

Biography of an Empire. Governing Ottomans in an Age of Revolution

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In modern Ottoman and Balkan history as in other fields, biographical studies have enjoyed a rather mixed fortune. Earlier studies tended to be focused on ‘great rulers’.⁽¹⁾ In Britain, where there was a sentimental tradition epitomized by Trevelyan’s writings on Garibaldi, historians often chose to write about figures from the national revivals in individual Balkan countries or Turkey itself.⁽²⁾ Some American-trained scholars used biography as a vehicle for writing about political ideas in the Balkans and the Near East, but continued to focus on characters associated with the national movements.⁽³⁾ Things changed somewhat in the 1990s, with reputed Ottomanists drawing attention to the potential utility of a biographical approach in shedding light on broader issues of social and cultural change.⁽⁴⁾ In the course of that decade, scholars such as Paschalis Kitromilides, Virginia Aksan and Katherine Fleming made skilful use of individual life-stories to ask wider questions, not just about their subjects but also about the world in which they lived and which they could be claimed to illustrate.⁽⁵⁾ More recently, others have given detailed treatment to a number of interesting personalities, particularly from the period of transition between the heights of Ottoman power and the emergence of the national states.⁽⁶⁾

In her book, Christine M. Philliou continues and consolidates this tradition with an extended reflection on changing modes of governance in the Ottoman Empire, built around the figure of Stephanos Vogorides (c.1778–59). The son of a livestock trader from Kotel (in today’s south-central Bulgaria), Stefanos was baptised ‘Stoiko’ but, under the influence of his uncle, Bishop of Vratsa, hellenized his name, made his way first to Bucharest, where he studied at the Princely Academy, and thence to Istanbul, where he continued to

make progress and connections. He ended up in a position of great influence as a mediator between the Porte and Western diplomats, so much so that he was nicknamed ‘the Talleyrand of the East’.

The lack of a book-length study on Vogorides was once lamented in an astute but regrettably unheeded footnote.⁽⁷⁾ Half a century later, the idea behind it has been brought to fruition, and in an impressive and imaginative fashion. Vogorides’ career exemplifies aspects of social and cultural change which can be more easily – and more vividly – understood through biography than through sociological clichés such as ‘the transition from feudalism to capitalism’ or ‘the emergence of national consciousness’. However, it is not exactly a conventional biography. Rather, episodes from Vogorides’ long and complicated life are given as vignettes at the end of longer chapters detailing political, cultural and social transformation of the Ottoman polity. In her preface, Philliou proposes to focus not simply on ‘the state’ and its destabilization, but on experiences, institutions, networks and individual personalities (p. xviii). She sees family and patronage relationships as stretching across formal institutions and confessional divides (p. xix). And she seeks to analyse Ottoman political order through identifying locations where formal and informal modes of governance intersect (p. xxiv).

Chapter one provides a revisionist overview of the much-discussed phenomenon of the Phanariots, the Orthodox Christians residing in the Phanar quarter of Istanbul who, in the 18th century, acquired control over the four key functions of Great Dragoman, *voyvoda* of Moldavia, *voyvoda* of Wallachia, and Dragoman of the Fleet. This involved Christians in roles of tax collection, information-gathering and diplomatic negotiation, as well as considerable cultural and intellectual functions. Philliou gives insight into the functioning of the Phanariot system through examination of a series of different sources. The first consists in a list of subscribers to a *History of Old Dacia* published in Greek in Vienna in 1818 and giving an idea of the complex range of ethnic, regional and social groups affiliated to a book publishing enterprise.⁽⁸⁾ A second section sees the Phanariots as viewed from the Ottoman chancery. While it is argued that there was no systematic policy towards them, a number of very interesting attitudes are quoted towards the ‘Phanariot clique’ (*fenarlı? tak?m?*). They are partly seen as a group prized for their loyalty, but also suspected for their relations with Russia and Austria. Philliou then turns her attention to Phanariot investiture ceremony and other aspects of court ritual. The final section of this chapter compares the Phanariots with Muslim notables, notably the *ayans* of the Balkans and the Egyptian *hanedans* (households). The former then appear not as a unique phenomenon but as part of a more widespread process of transfer of power from the central Court to the peripheral elites; and more especially a process that affected both Christian and Muslim peripheries in similar ways.

