

BYRON AND ALI PACHA

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I shall first give an outline of my ideas, then go through them again in a bit more detail.

When they were at Malta in September 1809, Byron and his friend Hobhouse took eleven lessons in Arabic, probably from the Abbate Giacchino Navarro, Librarian at the Valletta Public Library. This seems a sure sign they had arrived with no firm intention of going either to Greece or to Constantinople, for in neither place would Arabic be of any use. They bought an Arabic grammar on September 2nd, and started their lessons on the 3rd. Also on the 3rd, however, they met a man who, seeing two young, impressionable and directionless Englishmen, one of whom was of striking beauty, decided to charm them into his circle, and to send them to Albania, to Ali Pasha.

The man was Spiridion Foresti, sometime English Consul on Corfu, but now out of a job. By a secret clause in the 1807 Treaty of Tilsit, the Ionian Islands been restored to the French, and he'd had to leave. He was now assisting Admiral Collingwood, C-in-C Mediterranean Fleet, in a plan to take the Islands back. This would not be difficult, for the French were very unpopular there, and the islanders were anxious to put themselves under English protection (some of their merchantmen had tried to force the Foreign Office's hand in April, by raising the Union Jack in Constantinople harbour). The difficulty lay with Ali Pasha – the criminal parasite and mass-murderer often described as the Third Most Unpopular Man in Modern Greek History, after Hitler and Stalin. Ali had been casting a favourable eye on the Ionians for years – particularly on Santa Maura, and the coastal town of Parga: and, moreover, the English seem to have promised him that he could have them! On June 12th 1809, Collingwood wrote to Wellesley Pole at the Admiralty:

What the Sentiments of the inhabitants of the Islands are towards Ali Pacha, – their detestation of the Turkish Government, – and abhorrence of the Pacha personally –, I have before had occasion to state to their Lordships, His view of subduing the Islands is well known, but he can only make himself master of them by the Aid of the English; – and this introduction to putting the Republicans (now merely a name) under the protection of the British, is not improbably the expedient they have adopted to detach us from any Co-operation with the Pacha of Ioannina in his projects against them, – which

will at least preserve them, from a fate more dreaded, than their present condition, – but is diametrically opposite to the assurance Captain Leake is directed to give him.¹

If the English were to take the Islands, in the teeth of their own assurance that *he* could take them, Ali needed sweetening.

In the twenty-one-year-old Byron, Foresti had found his sweetener. A smooth cosmopolitan, he (together with his son George) took Byron and Hobhouse bathing, entertained them at the theatre, and regaled them with salacious rumour and gossip about the courts of Europe, about Angelica Catalani, and about Napoleon. On September 4th he introduced them to Constance Spencer-Smith, with whom Byron started an affair. By September 15th Byron and Hobhouse had succumbed to his persuasions, and were ready to go to Prevesa, and thence to Tepellene, Ali's Albanian H.Q. They'd no other plans, and Ali sounded exciting. They sailed on the 19th. Whether or not they knew that an English force of 1800-plus men was only three days behind them, aiming at the Ionians, is a point on which both men kept quiet for the rest of their lives.

Compromised by all this was the English Consul at Ioannina, William Martin Leake, topographer, archaeologist, numismatist, and secret agent. *He* had been instructed by Collingwood to *encourage* Ali in his lust for Santa Maura and Parga. Now he would have to carry the can for Albion's perfidy. On September 24th Ali sent Leake a letter, full of sadness and subtextual threat. "You haven't written me anything new," he wrote. "Especially now with the coming of these English I was waiting for some news from you after everything we had talked about all this time." When Byron and Hobhouse arrived at Ioannina, Leake refused to see them – but when their political innocence became clear he thawed a bit, and was more hospitable.

Such was the speed of communication even in 1809 that Ali was expecting his guests. His agents welcomed them in Ioannina, and provided transport for the difficult journey to Tepellene. Leake had told Ali that "an Englishman of great family" was in his dominions – a flattering description of Byron, whose family had never been great, and who had become a lord by accident, but who had the style to carry it off. As they approached Tepellene, Hobhouse drew parallels between Ali and the eighteenth-century reformist Portuguese tyrant, the Marquis de Pombal. It was wishful thinking. Ali reformed roads, but nothing else. Mostly he just killed people, horribly. But he knew a *fait accompli* when he saw one, and congratulated Byron and Hobhouse on the conquest of the Islands, saying how happy he was to have the English for his neighbours.

Exactly what else happened at Tepellene between Ali and Byron, no-one will know – and no-one is anxious to think about it. Part of Byron's motive in travelling was to satisfy his homosexual needs, upon which English law and custom frowned, and Ali's bisexuality was notorious. I doubt very much whether they hit the sack together, but Byron was probably entertained by Ali's Ganymedes, while Ali looked on benignly, and Hobhouse snored away down the passage. Cecil Y. Lang (teacher to Professor Jerome J. McGann, editor of the Clarendon Byron) would have us believe that the event was the single most important in Byron's life, and that his poetry – *Don Juan* in particular – is an encoded confession of the guilt he felt when later political sophistication made him realise how he'd been used.²

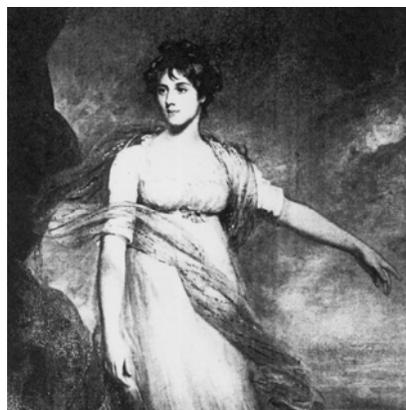
Six weeks after leaving Tepellene, Byron, waiting at Patrass for a favourable wind to cross the Gulf of Corinth, and climb Parnassus, shot an eagle. On the same day (December 10th) Hobhouse recorded, as if with surprise, "... we have observed the profess'd hatred of their masters to be universal amongst the Greeks." Byron was often to use the eagle in his poetry as

I am very grateful to Hugh Barnes, Nora Liassis, and Valeria Vallucci for their ideas and suggestions. A shorter and more optimistic speculation about Byron and Ali Pacha will be found in Kyriakos H. Metaxas, *Byron's Intelligence Mission to Greece*, 1982 *Byron Journal*, pp. 72-4. I have further consulted W.D. Wrigley, *The Diplomatic Significance of Ionian Neutrality, 1821-31* (Peter Lang, 1988) Michael Pratt, *Britain's Greek Empire* (Rex Collings, 1978) William Plomer, *Ali the Lion* (Jonathan Cape, 1936) and *The Diamond of Ioannina* (Jonathan Cape 1970); and Robert Adair, *The Negotiations for the Peace of the Dardanelles in 1808-1809* (Longman, 1845). An attempt at a more objective assessment of Ali is in K.E. Fleming, *The Muslim Bonaparte*, Princeton 1999.

