

The conversion of Parthenon into a mosque

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Περίληψη: Ο ακριβής χρονικός προσδιορισμός της μετατροπής του Παρθενώνα σε τζαμί παραμένει ασαφής. Μια πληρέστερη όμως μελέτη των γεγονότων που συνδέονται με την οθωμανική κατάκτηση της Αθήνας, πιθανότατα το 1456, και με τα αμέσως επόμενα χρόνια αποκαλύπτει ότι η πόλη απολάμβανε ποικίλα προνόμια, μεταξύ των οποίων θρησκευτική ελευθερία για του κατοίκους της με παράλληλη διατήρηση των ναών τους (ένας από τους οποίους ήταν ο Παρθενώνας). Η βενετική εισβολή στην Αθήνα το καλοκαίρι του 1466 φαίνεται ότι έθεσε σε κίνηση μια αλλαγή της στάσης των Οθωμανών έναντι των γηγενών Αθηναίων, κατάληξη της οποίας υπήρξε η μετατροπή του Παρθενώνα σε τζαμί κάποια στιγμή την περίοδο 1466-70.

Summary: The exact dating of the Parthenon's conversion into a mosque remains unclear. However, a closer study of events relating to the conquest of Athens by the Ottomans (dated most probably in 1456) and the years immediately following it reveals that the city enjoyed various privileges, including religious freedom for its inhabitants in their existing churches (one of which was the Parthenon). The Venetian invasion of Athens in the summer of 1466 seems to have triggered a change of Ottoman attitude vis-à-vis native Athenians, resulting in the conversion of the Parthenon to a mosque sometime in the period 1466-70.

Key words: Parthenon, Mehmed II, horismos, Ottoman-Venetian War, Bolzanio, Angiolello

The Parthenon's long history is covered by lengthy "dark" periods during which historical information on this masterpiece of ancient art is very little or nonexistent. Archaeological research partly substitutes for this lack of evidence but is not always successful in providing answers for crucial turning points of its transformations, such as its conversion into an Ottoman mosque; an event whose precise dating has not sufficiently drawn the attention of modern scholars.

Throughout its long history, the Parthenon has undergone few alterations. The oldest was its conversion into a Christian church, in the 5th

century A.D., resulting in a necessary "change of orientation" (for the sake of arranging for a Christian altar) from West to East. The next conversion was that from a Byzantine to a Catholic church, after the conquest of Athens by the warriors of the Fourth Crusade. However, in both cases its new function did not alter its appearance significantly. On the contrary, the Ottoman conquest of Athens had catalytic consequences for its future, as proven by its bombing by the troops of Francesco Morosini, in 1687, that caused its partial destruction.

The Ottoman conquest of Athens was completed on 4 June 1456, when Franco

Acciajuoli, last scion of the Florentine dynasty that ruled the city in the period 1388-1456, surrendered the Acropolis after a short siege by Omar Beg (son of Turahan Pasha, one of Mehmed II's most active warlords). This was accomplished on condition that Franco would become ruler of Thebes instead, as vassal to the Sultan.

Circumstances of the Ottoman conquest of Athens

The exact circumstances and events of the Ottoman invasion of Attica in 1456 and the surrender of Athens are not known in detail, despite the fact that this change of regime is known through ten short chronicles, as well as the *Chronicon Minus* by George Sphrantzes¹. Further information on the circumstances surrounding the city's fall may be found in the anonymous "Lament of Athens" which is believed to refer to atrocities committed during the Ottoman invasion of 1456 (such as slaughters; burnings; desecration of churches; enslavements; rapes, etc.)². The "Lament"

emphasizes the sufferings of farmers from Sopolia, that is, the suburbs of Athens. On the basis of information provided by the "Lament", Ferdinand Gregorovius and Demetrios Kampuroglou have reached the conclusion that it refers to events associated with the city itself. Since, however, there is no such clear reference anywhere in the text, it is more reasonable to conclude that relevant descriptions refer to events that occurred outside the city (in its suburbs or the wider region of Attica), possibly in order to terrorize its inhabitants so as not to resist. Also important is the fact that the relevant (though more brief) description of Laonikos Chalkokondyles, the last Byzantine historian, on the circumstances of the Ottoman conquest of the city of his birth, does not include any such information³.

The vagueness of sources on the exact nature of events relating to the conquest of Athens has resulted in a respective differentiation of views of modern researchers regarding their sequence. Ferdinand Gregorovius⁴, Ioannes Travlos⁵ and Nikos Moschonas⁶ claim that despite the fact that the city was taken in 1456, the Acropolis surrendered in 1458, following a two year siege.

¹ See the extensive report of the short chronicle 33/56 and the more vague ones of chronicles 55/15, 58/11, 59/20, 60/0, 63/12, 69/33, 69/63, 70/16, 79/2 and the chronicle of George Sphrantzes (cf. *Chronica Byzantina Breviora*, ed. P. Schreiner, *Die byzantinische Kleinchroniken*, I, Vienna 1975, 253, 399, 420, 440, 453, 475, 533, 538, 545, 580, respectively, as well as George Sphrantzes, *Chronocon*, ed. R. Maisano, Rome 1990, in the series *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* (hence: *CFHB*), no. 29, p. 146).

² For the text of the "Lament of Athens" see Demetrios Kampuroglou, *Μνημεία της Ιστορίας των Αθηναίων*, I, Athens 1891, 49-51. For its dating in the period of the Ottoman conquest see idem, *Ιστορία των Αθηναίων. Τουρκοκρατία*, I, Athens 1890, 121-124, and Kenneth M. Setton, *Athens in the Middle Ages*, chap. II: "On the raids

of the Moslems in the Aegean in the ninth and tenth centuries and their alleged occupation of Athens", 318.

³ L. Chalkokondyles, *Αποδείξεις Ιστοριών*, ed. E. Darkó, *Historiarum Demonstrationes*, II, Budapest 1927, 211-213 («παραλαβών δε τον της Θετταλίας στρατόν Ομάρης ο Τουραχάνεω και επελάσας ίσχει μεν αυτίκα των Αθηνών πόλιν, μετά δε τήν τε Ακρόπολιν επολιόρκει επί συχόν χρόνον. Και επειράτο μεν δια των προσηκόντων των εν τη Ακροπόλει ανδρών. Ως δ' ουδέν αυτώ προεχώρει, λόγους προσέφερε τοιούσδε»).

⁴ *Ιστορία της πόλεως Αθηνών κατά τους μέσους αιώνας*, II, Athens 1904, 385-386.

⁵ *Πολεοδομική εξέλιξις των Αθηνών*, Athens 1960, 173.

⁶ In *Ιστορία του ελληνικού έθνους* (hence: *IEE*), X, 189.

On the contrary, Demetrios Kampuroglou⁷ and Th. N. Philadelphus believe that 1456 was the year of the city's final conquest. The latter rightly claims that "if the Acropolis had resisted for two whole years, this fact would have been trumpeted forth by chroniclers as a unique feat. Moreover 1458, not 1456, would have been recorded as the year of surrender, since by "surrender" chroniclers refer to that of fortresses defending cities, not cities themselves". Elsewhere he also adds that water tanks on the Acropolis were found inadequate in cases of other prolonged sieges, such as that of 1687 by the troops of Morosini⁸. Furthermore, the comments of Franco Acciajuoli to the circumstances of his surrender, in his letter of 10 February 1460 to the duke of Milan Francesco Sforza, do not give the impression of extended hostilities for the conquest of the Acropolis. In this letter the author refers to the "exceptional strength" and "impregnability" of the Acropolis as factors that prompted the Ottomans to place it under their control stating, however, that the same forced them to reach a compromise with him⁹.

Therefore, it seems that both the walled city and the better fortified Acropolis surrendered almost simultaneously¹⁰. Travlos also indirectly acknowledges the peaceful surrender of the city

⁷ *Ιστορία των Αθηναίων. Τουρκοκρατία*, II, Athens 1890, 26-27.

⁸ Th. N. Philadelphus, *Ιστορία των Αθηνών επί Τουρκοκρατίας (1400-1800)*, I, Athens 1902, 146-147.

⁹ Gregorovius, III (ed. S. Lambros), Athens 1926, 408 (English translation in Setton, *Athens in the Middle Ages*, Λονδίνο 1975, chap. VI: "The Catalans and Florentines in Greece, 1380-1422", 273).

¹⁰ The existence of a wall around the city during this period is acknowledged by both Setton (op. cit., chap. I: "The Archaeology of Medieval Athens", 239-240, 243) and Travlos, 172.

stating that "he [Omar] did not attempt an assault [on the Acropolis] in order both to keep up appearances, since the Turks had come as friends, and to avoid a waste of time, as well as the city's destruction, in view of Mehmed II's forthcoming visit, which was prompted by his strong desire to express his admiration for its monuments"¹¹.

This visit took place in the autumn of 1458 and is well recorded in the historical sources of this period. Mehmed II was a well known admirer of Antiquity who had contacts with antiquarians of his time, such as Ciriaco de Pizzicoli and Francesco Filelfo. His visit to Athens is recorded by Kritoboulos, Chalkokokondyles and the later Chronicle of the Turkish Sultans, all of which mention that in the course of it he granted Athenians various unspecified privileges¹²; a fact which further indicates that the earlier surrender of Athens was accomplished in a peaceful manner, since the granting of privileges to peacefully surrendering cities was a standard Ottoman practice, in sharp contrast to the fate awaiting those stormed. The earlier "horismos" of privileges granted to Ioannina in 1431 is a similar example: in its context the conquerors acknowledged the privilege of the city's Greek inhabitants to communal self administration¹³.

What type of such privileges could Athenians have secured? Kritoboulos, who has recorded the

¹¹ Travlos, 173, who believes that Mehmed II wished to visit Athens even before Omar's invasion; a hypothesis, however, that is not confirmed by any source.

¹² Kritoboulos, *Ιστορίαι* (ed. R. Reinsch, *Critobuli Imbriotaе Historiae*, Berlin 1983, in *CFHB*, no. 22), 128-129, Chalkokokondyles, vol. II, 213, *Chronicle of the Turkish Sultans* (ed. G. Zoras, Athens 1958), 101.

¹³ On this "horismos" see A. Vakalopoulos, *Ιστορία του Νέου Ελληνισμού*, I, Thessalonike 1974 (repr.: Herodotos Publ., Athens 1996).

relevant piece of information, does not give any further details, mentioning simply that the Sultan “τους δέ γε οικήτορας ταύτης αιδοί των προγόνων φιλανθρώπως τε είδε και εδωρήσατο πολυτρόπως, και πάντων των ήτησαν έτυχον παρ’ αυτού” (“he treated the inhabitants [of Athens] with kindness out of respect for their ancestors, giving them various presents and granting them whatever they asked him”)¹⁴. Thus, on the basis of the “horismos” of Ioannina, Athenian privileges would probably have included the rights to self administration and preservation of their churches. A later oral tradition, according to which the keys to the city were surrendered to Mehmed II by the abbot of the monastery of Kaisariani (who, in turn, was granted privileges for his monastery), apparently falls into this pattern¹⁵.

According to Calkokondyles, a few years later, probably in 1460, Mehmed II visited Athens again. However, this time his visit was associated with the exile of ten noble families, under the pretext that they had been conspiring with Franco Acciajuoli for his restitution¹⁶.

Testimonies on the Acropolis

Wider political developments of this period in the south of Greece, including the fall of the Despotate of the Morea and the completion of the Ottoman conquest of the Peloponnese, would

have undoubtedly contributed to the overshadowing of any changes that might have occurred on the Acropolis at the same time. Political uncertainty in southern Greece would have also hindered potential travelers from Western Europe from visiting Athens, with a notable exception that holds the key for the proper dating of the Parthenon’s conversion into a mosque: a Venetian scholar known in the past as Anonymous Ambrosianus (due to the discovery of his manuscript in Milan’s Biblioteca Ambrosiana) but identified in 1984 by Luigi Beschi with the scholar Urbano Bolzanio¹⁷. The latter was a member of the circle of the humanist Francesco Squarcione and seems to have visited Athens after 1463, since there is a reference in his text to the death of the Venetian capitano Bertoldo d’ Este below the walls of the Acrocorinth in October 1463, in the context of the First Ottoman-Venetian War (1463-79)¹⁸; a fact that narrows down the date of his visit to Athens in the period 1464-71¹⁹. Bolzanio’s references to Athens are limited to descriptions of its ancient monuments. However, as far as the Parthenon is concerned, he characteristically refers to it as still being a church (“chiessia”), while describing the Propylaea as “a beautiful ancient palace next to the church [the Parthenon], all made of marble in a Roman

¹⁴ Kritoboulos, op.cit., 128.

¹⁵ J. Spon, *Voyage d’ Italie, de Dalmatie, de Grece et du Levant*, II, Lyon 1678, 225-226. However, Kampuroglou (*Ιστορία*, I, 21-23), rejects this tradition.

¹⁶ Chalkokondyles, vol. II, 237. Cf. references in the *Chronicle of Turkish Sultans*, 107, and the *Chronicle of Hierax* (ed. C. Sathas, *Ιέρακος χρονικόν περί της των Τούρκων βασιλείας*, in the series *Μεσαιωνική Βιβλιοθήκη*, I, Venice 1872), 268. Cf. also Kampouroglu, *Ιστορία*, II, 37-40.

¹⁷ E. Ziebarth, “Ein griechischer Reisebericht des funfzehnten Jahrhunderts”, *Mitteilungen des Kaiserlich Deutschen Archaeologischen Instituts - Atheinische Abteilungen*, 24 (1899), 81-82, Tasos Tanoulas, *Τα Προπύλαια της αθηναϊκής Ακρόπολης κατά τον Μεσαίωνα*, Athens 1987 (in the series *Βιβλιοθήκη της εν Αθήναις Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας*, no. 165), 44.

¹⁸ “Dove ascese Bertoldo capitano de la S(ignoria), dove l dio fu morto”: Ziebarth, 78. Cf. *ibid*, 82.

¹⁹ K.M. Setton, *Catalan Domination of Athens, 1311-1388*, Cambridge Mass. 1948, 238.

style”²⁰. This passage has led Kenneth M. Setton to the reasonable conclusion that the Parthenon’s conversion to a mosque must have taken place at least twelve years after the Ottoman conquest of Athens²¹. Gustav Friedrich Herzberg, apparently unaware of Bolzanio’s text, also shares the belief that the Parthenon remained a church as late as Mehmed II’s second visit to Athens²². He cites no arguments for his view but claims that its conversion was the outcome of the Sultan’s wrath against certain Athenian families for their participation in the conspiracy for the restitution of Franco Acciajuoli. However, had this being the case, Bolzanio would not have called the Parthenon a church a few years later. Therefore, it was due to some other event that the Parthenon was converted to a mosque, possibly relevant with the Venetian attack on Athens in the summer of 1466, in the course of the First Ottoman-Venetian War. The reasons for this attack are not specified in any source but one assumes that Athens might have served as an Ottoman military base²³. This hypothesis is enhanced by a reference in a letter of the

Venetian Provedittore Generale della Morea, Jacopo Barbarigo, to the Venetian Senate, dated 14 October 1465, in which he mentions that Omar Beg, the conqueror of Athens, then in charge of Ottoman troops fighting in the Peloponnese, had withdrawn to Athens early in that autumn to resupply²⁴.

The Ottoman assault commenced on 12 July 1466 following the landing at Piraeus of a contingent consisting of 2,000 infantry troops and 250 stradiotti under Vettore Capello. The city was easily taken and looted. Ottoman military installations were destroyed and 500 Turks were taken prisoners. The invaders withdrew early in August after a brief, unsuccessful siege of the Acropolis²⁵.

The consequences of the Venetian invasion for the Christian population of Athens are not known. However, one may not rule out the possibility that Ottoman authorities gradually hardened their stand towards it, especially if one also takes into consideration the fact that Athens was essentially in the “front line” of the war in southern Greece as late as 1470, when Venetian Negroponte was conquered. One should also note, though, that in 1470 there were still communities of Western Europeans living in the city. Giovan Maria Angiolello, a Venetian taken captive by the Ottomans in the course of the fall of Negroponte who found himself in Athens on

²⁰ “Estandisse la longere ab occidente in levante aedificio molto bello da vender et e nel detto castello una chiessia che gia fu tempio antiquo de romani molto mirabile tutto de marmore con col(on)ne a torno...”: Ziebarth, 73; Tanoulas, *ibid.*

²¹ Setton, *ibid.*

²² G. Herzberg, *Athen. Historisch-topographisch Dargestellt*, Halle 1885, 228-229.

²³ In this sense, G. Konstantinides’ hypothesis that Athenians might have sided with Venetians during the latter’s raid on Athens does not seem plausible («Μίαν τοιαύτην επιδρομήν επεχείρησαν εν έτει 1464 και κατά των Αθηνών, άδηλον αν οίκοθεν ή προσκληθέντες υπό των Αθηναίων»: G. Konstantinides, *Ιστορία των Αθηνών από Χριστού γεννήσεως μέχρι του έτους 1821*, Athens 1876, 487).

²⁴ C. Sathas, *Documents inedits relatifs a l’histoire de la Grece*, 6, Paris 1884, 51. Cf. Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant*, II, Philadelphia 1978, 284.

²⁵ See the text by I. Hasiotes in *IEE*, X, 269; Setton, *Papacy*, *ibid.*; Philadelphus, *op. cit.*, 153. This episode is mentioned by Sphrantzes and the Venetian chroniclers S. Magno and C. Zen (cf. Σφραντζή, 178; S. Magno, *Annali Veneti*, in K. Hopf, *Chroniques Greco-romanes*, Berlin 1873, 204. For Zen’s comments see N. Iorga, *Notes et extraits pour servir a l’Histoire des Croisades au XV siecle*, IV, Bucharest 1915, 209-210).

29 July 1470 is clear on this, mentioning briefly but characteristically that: “In questo luogo nomata Satines vi sono assai antiche fabbriche, et vi anche un Monasterio di Frati dell’ordine dell’ Opinione, i quali non danno obbedienza al Pontificato nostro, et sono la maggior parte Fiorentini; officiano alla italiana, et il parlar et legger suo italiano: et hanno un bellissimo luogo con grande entrata sicchit vivono del suo” [“In this place, called Satines, there are many ancient buildings and a monastery of the monks of the Order of the Opinion [of Michele da Cesena] who do not obey our pope. Most of them are Florentines, conduct their services in the Italian manner, speak and read Italian and their monastery is very beautiful, with a big entrance. There they live with whatever they produce themselves”]²⁶.

Conclusion

Information of Bolzanio and Angiolello on early Ottoman Athens alter significantly the city’s stereotype image prevailing to this day, allowing instead for the reasonable assumption that the settlement of Turks resulted neither in the abrupt removal of Latins²⁷ nor in the

immediate oppression of the Greek population, through measures such as the conversion of the most important churches to mosques. In this context it is also reasonable to assume that the Parthenon remained a church possibly until the conquest of Negroponte. Whether, however, during this period it continued to serve as an Orthodox church (that is, if privileges granted by Mehmed II included its surrender to native Athenians, as suggested by Herzberg for the first two years of the occupation)²⁸, or whether it continued to serve as a Roman Catholic church, it is impossible to tell.

²⁶ Giovan Maria Angiolello, *Viaggio da Negroponte*, passage cited by James Morton Paton, *Mediaeval and Renaissance Visitors to Greek Lands*, Princeton New Jersey, 1951, 39 (in the series *Gennadeion Monographs* no. III). On Angiolello see F. Babinger, lemma “Angiolello”, *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, II (1964), 275-278.

²⁷ Approximately 70 years later, in the Ottoman census of 1520-1530 (registering a total of 12.633 inhabitants of Athens, 11 Turkish and 2.286 Christian families) there is no record of Christians of Western descent or Latin creed; a fact that indicates that they had either been assimilated or left the city (for this census see A. Vakalopoulos,

Ιστορία, II 1, Thessalonike 1964 – repr.: Herodotos Publ, Athens 1996, 73, 341, and *IEE*, X, pp. 158-159).

²⁸ See n. 22, above.