Chapter two, entitled ‘Volatile synthesis’, continues the exploration of Ottoman governance in the period after 1788. Rather than subscribe to the classic narratives of decline, modernization and ongoing ‘backwardness’, Philliou continues with her micro-biographical method, providing fascinating insights into the age by viewing the complex chain of events from 1788–1821 through the figures of Nicholas Mavroyeni, Prince of Wallachia from 1786–90; Osman Pazvano?lu, formerly a mercenary in the service of the former, and from 1794 Pasha of Vidin; and finally Halet Efendi (c. 1765–1822), a high Ottoman official who masterminded a number of important Phanariot appointments to office (and depositions from them).

Chapter three, ‘Demolitions’ is dedicated to what has since become known as the Greek War of Independence. In contrast to most accounts, however, Philliou takes the step of narrating the course of events from the location of Istanbul. Besides well-known sources such as the account of the British chaplain Robert Walsh, and British consular reports ⁽⁹⁾, Philliou uses anonymous Greek-language narrative sources as well as Ottoman archival documents. Ottoman reprisals targeted not only Christian elites but their Muslim abettors such as Halet Efendi, the former high official, beheaded and a note attached to his nose (it is not exactly clear how), calling him ‘the man generally accused of being the cause of all the present distresses of the Empire’. Philliou shows the Ottoman reaction to be a complex process, linked with and simultaneous to the reform of the janissary corps and their eventual abolition in 1826. As such, the Greek Revolution can be understood as ‘one of several civil conflicts’ rather than as a unique national war of secession (pp. 80–1).

While some Phanariots fled after 1821 and integrated themselves into new states, there was a group of

second-tier officials who seized their opportunity at this time, and constituted themselves into what might be called a *Phanar après Phanar*.⁽¹⁰⁾ Chapters four to six continue the story in the period from 1821 to 1859. The first of these is somewhat miscellaneous, initially covering the dispersal of the Phanariot families after 1821: some enter the new Greek state, some flee to Russia, some continue to work in Moldavia and Wallachia. Moving on to consider Ottoman foreign relations in the 1830s and after, Philliou focuses on the Translation Bureau (*Tercüme odası*), which historically has been seen as a site of modernization and 'Western influence'.⁽¹¹⁾ Here, however, it is seen as a logical necessity in the wake of the collapse of the Phanariot system, which had been one of the key mechanisms through which the Ottoman state conducted relations with Western powers. She describes one or two cases in which an experienced phanariot might 'shadow' a newly-appointed Muslim (in this case a convert, Yahya Efendi) to ensure continuity and quality of work. However, as the story moves on into the 1850s, the influence of Vogorides and other 'post-Phanariots' maintains itself, particularly in the realm of ecclesiastical affairs, which, we are reminded, was the ground of contention which led to British and French military intervention on behalf of the Ottoman Empire against Russia, in the form of the Crimean War.

Philliou's work poses important and fascinating questions for the understanding not just of an individual life but of how the Ottoman Empire continued to function after the major blows to its authority in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Vogorides has usually been read simplistically as one of Ottoman history's 'villains', who backed the wrong horse, failing to understand the inevitability of Ottoman decline and the emergence of national states. The subject is intricate in its nature and needs studying slowly, but it is also vividly and entertainingly presented: Philliou's *vignette* method, alternating with more general political narrative or social analysis allows the reader to see things, as it were, through different lenses (the metaphor of perspective occurs frequently).

Some readers might question the representativeness of Vogorides as a figure through which to write a 'biography of an empire'. His career tells us a lot about Ottoman governance, but can it really be said to symbolize it? Many similar 'neophanariot' figures went in other directions, eventually siding with the causes of national independence in Greece, Romania and Bulgaria. Indeed Vogorides is sometimes credited with having helped the Bulgarian national cause in ways not indicated here.⁽¹²⁾

Particularly interesting are Vogorides's ambitions for his children, which Philliou notes diligently at various stages. His first-born son, Nikolaki, was made to marry (and take the name of) the only daughter of a Moldavian nobleman, Konaki.⁽¹³⁾ Nikolaki tried to get himself elected governor of that principality in 1857. Vogorides's second son, Aleko, had a longer and more successful life (1822–1910). Having served in Europe in the Ottoman diplomatic corps, Aleko became governor of Eastern Rumelia in 1879, and served there until the province was annexed to Bulgaria in 1886, when he stood as candidate for the Bulgarian throne. Meanwhile, Stefanos married his eldest daughter to the Prince of Moldavia in 1834, his middle daughter in the 1840s to the Ottoman Ambassador to Greece, and his youngest in the 1850s to a future governor of Crete. The latter wedding was, Philliou tells us (p. 143), the first such Christian ceremony ever attended by a Sultan. *Alii bella gerunt*: it was as if the Porte, having lost on the battlefield and at the negotiating table, was trying through its epigone Vogorides to marry its way back together again.

