

THE BEY APOLOGISES

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The letter Byron received in February 1811 from the Bey of Corinth is not known widely, if at all. It should figure in Byron book collections, for it is, as calligraphy, very beautiful: but its context is little understood, and its content known to virtually no-one.

Byron made two journeys from the Morea to Athens in the second half of 1810. The first, on which he was accompanied as far as Corinth by the Marquis of Sligo, was in July and August – shortly after he had returned to Greece from Constantinople. 1 In December 1812, Sligo was tried for abducting between twelve and fourteen members of the crew of HMS *Pylades*, the ship which took Byron and Hobhouse from Athens to Smyrna: he was fined £5,000 and sentenced to four months in Newgate. 2 On this journey Byron visited Vostitza, Patras, and Tripolitsa, where he met Vely Pasha (the son of Ali Pasha, and ruler of the Morea) who remonstrated with him about his “relationship” with Ali, saying “vecchio con vecchio, Giovane con Giovane”, 3 and presented him with a “pretty stallion”. 4 His second journey was in September, when he fell seriously ill at Patras. 5 He was back in Athens by mid-October. 6 It *seems* to have been while passing through Corinth while returning from the second of these trips that he encountered the foul weather, and the uncharacteristic failure of Turkish hospitality, about which he writes in the following letter to Stratford Canning, the English Minister Plenipotentiary in Constantinople:

Athens. October. 13th. 1810

Sir, – I cannot address you without an apology the more especially as I write in the character of a complainant. – In travelling from the Morea to Athens, the Bey of Corinth for some time refused me a lodging, and this at a time when the inclemency of the weather made it an act not only of impoliteness, but of inhumanity. It was indeed one of those days when “an enemy’s dog” would have been sheltered. – The Greek Cogia Bachi was equally unwilling to order a house, and I at last with difficulty procured a miserable cottage. – As the last circumstance has happened *twice* to myself in the same place, and *once* to others, I have nothing left but to request your interference. – I know no circumstance of extenuation, as a word from the Bey or the Cogia Bachi, would have admitted me into any house in the village, where I had before (in the time of Vely Pacha) found much better accommodation. – I therefore do hope and venture to request that this “circumcised dog” may not pass (I cannot say unpunished) but *unreprimanded*. – I believe it to be the inclination, as I know it to be in the power of the British minister to protect the subjects of his Sovereign from Insult. – I conceive that brutality will not be countenanced even by the Turks, as we are taught that hospitality is a Barbarian’s virtue. – Your interference may be esteemed a favour not only to me but to all future travellers. – By land or sea we must pass the Isthmus in our excursions from Athens to the Morea, and you will be informed of the accuracy of my statement of the Bey’s conduct, by the Marquis of Sligo, who does me the honour to deliver this letter. – I again solicit your interposition, and have the honour to be, Sir, / your most obedient humble Servant / BYRON 7

It is strange that Byron refers to the “Insult” in no other document, even though he stresses that it has occurred “twice”. It is also strange that he refers to “the time of Vely Pacha” as one in which he was better treated, for two of his visits to Corinth took place when Vely Pacha was in the Morea. Perhaps the “twice” refers to passing the Isthmus en route for Patras on his second journey, and then re-passing it on the way back. Very bad luck to have inclement weather on both occasions.

Corroboration of the story is to be found in part of a letter to Byron in the John Murray Archive, from the Marquis of Sligo himself. It is dated November 5th 1810:

I have delivered your letter concerning Nouri Bey to M^r. Canning, and have <c/>Conjoined my testimony to that contained in your letter, the effect of which will be a certain reprimand to the aforesaid Bey.

On receipt of Byron’s letter, Canning sent a reply, and a letter from himself as Plenipotentiary, to the Caimacan of the Morea – the Bey’s immediate superior, whose headquarters were at Tripolitsa, whence, in Byron’s words, he

1: BLJ II 5.

2: *Annual Register* for 1812, pp.279-289.

3: BLJ II 19.

4: BLJ II 14-15, 18.

5: See William A. Borst, *Lord Byron’s First Pilgrimage*, Yale 1948, rpt. Archon 1969, pp.156-157.

6: BLJ 23-24.

7: BLJ II 21-22.

