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He has published extensively on Ottoman history, including his landmark book, *An Introduction to Religious Foundations in the Ottoman Empire* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986); “Murad Reis Tekkesi (Rodos),” in Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, ed., *Osmanlı Toplumunda Tasavvuf ve Sufiler*, 2nd ed. (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 2014), pp. 375–408 [1st ed. 2005]; “Some Cases of Mistaken Identity in the Ottoman Epigraphy of Murad Reis on Rhodes,” in *σοφία άδολος*: Studies in Honor of Ioannis Papachristodoulou (Archaeological Institute of Aegean Studies, Rhodes, 2014), pp. 233–57; and ‘Σχόλια γύρω από την ιστορία του Καστελλορίζου με αφορμή την Οθωμανική Ιστορία της Νήσου Μείς του Χαμπιμπζαντέ Αχμέντ Κεμάλ’ [Comments on the History of Kastellorizo in Light of A History of the Island of Meis by Habibzade Ahmed Kemal], *Δωδεκανησιακά Χρονικά*, vol. 23 (Rhodes, 2010), pp. 62–84.

“My association with the Hafız Ahmed Ağa Library began in 1997, when Elias Kollias, then director of the Ephorate of Antiquities, invited me to translate its original catalogue from Ottoman Turkish into English. At the time, Dr. Kollias imagined that the task would require no more than a month. Were he alive today, he would, I suspect, be surprised—if not appaled—to learn that the project has now extended over three decades.

The reasons for this protracted endeavor lie in the nature of the original catalogue itself. Abbreviations are frequently used for the names of authors and titles of works, but these are of little help in securely identifying either. Moreover, the catalogue provides no account of the twenty-five classificatory headings, most of them being Islamic sciences, into which the library’s holdings are divided, nor does it offer biographical information on the scholars whose works defined the sciences. It soon became clear that the project could not remain a mere inventory of books. Rather, it had to evolve into a broader undertaking: a historical survey of the Islamic sciences, a biographical study of their authors, and a contextual discussion of the Prophet Muhammad, the Kur’ān, and the formative period of Islam.

In this light, an almost thirty-year effort for what was once thought to be a one-month task is perhaps not as implausible as it may seem. The British historian Arnold Toynbee confronted a similar experience: what began as a modest set of notes eventually grew into his monumental ‘A Study of History’, a multi-volume work that took him three decades to complete and expanded into nothing less than a history of the world.

At the close of my own study of the library, I was fortunate enough to be introduced to Tarık Tüten, the representative (mütevelli vekili) of the administrator (mütevelli) of the library’s pious foundation. Tarık has been an unfailing source of patience and support, particularly as I have contended with a debilitating illness. His encouragement has extended well beyond friendship: he has been an ardent advocate of my research on the library and on the history of Ottoman Rhodes, and he has shown himself to be a first-rate scholar through his involvement in the field of Ottoman studies and in the publication of this volume.”

John Robert Barnes

Gunpowder and the Explosion in 1856 of the former Church of St. John in the Medieval Town of Rhodes

On 6 November 1856, after a drought of some eight months, Rhodes experienced its first rainfall, which was accompanied by dark thunderclouds and multiple flashes of lightning. One lightning bolt struck a large powder magazine in the Old Town of Rhodes in the vicinity of the *Cami-i kebir*, the former conventual Church of St. John the Baptist of the Knights Hospitallers of St. John, which had been converted into a mosque upon the Ottoman conquest of Rhodes in 1522. The explosion of the gunpowder, estimated to have been between one hundred and fifty to three hundred tons, obliterated the former Church of St. John.¹ In addition to destroying part of the *Dizdar Konağı*, the former Palace of the Grand Masters, the blast sheared off the top part of the western-style clock tower which had been built by Ahmed Fethi Paşa only four years previously and hollowed out numerous shops and homes in the Turkish quarter of the Old Town, including residences located in the upper half of the Street of the Knights. The detonation also did considerable damage to the wall of the Old Town around the Amboise Gate. It has been estimated that the explosion killed over eight hundred people; later reports that the blast killed over 4,000 have been based on rumor and are apocryphal.