1: Public Record Office, ADM 1/415 No 29.

2: See C.Y. Lang, *Narcissus Jilted*, printed in *Historical Studies and Literary Criticism*, ed. McGann, Madison 1985, pp. 143-79.

an image of freedom, either exercised or denied – it is as if his killing the eagle, and the dawning of political awareness for both him and Hobhouse, coincided. His conscience was to be pricked at intervals by various islanders, especially the Karvellas brothers from Zante, whom he met at Geneva and at Pisa, and who told him of the brutal maladministrations of “King Tom” Maitland, the drunken English Governor-General. I find it hard to believe that Byron’s shame at the way he had allowed himself to be prostituted by Foresti was not an important ingredient in his motive for returning to Greece at the end of his life. He certainly atoned then.



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Now for the more detailed analysis. First, a number of mysteries.

Early in May 1814, it seems that Miss Mercer Elphinstone asked Byron for a loan of the famous Albanian costume³ which he had brought back from his first Eastern journey, and in which he had been painted by Thomas Phillips. Byron was pleased to send her the costume, implying that he disliked it, telling Elphinstone that she could keep it, and concluding:

I send you the Arnaout garments – which will make an admirable costume for a Dutch dragoon. – The Camesa or Kilt (to speak Scottishly) you will find very long – it is the custom with the Beys and a sign of rank to wear it to the ankle – I know not why – but so it is – the million shorten it to the knee which is more antique – and becoming – at least to those who have legs and a propensity to show them. – I have sent but one camesa – the other I will dispatch when it has undergone the Mussulman process of ablution. – – There are greaves for the legs – 2 waistcoats are beneath – one over the Jacket – the cloak – a sash – a short shawl and cap – and a pair of garters (something of the Highland order –) with an ataghan wherewithal to cut your fingers if you don’t take care – over the sash – there is a small leathern girdle with a buckle in the centre. – – – It is put off & on in a few minutes – if you like the dress – keep it – I shall be very glad to get rid of it – as it reminds me of one or two things I don’t wish to remember ...⁴

The eroticism of Byron contemplating Mercer quickly taking the costume off and then putting it on again (he is clearly familiar with all its mechanisms) – is suddenly undercut by his last sentence, a frustratingly cryptic statement, upon which he never enlarges. “... one or two things I don’t wish to remember.” What “things” does the Albanian costume remind him of, and why does he not wish to remember them?

The story of Byron’s first trip to the Eastern Mediterranean, and of his relationship with Ali Pacha, is hard to document because the record is often strewn with lacunæ. The log of the

3: Hobhouse’s diary for October 6th 1809, when he and Byron were in Ioannina, opens “Up 9. Tried on Albanese dresses as fine as pheasants” (B.L.Add.Mss 56527, f.46r.). This is the closest we can get to dating Byron’s acquisition of the famous costume.

4: BLJ IV 112-3.

Salsette for the relevant months of 1809 and 1810 is missing.⁵ The log of the *Entrepreneur* cutter between December 13th 1808 and March 13th 1810, between which dates she may have taken news of the impending arrival of Byron and Hobhouse to William Martin Leake,⁶ is missing. Leake's diary⁷ makes no reference to the visit of Byron and Hobhouse to Ioannina in October 1809; and as we shall see, Hobhouse's diary of the visit to Ali Pacha has been mutilated.

It all looks a bit suspicious.

On September 14th 1816, Hobhouse, staying with Byron at the Villa Diodati outside Geneva, recorded the following in his diary:

Two Carvellas, Greeks, dined here – one a physician the other student in law ... both told me that the English under Campbell in the Islands had made themselves detested – Campbell punishes beyond the law, and would not suffer the criminal to confess before execution. Maitland they said had restored a little the character of the English, which to my mind seems most unaccountably falling everywhere – they were from the Islands –⁸

General Sir James Campbell had taken command of Corfu on the final expulsion of the French in 1814, and had ruled the Ionian Islands until replaced by Sir Thomas Maitland. Nicholas and Francis Karvellas had an interest in stirring Byron and Hobhouse against him, for they were both from Zante. Here as elsewhere in the diary, Hobhouse plays with his cards very close to his chest; but I would suggest that among the emotions which both he and Byron felt, when the Karvellas brought them news of the supposed English misgovernment on the Ionian Islands, shame, and guilt by association, would have dominated; for I believe they had facilitated the English occupation of the Ionian Islands in the first place.

The Ionian Islands were only notionally Greek. Several Italians of Byron's and Hobhouse's acquaintance – the Countess Albrizzi and Ugo Foscolo, for example – were born on them. Their recent history was very confused. They had been Venetian colonies, intermittently from 1204, when they were part of the plunder of the Fourth Crusade, and continuously from 1499 until the 1797 Treaty of Campo Formio destroyed Venice's independence for ever and passed them to France; they controlled the trade routes to the Levant on which Venice's prosperity depended. Napoleon was anxious to keep them, knowing that whoever possessed them could dominate those routes, on which England's prosperity now depended in turn. But his soldiery alienated the populace by their derisive attitude to the Greek Church, by their tolerance of Jews, by their insistence on numbering all houses (which facilitated tax-collection), and by their derision for such popular superstitions as the worship of the relics of Saint Spiridon.⁹ After Nelson's Egyptian victories had weakened French power in the Eastern Mediterranean, Sultan Selim III and Tsar Paul – strange bedfellows – decided that the French could not be allowed to remain, and late in 1798 and early in 1799 the atheists and republicans were thrown out, amidst general local enthusiasm. The unlikely upshot of the Russo-Turkish occupation was the proclamation of a federal Septinsular Republic, on March 21st 1800. Then in March 1801 Tsar Paul was assassinated: his successor, Alexander I, reversed his foreign policy, and insisted on a Russian / Turkish withdrawal, only to reverse *that* decision in August 1802, and re-occupy the Islands unilaterally in 1803; John Capodistria, later first President of Greece, was the Islands' Foreign Minister. Then, by a secret article of the Treaty of Tilsit in July 1807, he turned the clock back still further, and re-ceded the Islands to France. The atheists (if that's what the French were in 1807 – they were certainly no longer republicans) returned in August. England felt, correctly, that her aspirations eastward were being frustrated. William Meyer, an official at the English

⁵: Public Record Office ADM 52, 3863-4599.

