that it could have been relocated to the cemetery at a later date.

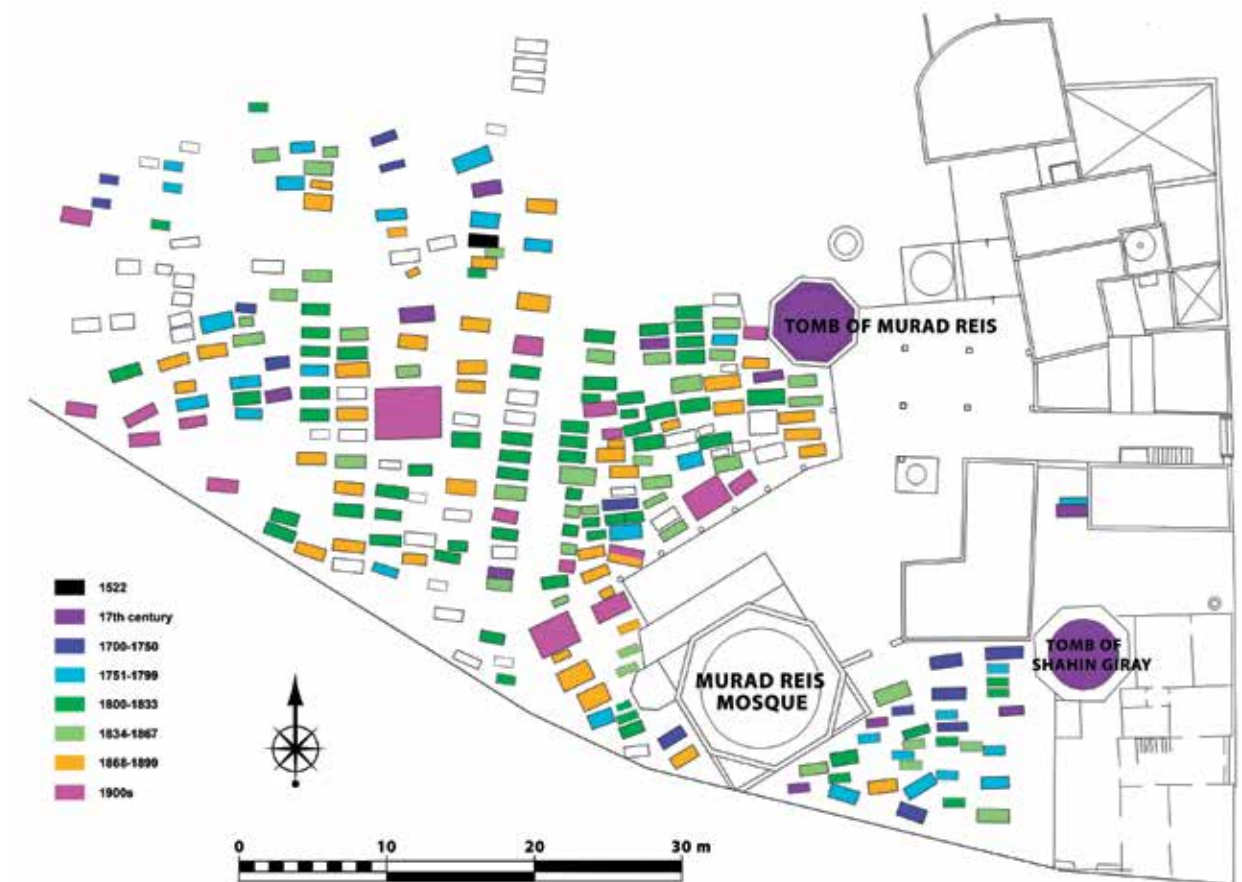


FIGURE 8: Murad Reis Cemetery chronological layout

Hospitallers had levelled the funerary church of Saint Anthony that stood on the site, as well as the enclosure protecting the adjacent Hospitaller cemetery, to deprive the besiegers of potential cover; they had done the same in 1480-1481, carrying the building material inside the town to serve for repairs during the siege³⁰.

The displaced Ottoman stelai of the town are already furnishing interesting preliminary data, allowing us to compare the two burial zones to each other, even though the study of the funerary inscriptions from the periphery of the medieval walls has barely started (FIGURE 8). Of course, much of the information will refer to the lives and milieu of the ruling class, consisting of the Ottoman administrators and nobility, highlighting different styles, fashions and status. Nevertheless, epidemics and natural or manmade disasters are equally likely to have impacted other social groups such as the less prominent Muslim and Jewish urban population within the walls and the Greek population of the suburban parishes, which are not easy to study directly through lack of material evidence. Moreover, periods of excess mortality and the shifting ratios between males and females through time have wider implications.

