

TESTIMONIES TO THE ECONOMIC VITALITY OF BALAT, THE MEDIAEVAL MILETUS

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The last few years have been marked by a renewed interest in the study of graffiti scratched into the plaster covering the walls of mediaeval buildings. These studies have concentrated either on inscriptions and coats-of-arms of Western pilgrims¹ or on ship-graffiti, also known as akidographemata, scratched or carved predominantly into the walls of Christian monuments, churches and monasteries². In fact, the practice of scratching, carving or drawing graffiti, and especially those of ships, onto the walls of religious buildings was very widespread, extending in the east to Isfahan³, in the south to the first cataract of the Nile⁴, in the north as far as Helsingör⁵, and in the west to the Rhine Valley⁶.

With respect to the purpose of this practice, several reasons should be listed. In many instances, these mediaeval graffiti of names

¹ Vincent, H. and Abel, F. M., *Bethléem. Le Sanctuaire de la Nativité*. Paris 1914, p. 189, pl. XIX. Meinardus, O., "The Mediaeval Graffiti in the Monasteries of SS. Antony and Paul", *Studia Orientalia Christiana Aegyptiaca*, XI, 1966, pp. 513-528, pl. XXXI-XXXVI.

² Alexandris, C. A., 'Η Θαλασσία δύναμις εις τήν ιστορίαν τῆς Βυζαντινῆς Αὐτοκρατορίας Athens, 1956, p. 59. Bryer, A., "Shipping in the Empire of Trebizond", *The Mariner's Mirror*, LII, 1, 1966, pp. 6 ff. Getakos, M., Συμβολή εις τήν μελέτην καί ἐρμηνείαν τῶν ἀκιδογραφημάτων Athens, 1956, Meinardus, O., "Mediaeval Navigation According to Akidopgraphemata in Byzantine Churches and Monasteries", *Bulletin of the Christian Archaeological Society*. Athens 1972, 5, VI, pp. 29-52.

³ The graffiti on the walls and the columns of the Masjid-Jomeh in Isfahan

⁴ The graffiti on the walls of the qubba of Shaikh Sayyid Hassan at Aswan.

⁵ Sölver, C., "Ett betydelsfullt Fund", *Segel och Motor*. Stockholm 1936, VIII. Winter, H., "Schiffsbilder auf Ziegelsteinen", *Forschungen und Fortschritte*, XIII, 35-36, 1937, p. 415.

⁶ Meinardus, O., "Ein Schiffsgraffito im Kölner Dom", *Kölner Domblatt*, XXXIII/XXXIV, 1971, pp. 239-242.

and coats-of-arms are no more than a mere record of the person's arrival at a certain place, which, in case of religiously important pilgrimage sites like Jerusalem⁷ or the Monastery of St. Catherine at Sinai⁸ serve as a more or less permanent testimony of a religious achievement as well as a kind of status symbol. Arabs, especially nomadic Bedouin tribes, have scratched or carved graffiti of the various designs into the walls of buildings, wells, etc., thereby demonstrating a visible claim to certain rights to the use of or the possession of those sites in question. Such graffiti are generally known as *ausam* (sing. *wasm*) and are found in many Eastern Mediterranean counties⁹.

In most cases, however, graffiti, and especially those of ships, are more than mere records of travellers, who intended others to learn that "they were here". In the Islamic world, ship graffiti are frequently found on the walls of a house of a *hāğğī*, who thereby shares with his community information pertaining to the mode of transport which he used on his pilgrimage to Mecca. In fluvial communities, e. g. in Upper Egypt, ship-graffiti are often found adorning the walls of a *qubba*, the tomb of a shaikh. In those cases, the ship-graffiti represent either a certain cult vessel¹⁰, or are carved into the walls for prophylactic purposes¹¹.

In the West, the practice of scratching or carving ship-graffiti into the plaster of churches and monasteries was very widespread. To the seafarer the church was always a source of consolation and moral support. The prayers in the liturgy and the icons of the sailor's saints gave him strength and courage to face the hardships and hazards of his life. He must have felt much happier, however, if he could leave behind, whether in his parish church or in a church or monastery at some port of call something to remind the saint of his prayers for his

⁷ E. g. the Casa Nova within the Franciscan Monastery of St. Saviour in Jerusalem, Hoade, E., *Guide to the Holy Land*. Jerusalem 1962, p. 323.