The cause of the catastrophe ostensibly was not hard to divine. Lightning had entered through one of the windows of the campanile of the church and struck the powder magazine in one of the vaults below. The gunpowder cache had been secreted in the underground crypt of the former Church of St. John during the siege of Rhodes in 1522, and left there for centuries. Either over a period of three centuries the Ottoman authorities had failed to discover it at all, or they had only recently located the explosives, but chose to do nothing about it. Another explanation excluded any role the Knights had in the affair, and claimed that Ottoman officials were the ones responsible for placing the gunpowder in the vaults.² According to this report, a rational explanation for Ottoman officials using the former church as a gunpoweder depository was that they regarded the crypt as a safe place since the entire structure above and below ground was made of stone and therefore not liable to catch fire.³ The assumption was logical as the Ottomans were known to have stored explosives in ancient stone structures, such as the Parthenon and the theatre at Aspendos near the Mediterranean coast of modern-day Turkey.

While the story of gunpowder being stored in the subterranean vaults of the church has had the widest circulation, there is another account closely related to it that dates the storage of the explosives to the last period of the Ottoman siege. According to this story, from the time that he had failed to be elected Grand Master of the Knights Hospitallers of Rhodes by only a few votes, Grand Chancellor Andrea d’Amaral harbored a hatred toward Philippe Villiers de l’Isle Adam of Auvergne who had won the election. His animosity toward the newly-elected Grand Master was great enough for him to envision treason by abetting the enemy at the height of the Ottoman siege of Rhodes in November 1522. He attempted to accomplish this by ordering one of his trusted servants to fire arrows into the Ottoman camp with the message that the defenders could not hold out much longer

1 Hedenborg 1856, 521.

2 *Illustrated London News* 1857.

3 Ibid.

due to a loss of manpower, ammunition, and supplies. In addition, in order to create a munitions shortage, d'Amaral hid a large cache of gunpowder in the crypt of the Church of St. John. Under torture his servant Blaise Dias, a Jewish convert, confessed that the idea of firing messages into the enemy camp was d'Amaral's, not his, and that he was only following his orders. For his treason, Dias was beheaded and quartered, and after being convicted of being a traitor, d'Amaral met the same fate as well.

The story of d'Amaral's treason and his responsibility for hiding the gunpowder in the Church of St. John was accepted by Johan Hedenborg, a Swedish physician who was a longtime resident on Rhodes and an eyewitness to the explosion of 6 November 1856 and the disastrous earthquake that preceded it a month before on 12 October. He was an eyewitness in the sense that his home in the New Town of Rhodes sustained serious damage in the earthquake and the explosion, and he gave a detailed report of conditions in the aftermath of both catastrophic events. He recorded his observations in the appendix of his manuscript entitled "Geschichte der Insel Rhodos." The work was never published due to its being incomplete in spite of its large size, and because it was written in faulty German, a language which was not the author's native tongue and cosequently one which he wrote imperfectly. Nevertheless, the description of the disasters to which he had been a witness is of value in describing the extensive carnage and destruction they caused.

For Hedenborg, that lightning entered through a window in the campanile and ignited a massive gunpowder cache in the crypt below was a given fact, as was the story about d'Amaral's hand in hiding the explosives in the subterranean vaults of the church.⁴ These reputed facts are briefly stated as being taken for granted and generally understood. In Hedenborg's history of Rhodes they are not elaborated upon as something to be explained or proven, and much of his discourse on the two events deals with his firsthand observations after the two catastrophes occurred. It remains an open question, however, where he derived these stories from—and how long they had been in circulation on Rhodes.

One answer to the question is that Hedenborg's eyewitness of the destruction in the aftermath of the explosion gave rise to these stories. For the author, the location of the blast was beyond dispute. It was the Cami-i kebir, the former Church of St. John, and specifically its campanile, both of which had been virtually effaced. No other edifice was so completely obliterated. The Palace of the Grand Masters adjacent to the former church also received considerable damage, as well as hundreds of dwellings in the vicinity, above all those at the top of the Street of the Knights. As described by the author, the hollowed-out site of the campanile resembled the smoking crater of a volcano. For Hedenborg it was clearly apparent from a personal inspection of the site of the former bell tower and of the vault below that this was the origin of the terrific explosion.