30 Cf. G. Bosio, *Dell' Istoria della Sacra Religione et Illustrissima Militia di San Giovanni Gerosolimitano*, vol. 2, Rome 1630, 398-399, 432.

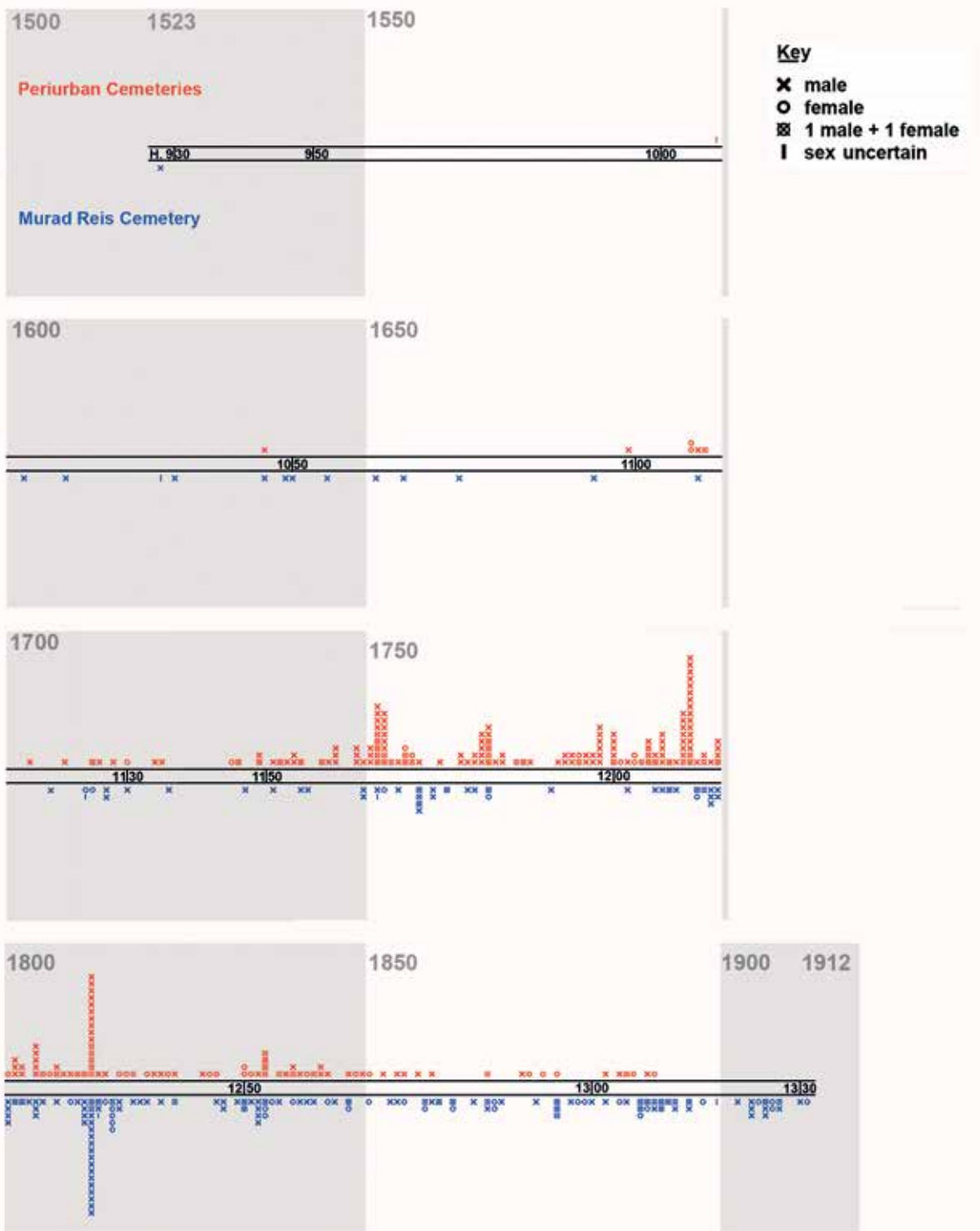


FIGURE 9: Burial activity in the periurban and Murad Reis cemeteries in the Ottoman period.

It is striking that, apart from one clear case probably due to plague, peaks of burial activity between the two Ottoman cemeteries of Rhodes do not coincide (FIGURE 9, 10). Even so, major mortality incidents are unlikely to have affected only the upper tier of society, who could afford a *şahide*, and let us know when, and sometimes how they died. Therefore, the understanding of the causes of discrepancies between the data of the two burial zones is of interest not only to students of Ottoman civilization but of local history and society more generally, as well as the role of Rhodes in military events and the international maritime traffic of the times. The planned publication of the study of the inscriptions of the Murad Reis Cemetery by Dr Barnes in collaboration with the scholars of the National Hellenic Research Foundation; and the production by them of a companion volume covering the funerary inscriptions of the periurban Ottoman cemeteries, will allow the past to speak more directly to everyone genuinely interested in the history of the Eastern Aegean in the last three centuries.