⁸ Rabino, M. H. L., "Le Monastère de Sainte-Catherine. Souvenir épigraphiques des anciens pèlerins", *Bulletin de Société de Géographie d'Égypte*, XIX, pp. 21-126.

⁹ Andree, Richard, *Eigentumszeichen. Ethnographische Parallelen und Vergleiche*. Leipzig 1889. Gennep, A. van, "Les Wasm ou marques de propriété des Arabes", *Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie*, XV, pp. 85-98.

¹⁰ Kriss, Rudolf, Kriss-Heinrich, Hubert, *Volks Glaube im Bereiche des Islam*. Wiesbaden 1960, pp. 31, 59, 60, 75, 100-107.

¹¹ *Ibid.* pp. 114 f.

ship. Thus by carving a picture of his ship into the walls of a church, the sailor placed the vessel under the protection of the particular saint. He could then rest assured that as no one could remove his graffito, the saint would have a constant reminder of his prayers and would not forget him in times of trouble. From this it is clear that graffiti portraying ships in churches and monasteries are a form of timeless prayer for safety rather than a thank-offering¹².

The issue regarding the purpose of these ship-graffiti becomes more complex when we discover them scratched into the walls of secular buildings belonging either to the Christian¹³ or the Islamic period. In these cases we cannot suggest any other reason than that the sailors, instead of adding their own names to certain sites, felt themselves so intensely associated with their ship that it became the mark of their identity. This suggestion seems quite valid since we must assume that most sailors would have been illiterate, and, therefore, would have had no other means of identifying themselves than by projecting the ship on which they sailed. Most ship-graffiti appear without any additional inscriptions or texts which could assist us in determining the provenance of the sailors.

THE SHIP GRIFFITI IN THE BATHS OF BALAT

The case in question are the ship-graffiti on the walls of the baths of Balat or Palatia, the ancient Miletus, and especially those on the walls of the bath near the ruins of the Delphinion. Some of these ship-graffiti were published by K. Wulzinger, P. Witteck and F. Sarre, though without any commentary regarding the circumstances and purpose of these scratchings¹⁴. Certainly, religious motivations must be excluded, since they appear particularly on the walls of the rest-rooms of the baths.

The problem regarding the date of these graffiti is partly solved by our knowledge of the approximate date of the construction of the baths. The *terminus a quo* is determined by an inscription in the Mosque

¹² Karakatsanis, A., "Marine Subjects in Post-Byzantine Art and Western Engraving", in *The Greek Merchant Marine 1543-1850*. Athens 1972, pp. 213-235.

¹³ E. g. the graffiti on the walls of the gate-house of the *Castle of Lindos on Rhodes*.

¹⁴ Wulzinger, K., Witteck, P., Sarre, F.) *Das Islamische Milet*. Berlin und Leipzig 1935, pp. 48-53 and figs. 20-22, 43-46.

of Ilyas Bey in Balat, according to which the building was begun in 1404, and probably completed a few years later. There is good reason to believe that secular buildings like the baths were built soon afterwards, probably some time in the middle of the XVth century¹⁵. The *terminus ad quem* coincides with the decline of Balat as a port in the XVIIth century.

From the XIVth century onwards, the port of Balat played an increasing economic role in the eastern Aegean Sea. Protected by the citadel - once upon a time the famous theatre of Miletus - Balat had become one of the principal export centres of the products of Asia Minor. Though belonging to the emirate of Mentеше, Balat was already temporarily occupied by Ottoman troops in the latter part of the XIVth century. By the beginning of the XVth century, however, at least for a brief period, it seems to have regained its political autonomy. Since the emirate of Mentеше did not possess its own navy to deliver its products throughout the eastern Mediterranean, the exporters were dependent upon the cooperation of the two maritime powers of the XVth and XVIth century, the Venetians and the Genoese. Undoubtedly, the fact that the Genoese maritime power rapidly declining in the eastern Aegean Sea led the Emir of Mentеше to conclude his treaties with the more powerful Venetians, who had their commercial centres in the Peloponnesian coastal cities and on the islands of the south Aegean Sea. In 1402/03 the Emir Ilyas Bey signed a commercial treaty with Leonardo della Porte, the ambassador of Marco Falier, the Duke of Crete, representing the Venetians, in which export and import conditions were stipulated and certain privileges for the Venetians guaranteed, e. g. the maintenance of their Church of St. Nicholas and their commercial establishments. In 1414, an additional treaty was signed between the Emir Ilyas and the Venetian Admiral Pietro Civrano. The Venetians were represented in Balat by a consul who administered the Venetian commercial interests and who was appointed by the Duke of Crete. Throughout the XVth century trade routes from Balat included Damietta and Alexandria in Egypt, and even the merchants of the Dalmatian port of Ragusa (Dubrovnik) are recorded to have traded with Balat¹⁶. Genoese