The question then arose as to who was responsible for putting such an enormous cache of gunpowder there in the first place. While Ottoman officials could be blamed, the notion was probably dismissed by Hedenborg as fantastical as soon as it was entertained, primarily because it lacked motivation. As the former church had been a mosque since 1522, it is doubtful if the Ottomans would have desecrated a venerable house of prayer by putting it to such dangerous and pedestrian use. It was more plausible to make the association with the treachery of the Grand Chancellor, above all his message to the Ottoman besiegers that the defenders were low on ammunition. It is known that d'Amaral was in charge of munitions and of the arsenal of the Knights during the siege; he was, therefore, in a position to create a shortage of gunpowder, which once discovered

4 Gelhoff-Volanaki 1982, 56.

would have seriously lowered the Knights' will to resist. It is worthy of note, however, that the charge that d'Amaral hid a massive amount of gunpowder in the crypt of the former church never materialized during his trial.⁵ Further, d'Amaral was not the only one responsible for munitions; that duty was entrusted to a commission of three knights, of which d'Amaral was only one. Apart from d'Amaral, the commission comprised Turcopolier John Bouch and Gabriel de Pomeroy. It would have been impossible therefore for him to deplete the Knights' store of explosives unnoticed, and it is unimaginable that in the event this had happened, Grand Master de l'Isle Adam would not have investigated the matter.⁶

Given the eyewitness account of Hedenborg and similar reports that followed within a year or two of the explosion, it would seem that there is conclusive proof of the cause of the detonation and a convincing explanation of how the gunpowder came to be stored in the crypt of the former church in the first place. Accounts of the catastrophe that were published soon after the incident corroborated the story of Hedenborg, and it became the only plausible cause of the explosion that was offered. Two months after the disastrous incident, an article that appeared in the *Illustrated London News* of 3 January 1857 attributed lightning striking a gunpowder cache in the church of St. John as the cause of the conflagration.⁷ The report in the *Illustrated London News* is the only article that blames the Ottoman administration for placing the explosives in the subterranean vaults of the former church. In 1889 in an article for the *Philosophical Magazine* entitled "On Lightning and Gunpowder Magazines," Charles Tomlinson ascribed the origin of the explosion to gunpowder placed in the vaults of the former church of St. John.⁸ In the following year in a work entitled *Lightning, Thunder and Lightning Conductors*, Gerald Molloy directly attributed the explosion of the church of St. John as the cause of so many inhabitants of Rhodes being killed.⁹ Fifteen years later, in a work entitled *Thunder and Lightning* published in 1905, the French meteorologist Camille Flammarion wrote that the cause of the explosion on Rhodes on 6 November 1856 was due to lightning that "penetrated the vaults of the Church of St. John, at Rhodes, setting fire to an enormous quantity of powder."¹⁰ Flammarion added that "four or five thousand people lost their lives in the catastrophe,"¹¹ as opposed to the actual estimate which was closer to eight hundred. In a work published as recently as 2016 under the title *Storm: Nature and Culture*, John Withington wrote "...but the deadliest ever explosion sparked by lightning was probably the one at the church of St John on the island of Rhodes on 6 November 1856. This ancient cathedral of the knights of Rhodes had a large collection of gunpowder in its vaults, and the explosion destroyed a large portion of the town, causing a death toll estimated at 4,000."¹² Then there is the article produced by nineteen scholars associated with the study of meteorology that was published online on 31 May 2017 entitled "WMO (World Meteorological Organization) Assessment of Weather and Climate Mortality Extremes: Lightning, Tropical Cyclones, Tornadoes, and Hail" that was headed by corresponding author Randall Cerveny. The article provides a summary of reports on the explosion of 1856 on Rhodes and concludes with the general findings that lightning striking a gunpowder cache in the vaults of the cathedral church of St. John the Baptist had caused the explosion.

5 Torr 2003, 73-74.

6 Ibid.

7 *Illustrated London News* 1857.

8 Tomlinson 1889, 368-75.

9 Molloy, 1890.

10 Flammarion 1905, 224-225.

11 Ibid.

12 Withington 2016.

More than a century after the event, the story was still being presented as being the one true version how the catastrophe originated. Mr. Rauf Kalaycıoğlu was a former instructor in the *Süleymaniye Medresesi* on Rhodes and sometime secretary to Şeyh Süleyman Kaşlıoğlu, the last Müfti of Rhodes and the last shaikh of the Murad Reis tekye. In the 1980s, Mr. Kalaycıoğlu was commissioned by the Fourth Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities to transcribe, transliterate, and translate into Greek and modern Turkish the Ottoman inscriptions on the grave steles in the cemetery of Murad Reis. In his recording of the epitaphs, he transcribed, transliterated and translated the inscriptions on the grave steles of three women who lost their lives in the explosion of 1856. According to Mr. Kalaycıoğlu the women were killed from the detonation by lightning of a munitions magazine that was located below the Cami-i kebir, the former conventual Church of St. John the Baptist.¹³ In 1982 Dr. Maria Gelhoff-Volanaki translated passages in Johan Hedenborg’s History of Rhodes in the periodical *O Dromos*. In the introduction to a translation from German into Greek of the relevant pages of Hedenborg’s “Geschichte der Insel Rhodos” describing the earthquake and explosion of 1856, Dr Gelhoff-Volanaki depicts the second catastrophe as being directly due to lightning igniting a large store of gunpowder which had been kept hidden below ground in the church of Saint John of the Order of the Knights.¹⁴ In spite of this singular and long-held understanding of the origin of the explosion, there is, nevertheless, another explanation.

In the cemetery of Murad Reis there is a group of three grave steles. They are mounted on sarcophagus-like cenotaphs made of cement which have been placed on a low cement platform. The cenotaphs and their base are not original—nor are the grave steles, for pieces of the original grave stones have been found scattered throughout the cemetery. It may be further added that the use of cement in construction was introduced into Rhodes only with the Italian occupation beginning in 1912; cement would not then have been employed in creating cenotaphs dating from the mid-nineteenth century. The first location of the graves was not on an open-air platform in the center of the graveyard, as it is now, but in a *türbe*, a small square mausoleum with a dome that abutted onto the street near the mosque of Ebu Bekr Paşa and extended beyond the fenced cemetery compound.¹⁵ Photographs of the mausoleum taken before the Second World War show the exact location. This structure was obliterated as a result of Allied bombing during World War II, which must have occurred between January of 1944 and April 1945 when the British flew more than 400 missions over Rhodes. Not only was the Old Town subject to repeated bombing, but so was the New Town as well. Located on the edge of the New Town, the cemetery of Murad Reis experienced aerial bombardment, and during one of these sorties, the tomb of the family of Pertev Efendi received a direct hit. This incident caused the Turkish translator Kalaycıoğlu to exclaim “What a thought-provoking event...! To be blown up twice within the space of a hundred years!”¹⁶ The cement monument that visitors see today was constructed sometime after the war, and either enough pieces of the original grave steles were found and put together to record the original epitaphs on new gravestones, or a record was found that had been kept of the dedications, which, in either case, allowed for a reconstruction of the epitaphs.¹⁷

13 Kalaycıoğlu, 76..

14 Gelhoff-Volanaki 1982, 52-59.

15 Balducci 1932, fig. 129.

16 Kalaycıoğlu, entry 76..

17 Note. During his recording of the epigraphy in the cemetery of Murad Reis, the author came across a fragment of one of the original grave steles.

The inscriptions, written in Ottoman in the Arabic script, are the obituaries of three women, Rukiye, ‘Iffet and Mihriban, the mother, daughter and wife of Defterdar Pertev Efendi, the director at the time of the financial administration of the Province of the Archipelago (*Eyalet-i Bahr-ı Sefid Defterdarı*). The epitaphs state that all three women were victims of the explosion that occurred on the afternoon of 6 November 1856. By way of example, the epitaph of Pertev Efendi’s wife, Mihriban, is as follows:

هوالباقی
هجرتک یتمش اوچنده آسمنی بر بلا
قلعه نگ جبخانه سندن چیقدی پگ دهشت فزای
اول زمانده زوجه پرتو ایکن بو مهربان
ناکھانی دار خدی ایتدی اول پاکیزه جای
جسم روحیله سمای رحمة چیقدی همان
ایلدی یا رب عزتنده جبه سای
دود آھندن چیقار عرشه بو تاریخ کھر
مرمر بانی قیلدی فردوس آشیان جبخانه وای
رضاء لله الفاتحه
فی را ۸ سنه ۱۲۷۳

Mihriban, wife of Pertev Efendi, Director of the Financial Administration of the Province of the Archipelago, d. 8 rebiyülevvel 1273/Thursday, 6 November 1856.