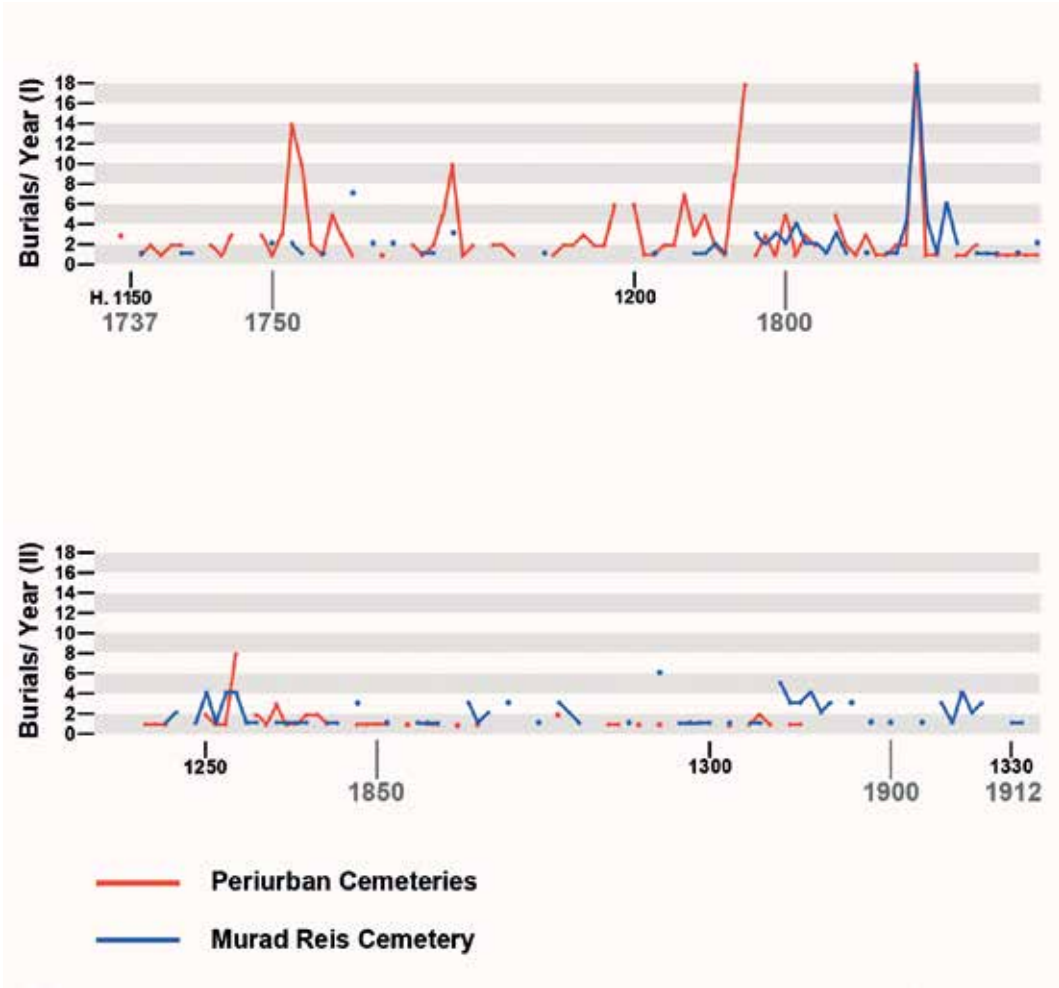


FIGURE 10: Annual burial rates in the periurban and Murad Reis cemeteries in the Ottoman period.

*Hüve'l bâkî
Rikabdâr-ı hazret-i Şehriyârî Sâbık
Hâfız Ahmed Ağa'nın pederleri
merhûm ve mağfur ilâ rahmet-i
rabbih'l-ğafur Baba Hasan Ağa'nın
ruhuna bi-hürmet'l-fâtiha. Sene 1186*

He is the Everlasting.
For the soul of Baba Hasan Ağa,
deceased father of the former
Rikabdar of His Imperial Majesty
Hafız Ahmed Ağa, may God, the All-
Forgiving, bestow His mercy upon
him. Recite Al-Fatiha. Year 1186
(1772)

Tomb of Hasan Ağa (d. 1772), father of Hafız Ahmed Ağa,
Murad Reis cemetery in Rhodes,
Transliteration of the inscription on the stele and the translation by İbrahim Akkurt & Burhan Çağlar, Photos: T. Tuten.