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁶ Heyd, W., *Histoire du Commerce du Levant au Moyen-Âge*. Leipzig, 1885-86,

merchants, the famous Giustianni, maintained their economic ties with Balat. According to Genoese records, "goods from Palatia passed through Chios en route to Alexandria", especially such products as wax, saffron, susumeni, galle, rappedi, cuirs rouge¹⁷. By the middle of the XVIth century, the Genoese influence in this region was terminated with the loss of their island of Chios in 1566.

The importance of the port of Balat is also testified by the famous Mediterranean Portolan of Piri Reis of 1521, according to which the port was known as Karaagatsh-Liman¹⁸. During the Ottoman period the port of Balat suffered severely from the new administrative changes. Balat was removed from the province of Mentеше and was joined to the island vilayet. Subsequently the importance of Balat as a port steadily declined.

One of the last testimonies to the economic activities of the port comes from the pen of Evliya Chelebi (1611-1679). In the narrative of his travels in Europe, Asia and Africa he speaks of the caiques of Gallipoli and İstanköy as well as the frigates from Zümbeki (Symi) and Ababolu (Nauplia) which he saw in Balat in 1670. Ships of the category of the zarbuna and shaiqa sailed on the Menderes River and collected their freight consisting mainly of wheat, barley and cotton and numerous other goods from the port of Balat. Although there were still some two hundred houses in Balat, the town had no longer a khan, an imaret or even a medrese. There was neither a hammam nor a well and merely one mosque. The regional administration including the qādī had left Balat and had moved to Söke¹⁹.

A few years later, in 1675, George Wheler and Jacob Spon stopped in Balat, known to them as Palatschia, because of the ruined ancient palaces(!). There was no more of the town than "ein verworrener Hauff obgleich alter Mauern", among which there were some shepherds, huts²⁰. Almost one hundred years later, Richard

vol. I, pp. 543-545, 595, vol. II, pp. 354-355. De Mas-Latrie, "Commerce d'Éphèse et de Milet au Moyen-Âge", *Biblioth. de l'École des Chartes*, 5e série, V, 1864, pp. 219.

¹⁷ Argenti, Philip P., *The Occupation of Chios by the Genoese and the Administration of the Island 1346-1566*. Cambridge 1958, vol. I, p. 483.

¹⁸ Cf. Wiegand, Theodor, *Die Milesische Landschaft*. Berlin 1929, p. 16.

¹⁹ Chelebi, Evliya, *Narrative of Travels in Europe, Asia and Africa*. (Transl. Ritter Joseph von Hammer) London 1846. Wiegand, Theodor, *loc. cit.*

²⁰ Spon, Jacob & Wheler, Georgius, *Italienische, Dalmatische, Griechische und Orientalische Reise-Beschreibung*. Nürnberg 1690, p. 73.

Chandler (1764) passed through Miletus, "a very mean place, but still called Palat or Palatia because of the palaces. . . the whole site of the town, to a great extent, is spread with rubbish, and overrun with thickets. The inhabitants were a very few Turkish families, the present citizens of Miletus"²¹.

