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Volume 1

John Cam Hobhouse

Excerpt

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JOURNEY THROUGH ALBANIA,

&c. &c.

CHAPTER I.

Departure from Malta — Approach to the Gulf of Lepanto, and to Patrass
— Passage between the islands Cefalonia, Ithaca, and Santa Maura, to
Prevyza.

LORD BYRON and myself, after a stay of three weeks at Malta, and after many hesitations whether we should bend our steps towards Smyrna or some port of European Turkey, were at last determined in favour of the latter, by one of those accidents which often, in spite of preconcerted schemes, decide the conduct of travellers. A brig of war, the Spider, was ordered to convoy about fifty sail of small merchantmen to Patrass, the chief port on the western side of the Morea, and to Prevyza, a town on the coast of Albania. The Governor of Malta, Sir Alexander Ball, was so obliging as to provide us with a passage in this ship to the latter place, whence we resolved to commence our tour.

On Tuesday, September 19th, 1809, we left Malta, and on the following Saturday, at nine o'clock in the morning, we were in the channel between Cefalonia and Zante, and at this time also had our first view of Greece.

Cefalonia appeared a chain of high rocks to the north, with a few villages scattered at their feet, and presented a prospect of universal barrenness. Zante was a low land to the south. Before us, to the east, were the high mountains of Albania and of the Morea, from which also projected towards us a long narrow neck of very low

land, at the extremity of which were to be seen the remains of a fort called, as we were informed, Castel-Tornese.

We had not much wind, and were obliged also to wait for the slow sailers of our convoy, so that it was not until seven o'clock in the evening that we were near enough to see Ithaca, called now Theaki, which then seemed a low land with two small hills to the north-east of Cefalonia. At seven o'clock the next morning we were in sight of the opening of the Gulf of Lepanto, and not far from the small islands called Curzolari, near which, and not in the Gulf itself, the battle of Lepanto was fought. The scenery which at this moment presented itself to us was peculiarly agreeable to our eyes, which had been so long fatigued with the white waste of Malta. To the south, not far from us, were low lands running out into the sea, covered with currant-trees of the most lively green; before us were hills crowned to their summits with wood; and on every other side, except at the opening by which we had come into this great bay, were rugged mountains of every shape. We were shown the situation of Patrass, but did not advance sufficiently before dark to see the town itself that evening. The following night, the whole of the next day, and the night after, I employed myself in cruising about the mouth of the bay in a boat;^a

^a The Ionian Islands were then in possession of the French, and the commander of our brig manned a boat to cruise after the small traders running between the islands. The crew consisted of nine men commanded by a midshipman,—the surgeon and myself went as volunteers. Besides muskets and cutlasses we had a small three-pounder gun in the bow of the boat. In the course of the first night we captured two currant-boats, but dismissed them. On the next morning we hailed a large brig, or trebaculo, and, receiving no answer, were approaching her, when her decks were

suddenly mounted by men, who saluted us with a brisk fire of musketry, which, although it pierced our boat and our one sail in every direction, struck only one of our men. This unlucky fellow, after falling to the bottom of the boat, and lying there apparently dead, received a second shot, but neither one nor the other wound proved to be mortal; and when we boarded the brig, after an hour's firing and exhausting all our ammunition, the sailor requested permission to bear his part in the attack. The brig turned out to be a merchantman, laden principally with sulphur, and,

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but on the 26th, at seven in the morning, was again on board of the brig at anchor off Patrass. Nothing could be more inviting than the appearance of this place. I had approached it just as the dawn was breaking over the mountains to the back of the town, which is itself on the foot of a hill clothed with gardens, groves of orange and lemon trees, and currant-grounds, which, when seen at a distance, reminded me of the bright green of an English meadow. The minarets of the Turkish moscks, always a beautiful object, glittering in the first rays of the sun, and the cultivated appearance of the whole neighbourhood of the town, formed an agreeable contrast with the barren rocks on the other side of the Gulf.

Though we were to proceed with a part of our convoy immediately to Prevyza, we were anxious, as may be supposed, to put foot in the Morea. Accordingly my friend and myself took a walk in some currant-grounds to the north of the town, until we were obliged to return by a signal from the brig, which got under

as she had touched at a French port, our crew were in hopes she might prove a prize. The midshipman, two of our sailors, and myself, remained on board to take charge of her, whilst the rest of our crew returned to their own boat and continued their cruise. We put the Turks into the hold, and passed that day and the next night disagreeably enough; for we discovered that our prisoners had concealed some of their arms, and were evidently preparing to recover their vessel. We were therefore obliged to keep a constant watch over them, but could not help allowing two at a time to come on deck and assist us in managing the ship and working at the pumps. It blew very hard, with a high sea, and our situation was altogether so unpleasant that we were very glad to catch a sight of the Spider's pennant a little after daylight. When we dropped anchor under her, our commander ordered the Turks to be

brought on board, and, having heard what had happened, requested me, as I spoke a little Italian, to tell the Turkish captain that he should be hanged in half an hour for firing on the British flag and killing an Englishman. I delivered the message with due solemnity, and, pointing to the yard-arm as being ready for the execution, asked him what he had to say in his behalf. I then had an opportunity of witnessing the tranquillity with which in general the Mussulman meets death. The Turk said, "I have before told you I mistook you for a pirate—I have nothing more to say: if I must die, I must die. God's will be done." The man spoke with the utmost composure, although he had every reason to believe he was about to die. I scarcely need add that nothing beyond the condemnation of the cargo was intended, and that was not obtained.—[1854.]

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weigh at twelve o'clock. The ship was not long in getting out of the bay, and before sunset we had a distant view of a town called Mesolonghi, with a singular-looking double shore at the foot of mountains rising one above the other as far as the eye could reach, which is, indeed, the appearance of all the country to be seen to the north of the Gulf of Lepanto.

The next morning we were in the channel, with Ithaca* to the left or west of us. This island, which is but of small circumference, and which is, as it were, enclosed in a bay formed by two promontories of the great island of Cefalonia, is not so rough and rocky as the main land to the right. We were close to it; and saw a few shrubs on a brown heathy land, two little towns in the hills scattered amongst trees, and a wind-mill or two, with a tower, on the heights. We made but little progress during this day; indeed the boats of the brig were employed in cutting out currant-boats from Ithaca, then not very strongly garrisoned, as may be easily believed, when I mention that a month afterwards, when the Ionian Islands were invested by a British squadron, the kingdom of Ulysses was surrendered into the hands of a serjeant and seven men. In the night we saw lights in all the mountains, which they told us were fires kindled by shepherds, whose flocks are not driven down from the hills to the low grounds till the beginning of October, when the autumnal rains usually commence.

On the 28th we sailed through the channel between Ithaca and the island of Santa Maura, and again saw Cefalonia stretching farther to the north. We doubled the promontory of Santa Maura, and saw the precipice

* The identity of this island with the Homeric Ithaca has been questioned, but there seems no reasonable doubt on the subject. Colonel Leake, Colonel Mure, and Mr. Bowen in his 'Ithaca in 1850,' should be consulted; and although the learned M.P. for Ayrshire declares that he will not "range himself as a partisan on any side," he is evidently inclined to "go out with the ayes."—See Mure, 'Tour in Greece,' chaps. iv. v. vi.—[1854.]

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which the fate of Sappho, the poetry of Ovid, and the rocks so formidable to the ancient mariners, have made for ever memorable. On each side of the headland is a large cave ; the shore is very bold, and the height very abrupt, but covered on the top with a green shrub or moss.

At seven in the evening we anchored off Prevyza, and the Greek acting as one of the English Vice-Consuls at that town came on board the brig. His name was Commiuti, or Comminiuti : he was of a tall and uncommonly handsome person and face, and dressed in the Greek fashion. We had letters of introduction to his brother, which he opened, but could not, I believe, read : he was not, however, the less civil ; but, with a profusion of compliments, promised to serve us to the extent of his power.

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CHAPTER II.

Prevyza — a description of that town — The mouth of the Gulf of Arta — Actium — Short description and account of Prevyza — and of the battle which placed the town in the hands of the Turks.

WE landed at Prevyza during a shower of rain, and with no very agreeable presentiments. The master of an English transport lying in the harbour had come on board, and told us most dismal stories of the Turks inhabiting the place. He had had a shot fired through his main-mast from some Turkish man-of-war; and one day, walking in the country, a Turk, to whom he had said and done nothing, turned round and fired at him. He added, that our Resident at the court of Ali, the Pasha of the country, was preparing to leave Ioannina, the capital, being unable to bear the insolence of the people. We picked our way through several dirty streets, to the house of Signor Commiuti. Few places will bear being visited in a rainy day, least of all a Turkish town, and such a town as Prevyza.

We found the streets without flags or stone paving of any kind, resembling dirty lanes, with wooden huts on each side, exceedingly narrow, and shaded over head with large rushes or reeds, reaching from the pents of the houses quite across from one side to the other. This contrivance, which must be very agreeable in hot weather, did at this time only increase the gloominess of the place, and added to the inconvenience of walking, as the rain dripped from the dirty reeds, and made the paths more miry. Add to this the savage appearance of the Turks, each of whom carried an immense brace of pistols and a long knife sticking out from a belt before his waist, and the accommodation we met

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with at the Consul's house, which seemed wretched to us who were just fresh from Christendom, and there will appear nothing enviable in our situation.

A circumstance just at that time occurred which seemed to coincide with the report made by the master of the transport; for, looking out of the Consul's window, I saw a young Turk discharge two pistols over a garden wall, to frighten some Greek mariners who were dancing and singing to the sound of a fiddle. The sailors, however, continued their sport; and we soon found that there was nothing malicious or unusual in the playfulness of the young Mussulman.

We dined with the brother of the Vice-Consul (the Vice-Consul himself being absent at Ioannina), when I was not so much struck with the dinner, and the way of serving it up, one dish after the other, of each of which we were expected to eat, as with Signor Commuti being waited upon by his father, an old man, and by one of his brothers. I afterwards found it to be a common practice in Greek families for those who have no money to be retainers and attendants to such of their relations as are more wealthy; nor does filial affection or obedience prevent a man from exacting the same duties from an indigent parent as he himself would perform, were his father to become by any accident the richer man of the two. An excessive reverence for wealth is the distinguishing characteristic, as it appears to me, of all the inhabitants of the Levant. What could Mr. De Guys, in his forced parallel between the ancient and modern Greeks, have said to such a change of those virtuous customs which would never permit a degradation of the dignity of old age?

After dinner we paid a visit to the Governor of the town, who resided within the enclosure of a fort at the lower end of the harbour, in a house belonging to Ali Pasha. We walked through a long gallery,

open, as is the custom, on one side, and through two or three large rooms with naked walls, and no other furniture than a low stage running round three sides of the chamber, on which, when inhabited, the sofa-cushions are placed. In one of these barrack-rooms, for that is the name by which you will best comprehend the sort of palace we visited, we found the Governor, who received us with the grave politeness that seems born with every Turk, and who gave us coffee and a pipe, the ceremony customary with the people of this country on the reception of visitors. The coffee is served up very thick, with the grounds left at the bottom of the cup, always without milk, and, except to travellers who are supposed to be accustomed to delicacies, without sugar. The cups are very small, not made to stand, but presented in other cups of open work, like our egg-cups or salt-cellars. Tobacco, which was unknown to the Orientals till the middle of the seventeenth century, is now the universal luxury of all the inhabitants of the Levant; but the Turkey plant is not nearly so pungent and strong as that of America and the West Indies, and a habit of smoking it is immediately acquired. The pipes are very long, the heads being made of earthenware, and the sticks, when they are best, of cherry-wood. In these the rich are very expensive: they adorn them with amber heads and joints, a pair of which I once saw exposed for sale at two thousand piasters, or more than a hundred pounds sterling.

The Governor could not easily be distinguished from the shabby-looking Albanian guards that surrounded him; some of them sitting down close to him, and the others standing opposite their master, staring and laughing at our conversation. Besides the Governor of the fort, there was here also an Intendant of the Marine, to whom Englishmen generally pay their respects, the port being occasionally the resort of some of our

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Adriatic squadron, but whom we did not visit till our return to this place.

Prevyza is said to contain about three thousand inhabitants, of which one-half are Turks. Of these Turks the greater part are Albanians, and are to be distinguished as such by their dress, manners, and language, of all which I shall hereafter take a separate notice. The houses of the town are all of wood, for the most part with only a ground floor; and, where there is one story, the communication to it is by a ladder or wooden steps on the outside, sheltered, however, by the overhanging eaves of the roof. In this case the horses and cattle occupy the lower chamber, or it is converted into a warehouse, and the family live on the floor above, in which there are seldom more than two rooms. This straggling town is placed on the longest of one of the extremities of a flat biforked tongue of land, that widens towards the point, and is more narrow about three miles from the end. The narrow part is the site of Nicopolis.

A bay, which runs into the land about a mile, forms the harbour; and the other extremity of the tongue, together with the opposite promontory, on which Anactorium, according to D'Anville, formerly stood, composes the mouth of the Gulf of Ambracia, now called the Gulf of Arta. This mouth is about half a mile, or a little more, in breadth: Polybius says five stadia, and Strabo a little more than four; alluding to this interior mouth, and not to that of the harbour, which is formed by the point of Prevyza and the promontory, and which is nearly a mile in breadth. It must be exceedingly difficult for a vessel of any size to work into the Gulf; for there is no deep water, except close to the town, that on the other side being full of shoals and quicksands.

Were it not for the positive authority that determines the battle of Actium to have been fought within the

promontory in the bay that first presents itself on the right hand to a person sailing into the Gulf, I should be inclined to think that the action took place in the sea between Leucadia and the Cape of Prevyza.^a The enormous vessels, of nine or ten banks of oars, in the fleet of Antony, under which, to use the expression of Florus, the waters groaned, can have scarcely been able to manœuvre in the small basin in the Gulf; and unless the battle was fought without the bay, I cannot understand how the combatants could see the runaway Egyptians steering for Peloponesus, as Plutarch, in his *Life of Antony*, says they did. They might suppose them making for that quarter, but they could not see them an instant after they had got out of the Gulf, the exit from which is not perceived until you are close to the mouth.

Either a good part of the low land of the promontory opposite Prevyza has been formed since the days of Augustus, which is extremely probable, or the floating castles of Antony were not so large as is usually conceived. The point is not very important: it is certain that the battle was fought; and that a naval action, for the first and only time in the history of the world, as Madame de Sévigné has remarked before me, decided the fate of an empire. D'Anville says that the name of Actium is not entirely lost in Azio;^b but I made every inquiry, and could not learn that there

^a Mr. Cramer (*Ancient Greece*, vol. ii. p. 9) says the battle was "*certainly fought in the bay of Prevyza.*" The only question is, where are the limits to which that bay may be said to extend. I think Mr. Hughes, who has devoted labour and learning to the question (*Travels*, vol. i. p. 426), is right in thinking that the action took place in the bay between La Punda and the point on which D'Anville places Actium; but I see no contradiction in Thucydides saying that Anactorium was in the mouth of the Gulf, and that the temple of the

Actium Apollo was in the mouth of the Gulf. With reference to the open sea, both these parts may be said to be in the mouth of the Ambracian Gulf, Anactorium coming first and Actium following.—[1854.]

^b The low-land promontory is called Punda, and Colonel Leake considers it sufficiently proved that it is the site of Actium (see p. 406, *Researches in Greece*). Mr. Cramer (vol. ii. p. 7), however, in his description of Greece, gives another opinion, and adheres to D'Anville; if so, the ruins belong to Anactorium.—[1854.]