⁶: Public Record Office ADM 51, 2072 parts 5-6.

⁷: Cambridge University Classics Faculty.

⁸: BL.Add.Mss. 56536 ff.119v.-120r. For the Karvellas brothers, who were from Zante, see *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Marchand, John Murray 1973-1994, (BLJ) X 169 and n. See also H.B.Forster, *Byron and Nicolas Karvellas. Keats-Shelley Journal*, January 1953 (II) pp. 73-7.

⁹: For Saint Spiridon, see Gerald Durrell, *My Family and Other Animals*, Rupert Hart-Davis (1956) Chapter 7.

embassy in Constantinople whom Byron and Hobhouse met, wrote in a memo to Robert Adair, the ambassador:

... the Supremacy of Great Britain over the Mediterranean would be rendered compleat and permanent by the possession of Corfú: nor could it be shaken even by the fall of Sicily or Sardinia, which Islands however by the occupation of Corfú, would be so much more strongly secured to their lawful sovereigns.

The Points of *Minorca, Malta, Corfu* and *Cerigo*, independent of the Island of Elba, would enable Great Britain to traverse effectually all the Arsenals and Maritime communications of the Enemy. These Insular Posts are by their nature and position the Citadels of the Mediterranean Sea. If possessed by Great Britain, as her Naval Sovereignty and Dignity now seem to require, they will enable her to defeat all the Enterprises of her Enemies in the South and in the East of Europe; and will afford her the surest pledges for the Indemnification of the Immense Expenditure to be incurred in the counteraction of the future hostile Enterprises of France.¹⁰

Watching these decisions and revisions from the mainland was the smooth but monstrous Ali Pacha, politician, bandit, road-builder, peace-keeper, parasite, sadist, mass-murderer and energetic bisexual. He was, if you like, the Saddam Hussein of his generation. He had taken advantage of the first expulsion of the French in 1798, and had invaded Prevesa on the coast, building a pyramid of the heads his troops severed there;¹¹ Byron had celebrated this feat in the song *Tambourgi! tambourgi!* in *Childe Harold II* – a song used as a refrain in the recent BBC2 mini-series. Afterwards he had poured twelve thousand troops on to Corfu itself, only to be forced to withdraw them when the Russians took over.¹² He courted whoever controlled the Islands, looking after his own interests while acting as Vizier to the Turkish Sultan. If Britain wanted to secure their route to India (“as her Naval Sovereignty and Dignity seemed to require,” in Meyer’s words), they needed him on their side, for their sea-route to India went through the Ionians, which he overlooked, and their land-route to India went through Albania, which he controlled.

On January 5th 1809, Sir Robert Adair and Stratford Canning – First Secretary at Constantinople – concluded a treaty with the Sultan, healing a breach which had been created by the ill-advised English bombardment of the Turkish capital in January 1807. Their way had been prepared secretly in advance, and consolidated subsequently, by the “classical topographer and numismatist” (read “secret agent”) William Martin Leake, who had met with Ali – the Sultan’s “Vizier” – and supplied him with arms and ammunition. The time seemed ripe to dislodge the French from the Ionians for good; various English officials in Malta, particularly Spiridon Foresti, previously English Consul on Zante and Minister for the Islands, had for some time been urging action.¹³ Adair pointed to the excellent relationship England had with Ali Pacha as an important element when weighing-up the risks involved.¹⁴ But Ali pretended to be worried about that relationship, and even threatened, if the English left him to confront the French alone, to prevent Leake, now English resident, from leaving Ioannina:¹⁵ in effect, to kidnap him. Leake wrote to Constantinople begging either to be promoted or replaced.¹⁶ On April 9th 1809 Adair had to write Ali a letter reassuring him of England’s friendship.¹⁷

It was into this situation that Hobhouse and Byron sailed, in September 1809. It is important to understand that Byron had, in a letter to Henry Drury of June 25th 1809, given as one motive for his tour, the desire to write a treatise ‘to be entitled “Sodomy simplified or Pæderasty proved to be praiseworthy from ancient authors and from modern practice.”’ He adds, “Hobhouse further hopes to indemnify himself in Turkey for a life of exemplary chastity by letting out his ‘fair bodye’ to the whole Divan.”¹⁸

10: Public Record Office FO 78 64 262-4.

11: Plomer, *Lion*, pp. 87-8.

12: Pratt, *op.cit.*, pp. 78-81.

13: Wrigley, *op.cit.*, p. 43; Pratt, *op.cit.*, p. 95.

14: Wrigley, *op.cit.*, p. 53; Adair, *op.cit.*, Vol.II, p.144.

15: Adair, *op.cit.*, Vol.II, p.217.

16: Public Record Office FO 78 65 121-2.

17: Adair, *op.cit.*, Vol.II, pp.151-2.

18: BLJ I 208.

Hobhouse and Byron land in Malta on August 31st, but sleep on board the Townshend packet that night – partly because the Maltese shore batteries will not honour Byron, the English peer, with a salute. As soon as they arrive, a battle of wills opens, as to which faction on Malta will advise them successfully, on the next stage of their travels. One party wants them, at first, to go to Constantinople, the other to Prevesa, and perhaps to Ali Pacha. The day after they land, they are invited to meet Sir Alexander Ball, the Governor:

Went to the Palace. Shown in to Sir Alexander Ball. Took places. Asked where we lodged – advised to go on Sunday with convoy to Smyrna (*Wizard* Brig, Captain Ferris).¹⁹

Smyrna would be a staging-post for Constantinople. Later in the day they dine with Major-General Hildebrand Oakes, the civil and military commissioner, where they notice a

... perpetual recommendation to go instantly to Constantinople –²⁰

It sounds as though the British establishment is anxious either to get rid of them or to save them from something.