Transliteration

Hüve'l-baki.
Hicretin yetmiş üçünde asmanî bir bela
Kalenin cebhanesinden çıktı pek dehşet fezay
Ol zamanda zevce-i Pertev iken bu Mihriban
Nâgehani dar-ı huldı etdi ol pakize cay
Cisim ruhile esma-yı rahmete çıktı heman
Eyle ya Rabb 'izzetinde cebhe-yi say
Dud-ı ahundan çıkar arşa bu tarih güher
Mihribanı kıldı ferdevs aşıyan cebhane vay.
Rızaenlillâh Elfatiha.
Fî rebiyülevvel 8 sene 1273.

Translation

Only He is eternal.
In the year one thousand two hundred and seventy-three of the hegira a cosmic calamity of terrifying proportions occurred in the Arsenal of the Fortified Town. At that moment Mihriban, the wife of Pertev, this innocent one, suddenly made her station the abode of eternity. Her body and soul at once ascended to the heaven of God's compassion. Grant, O Lord, in Your majesty an entreaty: That this chronogram born from a heaving sigh may be a gem for the throne of God. Alas, the Arsenal made Mihriban one who dwells in Paradise. For the love of God, (say) the Fatiha (for her soul). Thursday, 6 November 1856.

While the language used is much the same for all three epitaphs, what is interesting about them is that Pertev Efendi attributed their deaths to the explosion of the *cebthane*, an Ottoman term meaning arsenal. More specifically, he blamed their deaths on the detonation of the *kalenin cebhanesi* the arsenal of the fortified town. An arsenal by definition is a place for storing ordnance, and specifically munitions; naturally, then, it is a place consciously chosen for storing munitions. The term “arsenal” was never used for the gunpowder cache that was presumably hidden in a subterranean vault area beneath the bell tower of the former Church of St. John. In the principal account that has been given, the large deposit of gunpowder was unknown to Ottoman officials—either at all, or it was discovered only a short time before the explosion. In either case it could not have been considered a primary arsenal used by the Ottoman military administration on Rhodes.

There is a telling piece of evidence regarding the location of the Ottoman arsenal in the Old Town of Rhodes. According to a map of the fortified Old Town drawn in November 1847 by staff members from the Ottoman Imperial School of Engineering, the Ottoman arsenal was located directly in front of the former Church of St. John, that is, before the front of the edifice and the campanile. A rectangular structure in outline is identified as a *Cebthane* (Arsenal) in the drawing.

But the most decisive confirmation that it was an Ottoman arsenal that was blown up by lightning comes from a dedicatory inscription for a new arsenal inscribed on a large stone preserved in the garden of Diomède de Villaragut on the grounds of the Archaeological Museum, the former New Hospital of the Knights of St. John.* It reads as follows:

خان عبد المجید اول ساه جهانبان که ایدر امر تحکیم قلاع اوزره زه
بذل هممبو جته خانه یی اولکیدن اعلی یاپدی از قضا صاعقه ایتمشدی
اصابت اصابت اقدم اول شهگ حفظ ایده آسیب و ضرردن دائم بحر و برده اولان
اولکاسنی ربّ الکرمایلیوب خیر دعا سویلدی زیور تاریخ شاه عالم بو جبه خانه
یاپدی محکم سنه ۱۲۷۶

Transliteration

*Han Abdülmecid-i evvel şah-i cihanban ki eder
Emr-i tahkim-i kala üzerinde zihi bezl-i himem.
Bu cebehane'yi evvelkiden a'lâ yaptı.
Ez kaza saika etmişdi isabet akdem.
Ol şahın hıfz ede asib ve zarardan daim
Bahr u berde olan ülkesini Rabbü'l-kerim
Eyleyiüb hayr dua söyledi Ziver tarih
Şah-ı âlem bu cebehane'yi yaptı muhkem.
Sene 1276.*

Translation

Sultan Abdülmecid Khan, as a world-protecting sovereign,
is to be congratulated on a job well done in the effort he
has expended in ordering that the fortresses be strengthened.
He had made this Arsenal excellent once before;
but in the past by chance a bolt of lightning struck it.
May the Merciful Lord bless this Şah's country
that is on land and sea and protect it always
from misfortune and harm. Ziver has written the chronogram.
The ruler of the world has made this Arsenal sound.
1859-60.

What is significant about this inscription is the statement that Sultan Abdülmecid had previously constructed an arsenal,—probably sometime in the early 1840s, and that lightning had struck it;—that is, lightning had hit the structure of the arsenal that he built, and not some long-forgotten powder magazine left in the crypt of the former Church of St. John. The inscription is the dedication of a new arsenal that the Sultan built in 1859-60 to replace the one that had been destroyed. The smoldering cavernous pit on the site of the campanile that Hedenborg regarded as decisive evidence for the location of the explosion was not the result of ignition of the gunpowder below, but due to the exposure of the underground vault that was revealed after the blast had destroyed the bell tower. As to the Arsenal, needless to say, there would have been nothing left of the munitions depot itself.

The explosion that occurred in the late afternoon of 6 November 1856 is an important part of the history of Rhodes because of the tremendous loss of life and the great damage that it caused not only throughout the Old Town but even throughout Neo Chori, the New Town as well. But the story that has been presented about its origin until now is not history, and it has not been written by historians. The business of History is inquiry; specifically it is critically enquiring about the past. The most reliable form of this inquiry is to consult the epigraphic evidence, whether from written official documents, letters, books, funerary inscriptions, the record left in numismatics, and the like. The writing of history should not, therefore, be left to rumor, herarsay, recollection or, as in the case of Hedenborg, fallible eyewitness impressions. What has not been done thus far is to investigate the Ottoman epigraphic evidence regarding the explosion of 1856 about which both Ottoman officials and subjects were well-informed. In view of the evidence that has now been brought to light, it is time to consider revising the notion that has been thus far persistently presented. While it may take some time for scholars writing on the explosion of 1856 to become aware of the present essay, one way to avoid the pitfall of repeating the same mistake of virtually every author dealing with the subject is to ensure that touristic guidebooks of Rhodes state what is now known to be the true nature of the explosion. It is possible that this may be the best way for scholars to become readily acquainted with a fundamental change in this part of Rhodes’ historical narrative. This need not involve doing away altogether with the account of gunpowder hidden in the crypt of the former Church of St. John during the Ottoman siege, or d'Amaral's hand in the affair, as it makes for a colorful story—so long as it is presented as simply that, as a traditionally-held and entertaining tale that is a prologue to the actual story of what happened.

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Ottoman map of the Old Town 1847: İrade-i seniyye 1847. Ba İrade-i seniyye Mühendishane-i âmire canibinden memur buyurulduğum Bahr-ı Sefid’de bulunan Rodos Kalesinin Resm-i Musattahı fî 14 Z sene 1263/23 Kasım 1847 (“A One-Dimensional Drawing of the Castle (here meaning the Fortified Walled Town) of Rhodes in the Aegean Sea that I, the Sultan (Abdülmecid), ordered to be done by Imperial Decree by staff members of the Ottoman Imperial School of Engineering, dated 14 Zilhicce 1263/Tuesday, 23 November 1847.”) Archives of the Prime Ministry, Istanbul. A copy of the map is now on display in the Reading Room (*Tedkik odası*) of the Hafız Ahmed Ağa Library in the Old Town of Rhodes, a gift of Mr. Ahmed Arda, former Turkish Consul of Rhodes.

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* Dedicatory inscription of the new arsenal for the town of Rhodes commissioned by Sultan Abdülmecid in the year 1276/1860-1
Archeological Museum of Rhodes
Photo: T. Tuten

Next two pages
Ivan Aivazovsky (1817-1900)
View of Rhodes, 1861
Oil on canvas
Courtesy of Feodosia I. K. Aivazovsky Gallery,
Feodosia Urban District of the Republic of Crimea.