The ship-graffiti on the walls of the Selçuk hammami in Balat are, therefore, a valuable confirmation of the Venetian and Genoese economic activities in this port. All these graffiti were scratched into the plaster by means of a nail, a small knife or any other instrument with a sharp point. From our brief historical sketch we have learned that these graffiti represent ships which sailed to or from Balat between the middle of the XVth century to the middle of the XVIIth century, a period of approximately 200 years. From the large number of these scratchings on the walls of the bath near the Delphinion, we have copied a representative selection of galleys, a dromon, a caravel, some carracks and a coastal vessel. Among the galleys we must distinguish the one-masted galley (fig. 1, pl. I) and the two-masted or larger galley (fig. 2). Most of the galleys were coastal traders, though some of them were used as war-ships. Noticeable in all of these graffiti are the oars, and midships the long bridge between the oarsmen, known as the corsia. They were biremes with two men occupying one bench on either side. On fig. 1, pl. I, we notice the long yard and the flag on top of the mast. The two-masted galleys had a high orlum or poop. The smaller foremast was known as the arbor de proda, the mainmast as the arbor de medio. Similar to the galley was the dromon (fig. 3, pl. II), a ship that was often used as a man-of-war. Typical is the length of the vessel and the single flat deck which was almost wholly occupied by the oarsmen. A remarkable detail on this graffito is the long ram, which is well above the water-level. As in the case of the galleys, we notice the long yard of the lateen sail. The caravel (pl. III) was the XVIth century replacement of the small and middle sized galleys and was a favorite type of vessel in the Mediterranean. The rig of the caravel was very similar to that of the galleys with two masts, lateen rigged. The height of the mainmast was about the length of the deck, and very often its yard was even longer than the ship so that it must have

²¹ Chandler, R., *Travels in Asia Minor and Greece*. London, 1817, vol. I, pp. 168, 169.

stuck out over the bow and stern when lowered. Our graffito shows a man-of-war equipped with a powerful ram above the water-line. On the mainsail it has an additional square topsail. The mizzen is clearly seen, so are the main shrouds with ratlines.

By the XVIth century, the carrack and the cog had replaced the larger galleys. The carrack is a typical roundship, normally wide at the prow and the poop (figs. 4-8, pl. IV). Riding high out of the water, this vessel was used in war and peace. Our graffiti (figs. 4-7) show three masted carracks with large square sails. Fig. 4 is a man-of-war on account of its prominent ram. Fig. 8 shows an unfinished graffito of a roundship with a tall foremast. These vessels would be merchant ships sailing between Balat and the ports of the eastern Mediterranean and as far west as Spain.

We assume that they were either of Venetian or Genoese origin, and that their crews used the baths when their ships were in port. This is not at all surprising, of course, if we should remember that also the XVth century Western pilgrims to the Holy Land and to Mount Sinai were delighted by their use of Turkish baths, which provided them with a means for cleanliness and relaxation²². It is noteworthy that among the large number of graffiti of ships in the baths of Balat, there are only very few portraying the kind of coastal vessel as seen in fig. 9. This small sailing vessel with one lateen would have served the coastal regions and the nearby islands.

The fact that this practice of scratching ship-graffiti into the walls of baths was not limited to the port of Balat is evident from a graffito (fig. 10) of a large XVth century Venetian galley in the plaster of the first rest-room upon entering the hammam near the Mosque of Isa Bey (1375) in Ajasoluk (Selçuk)²³. This particular ship is very similar to the man-of-war on the wall of the Church of St. Nicholas of Mavrika on the island of Aegina in the Saronic Gulf²⁴. There is

²² *Fratris Felicis Fabri Evagatorium in Terrae Sanctae Arabiae et Egypti Pergrinationem*. Stuttgart 1843-1849, vol. II, pp. 368-369, III, p. 73, Letts, M. (ed.) *The Pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff*. London 1946, p. 114.

²³ Benndorf, Otto, "Die seldschukischen Bauwerke in Ajasoluk", *Forschungen in Ephesos*. Vol. I, Wien 1906, pp. 11 ff.

²⁴ Meinardus, O., "Mediaeval Navigation, etc.", p. 42.

little doubt that upon clearing this room, which is filled up with rubbish, other graffiti of ships could be identified which could significantly help us in our knowledge of the history of this township for a period, during which only few other sources are available.

To the student of mediaeval Turkish history, these graffiti are interesting testimonies of the economic vitality of the port of Balat from the XVth to the XVIIth century.