“governed in Vely Pasha’s absence”. Vely had, since Byron had met him in August, left the Morea, with troops with whom he was supposed to help the Sultan on the Danube, although he had in fact taken them to assist his father, Ali Pacha, with his military problems at Iannina. As Byron explains to Hobhouse on October 4th, during his second stay in the Morea:

Ali Pacha is in a scrape, Ibrahim Pacha, and the Pacha of Scutari have come down on him with 20000 Gegdes and Albanians, retaken Berat, and threaten Tepaleni, Adam Bey is dead, Vely Pacha was on his way to the Danube, but has gone off suddenly to Yanina, and all Albania is in an uproar ... Sultan Mamoud is in a phrenzy because Vely has not joined the army ... 1

Then, on “February 20th 1812” (sic: for “1811”) the Bey sent a letter to Byron, apologising. It seems that Byron’s complaint had had the desired effect.

The name of the Bey was Nuri, and that of his secretary, who actually wrote the letter, was Sotirakis Notaras: he was the second son of an illustrious, highly educated Corinthian family (“a descendant of the great duke of that family who was put to death soon after the capture of Constantinople” is Byron’s description). Byron lost no time in telling Canning what he had received:

Athens. Feb^y. 26th. 1811

Sir, – I have forwarded to the Caimacan of the Morea the letter which accompanied that of your Excellency, & it has produced a long apology from the Bey of Corinth, which is all that can be wished of Turk or Christian. – I took the liberty of correcting a small mistake in the said remonstrance, & of exchanging the word *Coronna* & substituting that of *Corinth* in its stead, it being the Governor of the latter city of whom I had occasion to complain – I have now only to return my thanks to your Excellency for your interference which has had all the effect which could be desired, & have the honour to be your obliged

& very obed^t. humble Servant

BYRON

When in the following year Byron was putting together the package in which *Childe Harold* I and II were to be presented to the public, he decided to make use of the Bey’s letter. For, as Roger Poole has written, 2 the book which John Murray published on March 10th 1812 contains far more than just *Childe Harold*, the two-Canto poem – which takes up only 115 pages.

1: BLJ II 40.

2: Roger Poole, What Constitutes the “Real” Childe Harold? in Lord Byron the European, ed Cardwell, 1997, pp.149-207.

Not only are there (by the time of its seventh edition of 1814, from which I am working) twenty-nine extra poems, taking up 71 pages, but 67 pages of Notes to *Childe Harold* itself, and, at the end, a 33-page Appendix, much of it in Greek. It was not, in aggregate, a book intended for the many. As Jerome McGann writes, Its publisher conceived its audience to be a wealthy one, people interested in travel books and topographical poems, people with a classical education and with a taste for antiquarian lore and the philosophical musings of a young English lord. As it turned out, all of England and Europe were to be snared by this book's imaginations.¹

Byron's idealistic aim seems to have been to use his knowledge of both Greeks and Turks to enlarge the minds of his countrymen, or at least the minds of those qualified in the way McGann describes: to make them see the Greeks as more cultured than they were normally taken to be, to see the Turks as more civilised than they were normally taken to be, and to see the Frankish nations as by no means superior to either. One section of his Notes reads:

I have in my possession about twenty-five letters, amongst which some from the Bey of Corinth, written to me by Notaras, the Cogia Bachi, and others by the dragoman of the Caimacan of the Morea (which last governs in Vely Pacha's absence) are said to be favourable specimens of their epistolary style. I also received some at Constantinople from private persons, written in a most hyperbolic style, but in the true antique character. The reader will find a *fac simile* of the handwriting of a good scribe, with specimens of the Romaic, in an appendix at the end of the volume.²

And in the Appendix, he adds

The letter given in the *fac simile* was signed and sent by the Bey of Corinth, and was written I believe by Notaras the Cogia Bachi, a descendant of the great duke of that family who was put to death soon after the capture of Constantinople. It contains merely an apology on account of some complaints lodged against Nouri Bey (the only complaint I ever had occasion to make against a Moslem) by my friend the Marquis of Sligo and myself with the minister at Pera. I will not affront the learned by deciphering it in a printed copy; a slight acquaintance with the written character in a couple of perusals will render it very easy. The contents merely regarding private business are not worth a translation; but as a specimen of the manner of writing in a character generally deemed elegant amongst the modern Greeks, the *fac simile* is annexed to this Appendix.³