Amidst mostly skilful handling of a vast mass of genealogical, chronological, sociological and diplomatic information, some errors of dating were perhaps inevitable. For instance, the dates given for Vogorides' birth vary, from 1780 (back cover of paperback edition) to 'the 1770s' (p. 38).⁽¹⁴⁾ The Princely Academy of Bucharest is described as having been 'founded by Mavrokordatos in the early eighteenth century' (p. 17), whereas it dates back somewhat earlier. Nicholas Mavroyeni's death date is given as 1791 (p. 43) – the correct date is September 1790. The attribution (p. 63) to Vogoridi of the title of *kaymakam* of Craiova and Galatsi in 1812 is surely incorrect, as Craiova and Galatsi were in different principalities. It was not Skarlato Kallimaki, Prince of Moldavia, who 'fled abruptly to Pisa' (p. 82) on the eve of hostilities in 1821, but his Wallachian counterpart Ioannis Karaca, in 1818. Vogorides's arrival in Bucharest to appease the rebel leader Tudor Vladimirescu (p. 216, n.1) happened in February 1821, not 1820. Prince Michael Sturdza was deposed in 1849, not 1848 (p. 148). Italian, not Latin, was the original language of Dante's *Inferno* (p. 170).

On one or two occasions Philliou slightly overstates her case for originality. While she significantly advances our understanding of the Phanariot phenomenon, she is perhaps not quite justified in claiming (p. 6) that this is an ‘all but ignored’ social group.⁽¹⁵⁾ Her criticism of historians’ failure to treat the period of the Crimean war from the perspective of the Ottoman Christians (p. 157) is based on scholarship more than 50 years old.⁽¹⁶⁾ More recent studies have gone some way to filling this gap.⁽¹⁷⁾

Philliou’s other achievements, however, are still major. She has taken hypotheses and ideas about studying the Ottoman Empire in a cross-cultural perspective, combined theoretical reflection with impressive linguistic and archival skills, and advanced them to a new stage. For this she deserves our rich thanks. The book is also methodologically attractive, situated as it is at the intersection of biographical, social, cultural and political history.

Notes

1. For example, Franz Babinger, *Mehmed the Conqueror and his Time*, trans. R. Manheim (Princeton, NJ, 1978), a translation of a work first published in German in 1953.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For example, Mercia Macdermott, *Apostle of Freedom. A Portrait of Vasil Levsky Against a Background of Nineteenth-Century Bulgaria* (London, 1967); Duncan Wilson, *The Life and Times of Vuk Stefanovi? Karadži?* (Oxford, 1970); C. M. Woodhouse, *Kapodistria, the Founder of Greek Independence* (London, 1973); idem, *Rhigas Velestinlis. The Proto-Martyr of the Greek Revolution* (Limni, 1995); Andrew Mango, *Ataturk* (London, 1999).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For example, Woodford D. McClellan, *Svetozar Markovi? and the Origins of Balkan Socialism* (Princeton, NJ, 1964); Gale Stokes, *Legitimacy through Liberalism. Vladimir Jovanovi? and the Transformation of Serbian Politics* (Seattle and London, 1975); Keith Hitchins, *Orthodoxy and Nationality. Andreiu ?aguna and the Rumanians of Transylvania* (Cambridge, MA, 1977); David Mackenzie, *Ilija Garašanin, Balkan Bismarck* (Boulder, CO, 1985); Duncan M. Perry, *Stefan Stambulov and the Emergence of Modern Bulgaria, 1870-1895* (Durham, NC, London, 1993). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. For example, Roderic Davison, *Essays in Ottoman and Turkish history, 1774–1923* (London, 1990), p. xvi.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Paschalis M. Kitromilides, *Enlightenment as Social Criticism. Iosipos Moisioudax and Greek Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ, 1992, based on an earlier, 1985 book in Greek); Virginia H. Aksan, *An Ottoman Statesman in War and Peace. Ahmed Resmi Efendi, 1700–1783* (Leiden, 1995); Katherine Fleming, *The Muslim Bonaparte. Diplomacy and Orientalism in Ali Pasha’s Greece* (Princeton, NJ, 1999).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. For example, Antonio d’Alessandri, *Il pensiero e l’opera di Dora d’Istria fra Oriente europeo e Italia* (Rome, 2007); Stella Ghervas, *Réinventer la tradition. Alexandre Stourdza et l’Europe de la Sainte-Alliance* (Geneva, 2009); Stefan Lemny, *Les Cantemir. L’aventure européenne d’une famille princière au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 2009); Angela Jianu, *A Circle of Friends* (Leiden, 2011).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Stevan K. Pavlowitch, ‘British diplomacy and the Serbian constitution of 1838’, *Slavonic and East European Review*, 38 (Dec. 1959), 149, n. 15: ‘There is unfortunately no monograph on this interesting personality’.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Also analysed in N. Iorga, *Histoire des roumains* (10 vols., Bucharest, 1937–44), vol. 8, pp. 254, 259–63.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Well-known through the collections: *The movement for Greek independence*, ed. Richard Clogg (Basingstoke, 1976); and *British Consular Reports from the Ottoman Levant in an Age of Upheaval*, ed. Theophilus Prousis (Istanbul, 2008).[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Cf. Nicolas Iorga, *Byzance après Byzance* (Bucharest, 1935).[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. For example, Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (London, 1961).[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Krumka Sharova, ‘B?lgarski diplomaticheski aktsii pred Evropa v nachaloto na 40-te godini na XIX v.’, in *Bulgariia i evropeiskite strani* (Sofia, 1975), pp. 32-6; Pierre Voillery, ‘Un centre bulgare anti-russe à Paris’, *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, 23, 1 (1982), 33–43; R. J. Crampton, *Bulgaria*