However, on September 3rd another character enters the drama, who is much more friendly, and seems instantly to know the kind of gossip – half political, half salacious – which will fascinate Hobhouse, at least:

... met a Mr Foresti, son of a “*famous*” Foresti, who mentioned anecdotes of Bounaparte, discovering an assassin by his agitation, and the “snuff-box story” ... Sir William Drummond’s strange behaviour at the court of Sicily. Young Wellesley Pole bullied the Divan and got Wallachia, etc, for the Russians, who got him appointed secretary of embassy at Constantinople, where he had to do everything, as Arbuthnot did nothing. Sir George Rumbold disguised himself as a serjeant and tried to seduce Danish soldiers at Altona. Spencer Smith certainly guilty ...²¹

It seems to me that this is George Foresti, the son of Spiridion Foresti²² subsequently appointed by his father as British Consul-General at Ioannina, replacing Leake.²³ The following day he seeks them out again, apparently with the aim of winning Byron to his side too; and again, we sense that he knows his man:

Went to the Theatre and saw a play of Kotzebue’s, performed without an afterpiece – pit very full – play very dull, but the people like it better than the operas – joined by Mr Foresti ... introduced by Mr Foresti to *la Celebre* Mrs Spencer-Smith and the son of the Spanish ambassador at London – Mrs Spencer Smith a tall pretty woman, with fat arms. Well made.²⁴

Byron’s reaction to Constance Spencer Smith was less clinical than Hobhouse’s: she was the first woman even roughly of his own class with whom he entangled romantically. On September 5th Spiridion Foresti himself meets them, and is as assiduous in his attentions as his son has been:

Up at 10. Lesson in Arabic. Mr Spiridion Foresti called, and showed us how to go to La Pietà to bathe in a boat. Dined at home. Mr Spiridion Foresti took us to the theatre in the evening. Mr Foresti is a ward of Mr North’s – when a boy “Mr Gibbon” took a pleasure in hearing him read Greek ... He told us that Lord Elgin had defaced many fine columns at Athens to get at the *releivos*, which the French never did ...²⁵

19: BL.Add.Mss. 56527 f.26r.

20: BL.Add.Mss. 56527 f.26v.

21: BL.Add.Mss. 56527 f.28r.-v.

22: Wrigley, op.cit., p.57.

23: Wrigley, op.cit. p.57; Adair, op.cit., Vol.II, pp.323-4; Plomer, op.cit., p. 155.

24: BL.Add.Mss. 56527 f.28v.

25: BL.Add.Mss. 56527 ff.28v.-29r.

However, on September 6th the establishment reasserts its advice:

Up 10. Lesson in Arabic. Bathe at La Pieta. Dinner (being the weekly public day) at Sir Alexander Ball's – large party. Pressed to go in a cutter next day to Constantinople.²⁶

At first it seems they are yielding to the pressure, for on September 8th, Hobhouse records,

Lord Byron made a bet of 20 guineas with a Mr Wherry that he got into the female slave market at Constantinople.²⁷

But on September 11th, Foresti is again on the offensive, acting as tour guide, host, and gossip. He shows Hobhouse (and perhaps Byron – Hobhouse's failure to mention him is no proof of his absence from the excursion) Civita Vecchia, St Paul's cave, and the Boschette Gardens; and keeps up the kind of in-talk which he knows will impress:

Informed by Foresti that Lord Valentia had caught the shitten pox in Egypt, as he heard from his surgeon – also that there are 95,000 inhabitants of Malta: 15,000 visitants. Dined at home. Lesson in Arabic. Went to the play with Mr Foresti – Lord Byron gallanting at Mrs. Fraser's.²⁸

On September 13th Foresti finally plays his trump card – sensational stories about Ali Pacha and his Greek subjects:

Lesson in Arabic, then bathe. Dinner at home. Mr Foresti in the evening mentioned some curious passages from the wars of the Suliots, written in Modern Greek. Three hundred women flung themselves over a cliff. The son of the chief Suliote being taken before the son of Ali Pacha in Ioannina, the young Pacha addressed him with, "Well, we have got you and we will now burn you alive." "I know it," replied the prisoner; "and when my father catches you he will serve you in the same manner". Mr Frederick North established a school at Prevesa.²⁹

Leslie Marchand³⁰ reads this episode as showing that Foresti "encouraged Byron and Hobhouse to visit Ali Pacha;" whether or not "encouraged" is the right word, implying as it does a prior predilection on their part, by the next day he has at least succeeded in pointing them in that direction:

Last lesson in Arabic – called on Colonel Dickens, Mr Laing, Mr Strani – and made preparations for sailing in the corvette for Prevesa³¹

On the 15th they make preparations, albeit a bit unwillingly:

Found we were to go in the *Spider*. Called on Sir Alexander Ball – advised to take provision in the *Spider* – commanded by Lieutenant Oliver: haggling about this point – send a note – no answer.³²

26: BL.Add.Mss. 56527 f.29r.

27: BL.Add.Mss. 56527 ff.29v.-30r.

28: BL.Add.Mss. 56527 ff.30v.-31r. *Lord V: George, Viscount Valentia, whose Travels to India, Ceylon, the Red Sea, Abyssinia and Egypt in the Years 1802-1806* had been reviewed in the *Quarterly Review* for August 1809 (pp. 88-126). See *English Bards* 1025 (early editions): *Let vain Valentia rival luckless Carr ... For Mrs Fraser, see Byron's poem Farewell to Malta, Lord Byron The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. McGann (Oxford 1980) I pp. 338-40, line 33.

29: BL.Add.Mss. 56527 f.31r. *Passages in modern Greek: unidentified. 300 women: on Ali's expulsion of the Suliots from Suli in 1803, sixty women and children threw themselves over a precipice at Zalongo; early in the following year, 130 women, again with their children, threw themselves into the river Achelous near Vurgareli. ... the son of the chief Suliote ... the son of Ali Pacha: the twelve-year-old son of the chief Suliote was Photo Tzavellas, and this interview happened after his father had abandoned him to Ali Pacha in 1792: but eventually he entered Ali's service. Veli Pacha ruled the Morea in Ali's name. Byron met him in July 1810. Mr Frederick North: the future Lord Guilford.*

30: BLJ II 262n.

31: BL.Add.Mss. 56527 f.31v. *Mr Laing: unidentified. Mr Strani: the English Consul at Patras.*

32: BL.Add.Mss. 56527 f.31v.

The *Spider* is the corvette bound for Prevesa, unlike the vessel suggested previously, the *Wizard*, which was going to Smyrna, on the way to Constantinople: Ball and Foresti are now speaking with one voice. On this day Byron writes to his mother:

I ... embark tomorrow for Patras from whence I proceed to Yanina where Ali Pacha holds his court, so I shall soon be amongst the Mussulmen ...³³

On the 19th – Byron having bade farewell to Mrs Spencer Smith – they sail for Prevesa. Three days later, on the 22nd, an English expeditionary force of 1,857 men, consisting of the 35th and 44th Regiments, the 20th Dragoons, and the Corsican Rangers, led by Major-General Sir John Oswald, with Richard Hughes as their assistant quarter-master general and Spiridon Foresti as special adviser, also sets out from Malta – to take the Ionian Islands from the French. They succeed in the case of every island except Corfu; Zante falls on October 2nd; Cefalonia on October 5th; Church and the Corsican Rangers take Ithaca on October 8th; and Cerigo, much further south, falls on October 12th. Santa Maura holds out until March 22nd 1810, when the battle for its capture involves nearly every single English casualty suffered in the campaign; and Corfu, too heavily fortified for a direct assault, remains in French hands until the defeat of Napoleon, in June 1814. In no document does either Hobhouse or Byron comment on the coincidence. All Byron allows the public is this (my italics):

Of Albania Gibbon remarks, that a country ‘within sight of Italy is less known than the interior of America’. *Circumstances, of little consequence to mention*, led Mr. Hobhouse and myself into that country before we visited any other part of the Ottoman dominions ...³⁴

And so cryptic is the record in Hobhouse’s diary, and in both versions of the book which he wrote about the journey,³⁵ that one cannot tell from it whether they are confident on entering Greece that Ali Pacha’s palace in Tepellene really is their goal: only Byron’s letter to his mother of September 15th, which I just quoted, mentions the possibility.

The brother of the English consul at Prevesa was charming, and took them around the ruins of Nicopolis the following day; but Hobhouse’s state of mind may perhaps be gauged by the recurrence in his diary at this point of humiliating lavatorial detail, to which he is less addicted elsewhere. There is even a vignette of Byron squatting at a jakes “... with your knees to your nose, in a most distressing posture ...”³⁶

Although the Consul provided them with a boat to Salora, they were perpetually bothered by distrustful “post-masters” and by the poor quality of the horses they were able to obtain. However, at Arta, where rain delayed them from October 1st to 3rd, they did enjoy the company of Captain Elmas (who impressed Hobhouse by his refusal to put the soap directly into one’s hand, on the grounds that it washed love away) and by the song celebrating Ali Pacha’s 1798 “victory” at Prevesa (involving the pile of skulls) which his soldiers sang lustily, and which Byron put into *Childe Harold II*.

On October 5th, still on poor-quality horses, they entered Ioannina, being made “a little sick”³⁷ by the sight of a man’s severed arm and part of his side, which was hung from a tree opposite a butcher’s shop. They were further depressed when told that Leake, the English Resident, was ill, and could not see them. Then suddenly everything changed:

After [our] dressing all in red, His Highness the Pacha’s secretary and the *Primate* [were] ushered in. The minister spoke French and overwhelmed me with the news that his Highness had been aware of our intention to visit Ioannina, that he had ordered everything to be prepared for our reception, that he

33: BLJ I 224.

34: CHP II, Byron’s note to 338 - CPW II 192.

35: His two books are *A Journey Through Albania and other Provinces of Turkey to Constantinople during the Years 1809-10* (James Cawthorne 1813) and its later rewritten and re-annotated version, *Travels in Albania and other Provinces of Turkey in 1809 & 1810* (John Murray 1855).

36: BL.Add.Mss. 56527 f.39r.

37: B.L.Add. Mss. 56527 f.45r.

was sorry to be obliged to leave his city to finish a little war, but begged that we would follow him, and that he had ordered an escort to conduct us to his camp. The Primate spoke never a word, but bowed very gracefully. Lord Byron [being] introduced to them, he, the secretary, repeated his communication, and left us, as he said, to give orders for the necessary preparations. After dinner again [we were] astonished to find the Pacha had left orders that we should be furnished with everything for our table, and on no account allowed to pay – as also that we had been expected four days, and that Captain Leake had deferred leaving Ioannina on purpose to receive us!!!³⁸

How did Ali Pacha know they were coming? It is not even clear that he did, for in his books³⁹ Hobhouse glosses over his astonishment and insists that “these were the usual honours;” but Byron could not believe that he was not special, and on November 12th wrote to his mother:

He [Ali] had heard that an Englishman of rank was in his dominions & had left orders in Yannina with the Commandant to provide a house & supply me with every kind of necessary, *gratis* ...⁴⁰

Notice that where Hobhouse writes of “our intention to visit Ioannina,” Byron writes more off-handedly that “an Englishman of rank was in his dominions.” We may read a plan into Hobhouse’s words: not, now, into Byron’s. Later in the letter he asserts that the information and the recommendation had been forwarded to Ali by Leake:

... he [Ali] then said the English Minister (Cap^t Leake) had told him I was of great family ...⁴¹

This begs a previous question, namely, how did *Leake* know they were coming? He must have been alerted by a dispatch from Malta – perhaps Ball, or Foresti, sent one in the *Spider*, or in the *Entreprenant* cutter.⁴² We cannot tell, for the cutter’s log for this period has not survived, and even if it had, would not have contained details of dispatches carried. Whoever it was from, the plan, to flatter and please Ali Pacha with a visit from a beautiful and impressionable young Englishman “of great family,” was expertly timed, for on October 6th Ali’s secretary, Spiridon Colovo, was able to congratulate them on the news that Zante had fallen to the troops of the English squadron.

It was on October 6th that Byron probably obtained the Albanian costume which over four years later he was give away to Mercer Elphinstone.

Just how “great” the “family” that Byron was thought to belong is perhaps made clear by a letter of the Marquis of Sligo to his mother of August 3rd 1810. By now Hobhouse had gone home, and Sligo and Byron were, separately, touring the Morea. Both intended to visit Ali’s son Veli Pacha at Tripolitza, but Sligo got there first, and it seems, was mistaken for Byron, about whom they had heard at Tripolitza:

I should first however tell you that I had about fifty Messages from him by his [*Veli*’s] Prime Minister in the course of the Evening and the painter found out in conversation the [*sic: for “he”*] took me for the Kings Nephew and that I was come on a secret mission of importance, accordingly he said that if My Mission was of importance & secrecy that I should come at night secretly ...⁴³

If my conjecture is right, then, Ali Pacha had received Byron under the impression that he was George III’s nephew. Was this what Spiridion Foresti had conveyed to Tepellene, and was this the reason for Ali’s great pleasure and flattery?

Accompanied now by Spiridon Colovo, by his servant, by a priestly relation of his, by an Albanian called Vassily, and by George Fousmioti, their dragoman, or travel courier / interpreter, they (Byron, Hobhouse, and Fletcher) set off for Tepellene on October 11th. They

38: BL.Add.Mss. 56527 ff.45r.-v.

39: Hobhouse, *A Journey*, 53; *Travels*, I 46.

40: BLJ I 226.

41: BLJ I 227.

42: Adair, op.cit., Vol.II, pp.210 and 223.

43: Yale Beinecke, OSB MSS 74 Box 1, Folder 1, p.2.

rode on much better horses, for which they paid nothing, and in a much better mood: and arrived at Ali Pacha's home town at five o'clock on Thursday October 19th. That evening, reports Hobhouse,

Lord Byron gave me a lecture about not caring *enough for the English* nobility – – – – ⁴⁴

There follow the meetings with Ali Pasha. Hobhouse is consistent, in his manuscript diary, and in both versions of his travel book, in recording three: one late in the morning of October 20th, one at what seems the same time on the 21st, and one – their farewell – after dinner on the 22nd. Here, in its entirety, is his diary description of the first meeting:

Up late – waited on the Vizier with Dragoman, Georgio Fousmioti, and the Secretary. Vizier affable, good humoured, about my own height [five feet five] fat, a white beard, high turban, many folds, ataghan studded with diamonds, in a room with a fountain in the middle. Showed us a mountain howitzer, and looking through his glass observed that on the other side of the River he saw the Prime Minister of his enemy Ibrahim, who had come over to his part. He asked Lord Byron, whom I thought he looked a little leeringly at, how he could have had the heart to leave his mother. He said he considered us as his children (he sent us fruit after dinner and desired moreover that we might have every thing we wished) – ⁴⁵

For the fountain, see Byron's own note to *Don Juan* V, Stanza 55:

A Common furniture. – I recollect being received by Ali Pacha in a room containing a marble bason and fountain &^c. &^c. &^c.⁴⁶

In his November letter to his mother, Byron gives his version of what Ali said:

His first question was why at so early an age I left my country? (the Turks have no idea of travelling for amusement) he then said the English Minister Capt. Leake had told him I was of a great family, & desired his respects to my mother, which I now in the name of Ali Pacha present to you. He said he was certain I was a man of birth because I had small ears, curling hair, & little white hands, and expressed himself pleased with my appearance & garb. He told me to consider him as a father whilst I was in Turkey, & said he looked on me as his son. – Indeed he treated me like a child, sending me almonds & sugared sherbet, fruit & sweetmeats 20 times a day. – He begged me to visit him often, and at night when he was more at leisure – I then after coffee & pipes retired for the first time.⁴⁷

Notice that, according to Byron, the gestures of “hospitality” extend to him alone. He seems to have remembered Ali's exhortation to “think of us as of a father” – as we shall see; but neither he nor Hobhouse (whom Mrs Byron would not have understood to have been present at the interview) say anything about responding to Ali's request to visit him at night.

During the second interview, on October 21st, before which they had sent Ali a gun and a telescope as presents, Hobhouse records (in his travel books, but *not* in his diary):

Ali congratulated us upon the news which had arrived a fortnight before, of the surrender of Zante, Cefalonia, Ithaca, and Cerigo, to the British Squadron: he said, he was happy to have the English for his neighbours; that he was sure they would not serve him as the Russians and the French had done, in protecting his runaway robbers; that he had always been a friend to our Nation, even during our war with Turkey, and had been instrumental in bringing about the peace.⁴⁸

For “runaway robbers” read “Greek insurgents,” part of one of whom they had seen swinging from a tree in Ioannina. Leake had assured them that the dead man had been a robber: but the

44: BL.Add.Mss. 56527 f.58v.

45: BL.Add.Mss. 56527 f.59r.

46: Fair copy, John Murray Archive.

47: BLJ I 228.

48: Hobhouse, *A Journey*, I 112; *Travels*, I 98-9.

1855 version of Hobhouse's book⁴⁹ reveals that he had been a priest and a rebel, named Euthemos Blacavas.⁵⁰

In his diary account, Hobhouse ignores the Islands completely, and writes (in contradiction to Byron, who has Ali praising his small features in the first interview):

... the Vizier observed Lord Byron's little ears, by which he observed to George that he could discover him to be of an ancient house. Dined in apartments. Bed, early. Finish day.⁵¹

Byron relayed the compliment to his mother, as we have seen, and eleven years later put it into his rough draft note to *Don Juan* V Stanza 106:

There is perhaps nothing more distinctive of birth than the hand – it is almost the only sign of blood which Aristocracy can generate. – I remember a Pacha's remarking that he knew that a certain Englishman was *nobly born* – because "he had *small ears – small hands, & curling silky hair.* – –"⁵²

The third and last meeting is, according to Hobhouse, the farewell of October 22nd:

... dined went to the Vizier took leave – and asked leave to take Vasily about with us – and another domestic Albanian. Vasily called in and spoken to very kindly by His Highness, who knows how to do these things well. Told it was time to go having to get up early next morning!!⁵³

Hobhouse ends his entry for October 22nd with this:

Translation of an Italian stanza
written in the window of a Turkish Harem –

Dear Youth, whose form and face unite
To lead my sinful soul astray;
Whose wanton willing looks invite
To every bliss and teach the way.

Ah spare thyself, thyself and me,
Withold the too-distracting joy;
Ah cease so fair and fond to be,
And look less lovely or more coy.⁵⁴

Here his diary really does present a conundrum, for the page previous to this one is torn out. It is the only page so treated in all the volumes of the diary that I have seen so far. The first side of its stub has words which are similar to those which precede the translation, and may have contained its rough draft; but the second side of the stub is blank, and there is no way of telling what was on it. Our sense that something is being withheld is reinforced, firstly by the homoerotic poem, and secondly by Byron's statement, in the letter to his mother, that

I saw him [Ali] thrice afterwards.⁵⁵

... that is, three times after the first meeting on October 20th – which would make four meetings, to one of which, unless Byron is being inaccurate, Hobhouse, perhaps because he was short and ugly, was not invited. A clue of sorts may be found in one of the cancelled stanzas to Childe Harold II, which was cut on the advice of Dallas, Murray, perhaps Gifford, and certainly

⁴⁹: Hobhouse, *Travels*, I 105 na.

⁵⁰: Plomer, *Lion*, pp. 142-4: here his name is transliterated Evthymio Vlachavas.

⁵¹: BL.Add.Mss. 56527 f.60r.

⁵²: Fair copy, John Murray Archive.

⁵³: BL.Add.Mss. 56527 ff.60r.-v.

⁵⁴: BL.Add.Mss. 56527 f.61r.

⁵⁵: BLJ I 228.

– I should think, if his opinion was asked – Hobhouse. It has languished unread in footnotes and appendices ever since:

Childe Harold with that chief held colloquy,
 Yet what they spake, it boots not to repeat,
 Converse may little charm strange ear, or eye –
 Albeit he rested in that spacious seat
 Of Moslem luxury, the choice retreat
 Of sated Grandeur from the city's noise,
 And were it humbler, it in sooth were sweet;
 But Peace abhorreth artificial joys,
 And Pleasure, leagued with Pomp, the zest of both destroys. –

Was Ali too sophisticated a lover for the idealistic Harold, and did experience of that “seat” – whether “spacious” or “worthy” – confirm Harold in his instinctive “taste” (or “zest”) for younger partners, closer in youth and innocence to himself? (On October 2nd a Greek doctor at Arta had told Hobhouse that Ali “had a scintum perineum from making like Phaedo the most of his youth”). Perhaps we really should give more weight to Cecil Lang’s idea, that an encoded depiction of what went on is to be found in *Don Juan* IX and X in the relationship between Juan (who has only loved Julia and Haidee) and Catherine the Great (who has loved Potemkin, Orloff, Lanskoi, Momonoff, Zubov, Yermoloff, Sherbatoff ...) Perhaps it really is true that in the Russian Cantos of *Don Juan* Byron confesses covertly what in *Childe Harold* he was forced to keep surreptitious?

On January 5th 1810 George Foresti writes to Hudson Lowe, who is by now Civil Administrator on Cefalonia and Ithaca. He refers to an “extraordinary Proposition” which Ali has just made. The proposition is probably the one whereby Ali would help the English in the taking of Santa Maura,⁵⁶ whatever it is, it’s clearly a pleasant surprise:

It is impossible not to believe that he must have had some personal & forcible motive for making this Proposition, and as I can hardly suspect it to have been the Effect of his recent Visitors – I conclude that Mr. Canning must have made some strong Remonstrance to His Highs. Agent at Constantinople, upon Mr. Manthos’ late Mission to Zante ...⁵⁷

Foresti’s tone is unctuous, and leaves us to suspect that, in fact, he feels “the Effect of his recent Visitors” on Ali to have been greater in reality than he claims to think.

There still exist many despatches of 1809 and 1810, from both Forestis, to Hudson Lowe, from Lowe to the Forestis, from Oswald to Lowe, and so on, discussing Ali Pacha and the Ionians in great detail.⁵⁸ Byron and Hobhouse are never named. By early 1810 they are already forgotten, a footnote to a footnote in the history of English Imperialism.

It’s important to understand that neither Byron nor Hobhouse were “philhellenes” at this stage. While they approach Ali’s palace, and for weeks after they have left it, neither Hobhouse’s diary, nor Byron’s letters, show any awareness of the political dimension of Greek suffering, or of Ali’s part in it – even when Greek women are beaten up, and their homes broken into, to provide them, Ali’s guests, with accommodation.⁵⁹

It is not until they have left Ali’s territory, put their Albanian escort behind them, and reached Vostiza on the Gulf of Corinth in early December, that light starts to dawn. Here they meet Andreas Londros, who is at this point, though Greek, a Cogia Basha, or local governor for the Turks, but who is, twelve years later, to become a leader in the Greek War of Independence,

56: See Plomer, *Diamond*, 155; Ali was forbidden by the Porte to help them, and told to remain neutral.

57: BL.Add.Mss. 20183 f. 3.

58: See BL.Add.Mss. 20109, 20110, 20183.

59: Such an incident occurs on October 23rd (B.L. Add. Mss. 56527 61v).

and a valued contact of Byron's on his return in 1823.⁶⁰ Hobhouse patronises him at first as "a very little fellow with an enormous cap;"⁶¹ but is impressed when Londros tells him that he has "had from his childhood upwards time to study only politics."⁶² The Englishmen want to cross the Gulf and visit Parnassus; but the winds are contrary for some days, and give them time to get to know Londros better. Hobhouse's diary entry for December 9th runs:

Up 10. Wind contrary. Our young Cogia Bassa being gone to transact business with the Waiwode (for he has a command even over all the other Cogia Bassa's in the Peloponnesus) I staid at home and read Thucydides' character of the ancient Greeks – see how much the present Albanians and the freer Greeks resemble their forefathers. Before dinner went out again to shoot woodcocks on the shore, by which we came and found none – but Byron shot an Eagle – came home. A better dinner today, but all fowl. This evening the Doctor mentioned some circumstances of "Riga," who about twenty years ago attempted to organise a Revolution of the Greeks – he was a man of letters and had sufficient address to obtain offers of pecuniary assistance from all the Greek merchants settled in the various parts of Europe, but being at Vienna was given up to the Grand Signor by Joseph Y^e second – and executed. The Patriotic song of the Greeks is a translation of "*Allons Enfants*" – the little Cogia Bassa, at the mention of Riga's name, was in an ecstasy, and tumbled over y^e draft board on which he was playing with the Doctor. This seemed odd in a man in so high employ under the Turks – but we have observed the professed hatred of their masters to be universal amongst the Greeks.⁶³

Byron's shooting of the eagle, and the dawning of his and Hobhouse's political understanding, coincide with startling aptness: it is as if they must not go to Parnassus until they have got the message.⁶⁴ The following day's entry in Hobhouse's diary is dominated by a rough and partial transcription of *Δευτε Παιδες*, the version of the *Marseillaise* by that Riga, whose very name causes Londros to fall over his draughts-board.⁶⁵ Both Byron and Hobhouse ultimately translate it all.⁶⁶

Byron's guilt over the eagle was to haunt him for a long time,⁶⁷ and he atoned by using the bird as a recurring metaphor in his poetry for a sacred freedom to which normal man can never aspire.⁶⁸

To conclude: whatever the case with Byron's attitude to the Greeks when he was in Greece, we can imagine what his thoughts about his trip to Tepellene must have been when he contemplated it with hindsight. We can also imagine why he spoke of it hardly at all. The humiliating knowledge that he had been employed as a toy-boy in the interests of English hegemony must have rankled, and given him a particular detestation of the establishment which had so used him. It may also have increased his sense of alienation from the affluent English readership to whom he was, in Professor McGann's words, "pander and whore"⁶⁹ in his writing throughout his Years of Fame.

He maintained his silence for ever. It is if, becoming confused about his relationship with Ali, he was afraid of passing any comment at all. In May 1820, R.B. Hoppner wrote to him

You have heard I presume of Ali Pacha's having declared himself independent of the Porte. This is the only news we have here, it is reported that he has been baptized which requires confirmation should he have done so, by this masterly stroke of Policy, he will draw over all the Greeks to his party.⁷⁰

60: See BLJ XI 103-4, 122-3, and 141.

61: B.L.Add.Mss. 56527 76r (entry for December 5th).

62: B.L.Add.Mss. 56527 76v (entry for December 6th).

63: B.L.Add.Mss. 56527 77r-77v (entry for December 9th). Thucydides: in the opening of *The Peloponnesian War* he dwells on the ancient Greeks' skills in piracy and armed robbery.

64: They reach Parnassus on December 16th. Byron's Falstaffian assertion, at BLJ III 253, that he saw six eagles over Parnassus, or, at BLJ IX 41, that he saw twelve, is not born out by Hobhouse's diary.

65: For Konstantin Riga, see *Childe Harold II*, n3, and *The Bride of Abydos*, II 380n.

66: Byron's translation is at CPW I 330-2; Hobhouse's, at *Journey II* 586-7.

67: See BLJ III 253.

68: See *The Siege of Corinth*, 1029-end; *Manfred*, I ii 29-36; or *The Age of Bronze*, III 55-6.

69: Jerome J. McGann, *Byron and Romanticism* (Cambridge 2002), p. 36.

70: JMA.

Byron did not react to this news.⁷¹

There is another, amusing document which allows us to infer something. On October 22nd 1820, Teresa Guiccioli wrote a letter to her lover, with the following in the postscript:

Ali – Bassa – quel tuo Amico – Padre – quel cuore tenero – liberale – forse è morto – – è una perdita pel Mondo – pe'buoni patrioti – e per le finanze de'suoi domini – (perchè la popolazione si accrescerà), irreparabile. Ma davvero Amor mio si dispiace a te, dispiacerà anche a me la sua morte – – nulla però potrà farla dispiacere a Pierino! – in ogni modo però se fosse morte nella maniera che si dice sarebbe il punto più luminoso della Sua vita. – Ma perchè ti ho fatto queste ciarle? io non lo sò – – ma io credo p una magica potenza che non mi permette quando scrivo, o parlo a te, *di star ne'limiti della discrezione. Perdona Amor Mio!*

*[Ali – Pasha – that Friend – Father of yours – that tender heart – liberal – perhaps he is dead – – it is a loss to the World – to good patriots – and to the finances of his domains (because the population will increase), irreparably. – But in truth, my Love, if it causes you sorrow, his death will be a cause of sorrow to me also – – nothing, however, can make it a cause of sorrow to Pierino! In any case, however, if he died in the manner that they say, it would be the most brilliant moment in his Life. – But why have I run on like this? I do not know – – but I think because of a magic power that does not permit me when write or speak to you to remain within the limits of discretion. Pardon me my Love!]*⁷²

It gives us a fascinating insight, not only into Teresa's political sophistication, but into her cleverness in intuiting and laughing at Byron's perception of Ali (whose death had been rumoured, but had not yet occurred). Had Byron really tried to convince her, with his reminiscences, that Ali was all these things – his friend? – his substitute father? – a tender heart? – a liberal? If he had, it's clear he hadn't succeeded. She was no credulous Desdemona. Pierino's scepticism seems to have helped. Are we to read Byron's failure to say or write anything about Ali Pasha as paralleling the strange life-long fixations he had with other older men – guardian-figures such as the financially untrustworthy John Hanson, and the critically still more untrustworthy William Gifford – his faith in both of whom no amount of negative evidence could shake? Was he really nostalgic about his encounter with, of all people, Ali Pacha?

71: See BLJ VII 103-4

72: *Shelley and his Circle X* (ed Reiman and Fischer) Harvard 2002, p. 942.