It was therefore as an example both of the refinement of contemporary Turkish manners, and of the beauty of contemporary aristocratic Greek calligraphy, that Byron appended his letter from the Bey of Corinth to *Childe Harold* II. But we may wonder how successful his pro-Turkish ambition for it was, because although the calligraphic beauty of its Greek is clear at once, it is very difficult to transcribe and translate. The penultimate sentence, in the note just quoted, is some distance from the truth. Some of the words in the letter are loanwords from Turkish, some of the Greek words (though not many) are mis-spelled, and the grammar is not always perfect. Like Byron's letters to Canning, with their canine quotations from *King Lear* and *Othello*, it is in a mixture of registers. Some words still cannot be understood fully. What has most baffled scholarship, however, is the handwriting, which seems to have proved – until now – an insurmountable barrier to reading the letter. But here it is, in its first-ever English garb, which has been created for it by Dr David Holton, who has been helped with the Turkish words by Dr Mehtin Kunt, and by a literal translation into modern Greek by Professor Vasileios Katsaros, printed on the following page.

1 Jerome J. McGann, *The Beauty of Reflections*, Oxford 1985. p259

2 *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, A Romaunt, John Murray, seventh edition 1814, (hereinafter CHP) pp.181-2

3 CHP pp.295-6

ἐξοχότατε, ἐκλαμπρότατε, πανευγενέστατε, καί ἐπιπόθητέ μοι φίλε μηλιόρδ πυρόν, ἀκριβῶς καί φιλικῶς χαιρετῶ, καί ἐρωτῶ τό ἀκριβόν μοι χατήρι σας.

μετά τούς φιλικούς μοι χαιρετισμούς, καί ἐπερώτησιν τῆς ἀκριβῆς μοι ὑγιείας σας σᾶς φανερώνω, ὅτι εὐρισκόμενος εἰς κόρινθον αὐτάς τὰς ἡμέρας, ἐξέφνης μοῦ ἦλθε προσταγή παρά τοῦ ἐνδοξομεγαλοπρεπεστάτου καί μεκάμ μπειφέντη μου, καί μέ ἐπῆραν εἰς τριπολιτζάν, κάνοντάς μου μέγαν ταζίρι, καί τεκτήρι, διὰ τήν δυσσαρέσκεϊαν ὅπου ἡ ἐκλαμπροτητά σας ἐλάβετε ἀπό λόγουμου περνώντας ἀπό κόρινθον, καί εἰς αὐτό ἔμεινα ἐκστατικῶς, καί πολλά περίλειπος, χωρίς νά ἔχω παραμικράν εἶδησιν. ἐγὼ ἐξοχότατε σᾶς βεβαιῶνω, ὅπου ἐν ὅσον καιρόν ἐγνόρισα τοῦ λόγουμου, καί εὐρέθηκα εἰς τόν χανέ μας, ποτέ δέν ἐξεύρω νά μή δεχθῶ, καί νά μήν περιποιηθῶ κἀνέναν ἀπό ὅσους βιατόρους μηλιόρδους, ἰγκλέζους ἐπέρασαν ἀπ' ἐδῶ, τό κάθε ἄλλον(?), πόσον μάλλον εἰς παρόμοιους ἀνθρώπους ὡσάν τήν ἐκλαμπροτητά σας, ὅπου ἦτον ἡ μεγαλύτερή μου εὐχαρήστησις νά σᾶς εἶδῶ, καί να γνωρισθῶ μέ τό ἄξιον ὑποκείμενόν σου, μᾶ ἡ κακή μου τύχης ἠθέλησε νά μήν εὐρεθῶ εἰς κόρινθον, ἀλλά εἰς τριπολιτζάν, ὅπου τότε εὐγενε τό ἀγερλικι, καί καλαμπαλίκι τοῦ ὑψηλωτάτου αὐθεντός μου, ὅπου τά στρατεύματα τοῦ ὕψους του μέ μέγαν βίαν, καί χωρίς μικράν ὑπομονήν εὐγεναν, ἀλλά μέ μεγαλωτάτην σύγχησιν ἤρπαζαν τά ἄλογα, καί ἐπῆγεναν, καί διαύτην τήν αἰτίαν, καί ἔλλειψιν ἐδικήν μου ἀπό κόρινθον, ἠκολούθησε τό παράπονόν σας, χωρίς σφάλμα ἐδικόν μου, ἀλλά ἐξ' ἁμαρτιῶν μου. μόλον τοῦτο δέν ἔλλειψα νά παιδεύσω σφοδρῶς, τούς βεκῆλιδες, καί ἐπιτρόπους μου ὅπου εἶχα εἰς κόρινθον. λοιπόν ἐκλαμπροτατε φίλε μου, μέ τό νά ἦτον ἀκούσιον τό σφάλμα μου, χωρίς νά ἔχω εἶδησιν, σέ παρακαλῶ νά μέ συμπαθῆς, καί νά μέ περάσης εἰς τήν εὐγενικήν σου φηλίαν καί ἀγάπην, γράφοντάς μου τήν ἀγαθήν σου ὑγιείαν πρός χαροποιήσιν μου, γνωρίζοντάς με φίλον σου εἰλικρινόν. ταῦτα μέν φιλικῶς καί μένω :