- (Oxford, 2007), p. 68.[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. The name is given variously as Conaki or Konaki in the index. The Phanariot practice of marrying into Moldavian families was an old one: see Radu G. P?un, ‘Stratégies de famille, stratégies de pouvoir. Les gréco-levantins en Moldavie au XVII^e siècle’, in *Social behaviour and family strategies in the Balkans*, ed. Ionela B?lu?u?, Constan?a Vintil?-Ghi?ulescu and Mihai-R?zvan Ungureanu (Bucharest, 2008), pp. 15–38. This makes me question whether Vogorides ‘borrowed’ (p. 10) *ayan* and *vezir* kinship practices; it is probably a matter of long-term structural commonalities.[Back to \(13\)](#)
 14. Surprisingly, Philliou overlooks the older article by Ioan Filitti (‘Notice sur les Vogoridi’, *Revue historique du sud-est européen*, 4, 10–12 (1927), 314–20) which established the interval 1777–9 fairly clearly. She acknowledges, but does not make very much use of, the only other article in a Western language – Maria Todorova, ‘Stefan Bogoridi, een Bulgaarse fanariot in het Ottomaanse rijk’, in *Oost-Europa in het verleden*, ed. A. P. Goudoever (Groningen, 1987), pp. 171–87. Todorova follows Filitti and Bulgarian scholarship to venture a ‘probable’ 1778.[Back to \(14\)](#)
 15. It is true that little attention is given to the Phanariots in, for example, *The Cambridge History of Turkey, Vol. 3. The Later Ottoman Empire, 1603–1839*, ed. Suraiya Faroqhi (Cambridge, 2006) or in the otherwise excellent volume *The Early Modern Ottomans*, ed. Virginia Aksan and Daniel Goffman (Cambridge, 2007). But the older literature on Phanariots is extensive and was surveyed by, among others, ?tefan Lemny, ‘La critique du régime phanariote. Clichés mentaux et perspectives historiographiques’, in *Culture and Society*, ed. A. Zub (Ia?i, 1985), and Panayotis Alexandrou Papachristou, *The Three Faces of the Phanariots. An Inquiry into the Role and Motivations of the Greek Nobility under Ottoman rule, 1683–1821* (MA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1992).[Back to \(15\)](#)
 16. Respectively, R. W. Seton-Watson and A. J. P. Taylor. Their work dates from much earlier than the 1969 and 1971 editions used by Philliou.[Back to \(16\)](#)
 17. For example, *Ottoman Greeks in the Age of Nationalism*, ed. Dimitris Gondicas and Charles Issawi (Princeton, NJ, 2000), which figures in Philliou’s bibliography but seems not to have been cited.[Back to \(17\)](#)

The author accepts this review, appreciates the reviewer's critical engagement, and does not wish to comment further.

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