1812 :

φεβρουαρίου : 20 :

Τῷ ἐκλαμπροτάτῳ, καί εὐγενεστάτῳ μηλιόρδ πυρῶν. Πανευπροσηγόρως –
εἰς τὰς ἀθήνας –

English translation:

Most excellent, most eminent, most highly noble, and desired friend of mine milord Byron, I salute you affectionately and in friendship, and request your kind favour.

After my friendly greetings and inquiry about your health which is dear to me, I announce to you that, finding myself in Corinth at this time, there came suddenly to me an order from the most glorious and distinguished *kaymekam bey efendi*, and they conducted me to Tripolitsa, subjecting me to a great scolding and reprimand, on account of the displeasure which your eminence received from me while passing through Corinth, and at this I was amazed and much sorrowed, without having the least idea about it. I assure you, excellency, that as far as I myself have known and as long as I have been in our *khan*, I am not aware of ever having failed to receive or attend to any one of those travellers, English milords, who have passed through here. On the contrary: and especially to such persons as your eminence, whom it would have been my greatest pleasure to see, and to become acquainted with your worthy self; however, my ill fortune determined that I should not be in Corinth, but in Tripolitsa, where at that time the baggage and retinue of my supreme master were leaving. There the armies of his highness, with great haste and impatience, were setting forth. Amidst great confusion they began seizing the horses and going on their way. And on account of this, and my own absence from Corinth, your complaint followed, without any fault on my part, but in consequence of my sins. For all this, I have not ceased to punish severely the agents and my commissaries, which I had in Corinth. Therefore, my most eminent friend, in as much as my fault was unintentional, without my being aware, I pray you to forgive me, and to assign me to your noble friendship and affection, by writing to me of your good health, in which I shall rejoice, and by recognising me as your sincere friend. This much in friendship, and I remain: 1812 : February : 20:

[signature in Turkish]

[Ottoman date corresponding to 11 February 1811 in the Julian calendar]

To the most eminent and most noble milord Byron. Most courteously at Athens¹

¹ Facsimile at CHP pp.262-263: translation by David Holton and Mehtin Kunt. We have also been assisted by a literal translation into modern Greek by Professor Vasiles Katsaros.

Dr Holton writes, about the clearly inaccurate date: “The problem of the date remains unsolved. There is a Turkish date which translates as 11 Feb. 1811 in the Julian calendar. If we hypothesise that the Greek secretary was using the Gregorian calendar (twelve days difference) for Byron’s benefit, and that Gregorian 20 February (= 8 Feb. Old Style) was when he did his calligraphy, but Nuri Bey signed and dated it a few days later, the only mystery is 1812. It has to be a slip, but a very strange one.”

It may be doubted whether publishing the *fac simile* ever had quite the educative effects Byron intended. But at least we now have a clearer idea of what its contents signify. However, reading the letter in the light of what we know was going on at Tripolitsa is again strange, for it seems that Nuri Bey received the complaint while he was witnessing a huge troop departure (“the baggage and retinue of my supreme master were leaving”, and so on). This sounds like the departure of Veli Pasha (“my supreme master” ... “the most high one”) and his army, off to help Ali at Iannina, which must have been *before* Byron’s *second* trip, which in turn means that Nuri Bey’s neglect, occasioning the affront, occurred during Byron’s *first* trip, while Veli Pasha was at Tripolitsa – which Byron, in his first letter to Stratford Canning, says was a time when he had found “much better accommodation” at Corinth.

Perhaps Nuri Bey is either confused about when exactly his alleged inhospitality is supposed to have occurred, or is thrashing about in desperation for an excuse.

NOTES: I am very grateful to Dr David Holton and his colleagues for the time they have taken in transliterating and translating the Bey’s letter. I am also grateful to Professor Nora Liasis for her advice. BLJ: *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand.