# THE SALE OF PARGA AND *THE ISLES OF GREECE*

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(First published as *The Sale of Parga and* The Isles of Greece, *Keats-Shelley Review* 2000, pp. 42-51. Reproduced with permission.)

This little-discussed episode sheds, I think, an interesting light on Byron's ambivalent attitude to Greece, to Ali Pacha, and to his reception there by Ali in 1809.

In April 1819, with Byron exiled in Venice, the English, anxious in their mood of post-war economy to rid themselves of some territory, sold the Greek coastal town of Parga to Ali Pasha, who had been casting a favourable eye on it for some decades. England felt unable to hold and defend such places, which needed more soldiers than they could afford, and asked 633,000 Spanish dollars (£124,000: the money was to go to the Pargiots).[1] The event had been international news; but Byron may have had his awareness of it aroused especially by an article in the *Edinburgh Review* for October 1819, in which he would have understood Frances Jeffrey to have said of the business

> ... an arrangement more ungenerous, cruel and unjust to those who were the objects of it, and at once more dishonourable and injurious to those who conducted it, cannot well be imagined ...[2]

and to have called it

> ... one of the most flagrant instances of impolicy and oppression of which history has preserved any record ...[3]

In fact much of the article was by the Italian poet Ugo Foscolo, born on the Ionian island of Zante, now exiled in London, as a result of the Austrian occupation of Italy, and protective in sentiment of any area threatened by Frankish imperialist machinations.[4] On June 30th 1819 (two weeks before the publication of *Don Juan* I and II) Hobhouse wrote in his diary:

> I called on Foscolo – he told me that his opinion of the Whigs was fixed – he said in a letter to me that they sacrifice their principles to their party and their party to some individuals of their party. He told me that the opposition to the cession of Parga had been crushed on account of Lord Lauderdale's brother, and that Monck had refused to continue his motion merely because he had heard from Colburn that Colburn had heard that another man knew that Parga was ceded. "Now," said Foscolo, "if they could not save the honor of the English government they could have saved the honor of the English nation – but no – they would not". Ali Pasha had given this lady a shawl, and that lady a compliment, and the Pasha was found to be a very good sort of a fellow, who ought to have what he asked for in a civil way. Foscolo told me that the English submitted to the most extraordinary indignities in the persons of their Ionian subjects. A butcher going over to Prevesa from Santa Maura was seized by Ali who told him "I am in love with your nephew of fourteen years old. Tell your brother to send him to my Seraglio or I will keep you here all your life". The butcher

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**1:** W.D.Wrigley, *The Diplomatic Significance of Ionian Neutrality, 1821-31* (Peter Lang, 1988) pp 80-81; *Annual Register* for 1819, pp. 194-8.

**2:** *Edinburgh Review*, October 1819, p. 286.

**3:** Ibid, p. 288.

**4:** See E.R.Vincent, *Ugo Foscolo, An Italian in Regency England* (Cambridge 1953) pp 111-15. Foscolo planned a book on the matter, which one of Hobhouse's sisters – to whom he proposed without success – helped him translate. The British Library (c. 142 aa 24) has a text of this work, entitled *Narrative of events illustrating the fortunes and cession of Parga translated in part by Sara Matilda Hobhouse*. The copy is inscribed "To Miss Hobhouse who had the kindness to translate into English a portion of the unfinished and never-to-be-published volume on Parga."

writes to his brother the baker, "If you love me send your son to the Pasha" – the baker consents – sends the boy, who is circumcised etc., and the butcher is released.

In 1812 two soldiers of *Ali's* shot a Greek named Suli, on the parade before the English commanding officer at Santa Maura. They were arrested and sent to Zante but escaped the first night. The French used to hang up Ali's Albanians like dogs.[5]

On April 27th 1819, Parga's entire Suliote population – 867 households – had emigrated to Corfu, taking (as Foscolo asserted) the very bodies from the graves, and burning them before the church to protect them from Ali's atrocities, even as Ali and his men closed in. Many leading Whigs, including Lord John Russell, Sir James Mackintosh and James Scarlett, Q.C., had been shamed into protest; and Foscolo had written the whole thing up for the *Edinburgh*, with Jeffrey as his translator and adaptor. At one point in his piece a "Pargiote elder" says the following (my italics):

... I exhort you well to consider, before you yield yourselves up to the English, that the King of England has in his pay all the Kings of Europe, – obtaining money for this purpose from his merchants; so that in that country the merchants and the King are but as one: whence, should it become advantageous to the merchants to sell you, in order to conciliate Ali, and obtain certain commercial advantages in his harbours, *the English will sell you to Ali.* If, however, you still persist in surrendering yourselves to England, beware how you confide in the promises of military men, whose trade, whatever may be their dignity, is that of a servant; therefore, being taught only to obey, they seldom have wisdom to weigh their promises, and never have power to fulfil them – as you do, because you are all free men. But go and present yourselves before their King: If he mean to be the master of this city, let him swear it upon the gospel of Christ. *Yet I would not entirely trust even him. For within these twenty years, Christian princes have openly turned their subjects and friends into merchandise,* and have shown but little regard for the gospel …[6]

As in some parts of Thucydides, we may query the strict authenticity of the "elder's" words here, even while we are impressed by their eloquence and general aptness. Had such a person existed in Parga, this is exactly what he *should* have said.

The *Edinburgh* article ends sensationally (my italics):

As soon as the notice was given [of how much Ali was to be charged for their homeland] every family marched solemnly out of its dwelling, without tears or lamentation; and the men, preceded by their priests, and followed by their sons, proceeded to the sepulchres of their fathers, and silently unearthed and collected their remains, – which they placed upon a huge pile of wood which they had previously erected before one of their churches. They even took their arms in their hands, and, setting fire to the pile, stood motionless and silent around it, till the whole was consumed. During this melancholy ceremony, some of Ali's troops, impatient for possession, approached the gates of the town; upon which a deputation of citizens was sent to inform our Governor, that if a single Infidel was admitted before the remains or their ancestors were secured from profanation, and they themselves, with their families, fairly embarked, they would all instantly put to death their wives and children, – and die with their arms in their hands, – and not without a bloody revenge on those who had *bought and sold* their country. Such a remonstrance, at such a moment, was felt and respected, as it ought by those to whom it was addressed. General Adam succeeded in stopping the march of the Mussulmans. The pile burnt out – and the people embarked in silence; – and Free and Christian Parga is now a stronghold of ruffians, renegadoes, and slaves![7]

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**5:** BL. Add. Mss. 56540 84r-84v. "Accidentals" modified.
**6:** *Edinburgh Review*, October 1819, pp. 282-3.
**7:** *Edinburgh Review*, October 1819, p. 293.

Byron started Cantos III / IV of *Don Juan* (they were originally a unit) on September 17th, and finished the draft on November 30th 1819. It includes the memorable *Isles of Greece*, with, at verses 12-14, this (my italics after the third line):

> The Tyrant of the Chersonese
> Was Freedom's best and bravest friend;
> *That* Tyrant was Miltiades! –
> Oh! that the present hour would lend
> Another Despot of the kind!
> Such Chains as his were sure to bind. –
>
> Fill high the bowl with Samian Wine!
> *On Suli's Rock, and Parga's Shore,*
> Exists the remnant of a line
> Such as the Doric Mothers bore;
> And there perhaps some Seed is sown
> The Heracleidan blood might own.
>
> Trust not for freedom to the Franks –
> *They have a king who buys and sells –*
> In native swords – and native ranks –
> The only hope of freedom dwells –
> *But Turkish force – and Latin fraud –*
> Would break your shield however broad. –[8]

The echoes suggest that the *Edinburgh Review* arrived in Byron's mail at just the right time: although the well-attested physical and psychological resemblance between Ali Pacha and Lambro – in whose fortress / palace and in whose imagined absence the song is sung, who was once a Greek patriot, and is now not a mainland oppressor but an island pirate – should put us on guard against too simplistically political an interpretation of the epic.

It seems someone thought that Byron's reaction to the cession of Parga should have been more explicit, and, also in 1819, tried their hand at a pastiche Byron poem on the subject, called simply *Parga*. In it Parga is accorded all the self-awareness and tradition of an ancient Greek city-state, and its inhabitants all the eloquence their predicament calls for. The poem, which is based in part on the *Edinburgh Review* article just mentioned, is dedicated to Sir James Mackintosh, and was so convincing that it found its way into an 1821 German complete English-language Byron edition, the eleventh volume of which it shares with *Beppo*.[9] Continental academics were taken in, seeing the self-evidently Byronic nature of the subject, and hearing in it the authentic tones of satire, passion and political outrage. It was even translated into German and Danish. How good the *pasticheur* was may be gleaned from the following extract:

> "Who's he that comes in English garb,
> "The arrows of distress to barb,
> "Who scarcely stops to gasp for breath,
> "As tho' he rode for life or death;

**8:** *Don Juan*, III 755-72 (my edition).

**9:** See Jørgen Erik Nielsen, *Parga. A Verse Tale Attributed to Byron,* English Studies (Amsterdam) 50, 1969, pp 397-405. Nielsen finds many echoes of Thomas Moore in the poem, and Moore was in frequent communication during 1819 with Sir James Mackintosh, the poem's dedicatee. But neither I, nor Thérèse Tessier, nor Jeffery Vail (for both of whose advice I am grateful) can find any evidence linking Moore to the poem.

"He looks of sullen froward mood,
"And drips his jaded steed with blood;
"Onward he draws – his glances break
"Like streams from fell Avernus' lake.
"He comes to tell how Ali won
"By art, our land from sire and son –
"Whose freedom's fled – whose glory's gone –
"We fall, but we are not subdued,
"'Tis but our lease of woes renewed.
"And if our star of hope's laid low,
"'Twas treachery that struck the blow –
"Thy message – be thou friend or foe?" –
* * * * * * * * * * * *

XIX.

The Courier paused, for on his ear
Struck sounds which gave him deepest fear;
A while he gazed – then named the hour,
Parga must yield to Turkish power;
Though Albion would protect them still,
From Ali Pasha's lawless will.[10]

It's not all as competent as this. The metre alternates between pentameter and tetrameter, and, in the latter, monosyllabic rhymes sometimes alternate unByronically with polysyllabic ones; an occasional alexandrine interrupts the octosyllabics. Some lines need rethinking:

"England, like Heliotrope, inclines
"To where the sun the brightest shines.[11]

The slight story concerns the rescue of the helpless "Parguinote" heroine – called Haidée, as if in direct challenge to Byron's Ionian heroine – by her freedom-fighting lover Marcarius, from the sacrifice intended for her by her elderly father Andreas, as Ali and his savages approach their doomed town. Andreas agrees not to kill Haidee, and his refusal to allow her and Marcarius to marry until Parga is free again is rendered void when he collapses dying, and, in his last moments, foresees the future freedom of Parga, as Britain "resumes her wonted power":

" I hear the 'Io Peans' rise
"From echoing hills to answering skies
"Like thousand thunders as they roll,
"Swelling the peal from pole to pole.
"I see a patriot band advance,
"Firm is each heart and fixed each lance.
"With laurel leaves each brow is bound,
"The crescent's crush'd – the cross is crown'd,
"And Parga reigns again – redeem'd – reveng'd – renown'd!"
He falls – and lo! his heart hath beat
Its last faint throb at Haidée's feet.[12]

**10:** *Parga*, 332-53.
**11:** *Parga*, 362-63.
**12:** *Parga*, 1019-29.

The possibility that *Parga* was written after the publication of *Don Juan* I and II (which came out on July 15th 1819, giving plenty of time for the composition of the critical / parasitical work) and that it was intended as a political riposte to Byron, is not to be discounted. The stealing of the heroine's name, and the polemical difference created between her patriotic father and Byron's predatory Lambro, seems calculated. "This is the kind of poem that Byron should be writing now! This is the kind of politically-explicit poem he should have written years ago! If only *The Giaour* had been as honestly and overtly Whiggish as this!" seems to be the implication. However, it is not until Canto III (published in August 1821) that Byron's Lambro is given his political aspirations, and even then they are echoes from his past:

> His Country's wrongs, and his despair to save her
> Had stung him from a Slave to an Enslaver. – – –[13]

There is reason to suspect that Byron read *Parga* (he never refers to it, as he does frequently to other *spuria* which come his way). At the end of the first of its two cantos, "The Bard of Parga's strain"[14] sings a song, of which the following are the first three verses:

> "Courage sons of Parga's land,
> Steel the heart, and nerve the hand;
> For though our sun has set in pain,
> 'Twill rise with brighter beams again.
>
> "Mark how deep that shadow falls
> O'er yon turret's towering walls;
> As that shadow falls, so we
> Will yet regain our liberty.
>
> "Miltiades again may rise
> From Parga's ashes to the skies,
> Soothe our woes – relieve our pains,
> And bind our tyrants in our chains.[15]

A comparison with *The Isles of Greece* (quoted in part above) suggests Byron taking a sentimental original and playing disillusioning games with it. Lines three and four above seem echoed pessimistically in lines five and six of the song in *Don Juan* (*Eternal Summer gilds them yet, / But All, except their Sun, is set*). Where for the pastiche-Byron Militiades is a heroic deliverer, his own tyranny over Chersonesus forgotten, for the more historically-critical Byron he is a paradox – a local tyrant who fights for national freedom – an idealised version, perhaps, of Ali Pasha.[16] And the strange amalgam of Southey and Byron himself which constitutes the prostitute-poet of

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**13:** *Don Juan* III 53, 7-8 (my edition).
**14:** *Parga*, line 425.
**15:** *Parga*, Canto I, unnumbered lines near end.
**16:** On October 13th 1809 Hobhouse had recorded in his diary the following comparison between Ali and the eighteenth-century Portuguese reformist tyrant, the Marquis de Pombal, a version of Miltiades: "… the [Greek] people ought to be miserable every way – yet Ali builds bridges and palaces; cleans the country of robbers, improves the police of his towns, and extends his power on every side, acting the part of the great man in the usual acceptation of the term. Albania will be forever the better for his administration, and should the children of the present slaves become free, they will remember his name with gratitude and forget the injuries of their fathers." (The Marquis of Pombal was at the same time the tyrant and the benefactor of the Portuguese) (B.L. Add. Mss. 56527, f 54r)

*Don Juan* III could be construed as an ironic riposte to the attempt, in *Parga*, to re-animate Byron's own *Giaour* style.

The *Quarterly Review* for May 1820 had an article by Sir John Barrow, refuting, in the most confident terms, with two English army witnesses as corroborators, many of the assertions made about the cession of Parga in the previous year's *Edinburgh*. The English, writes Barrow, had no treaty obligations to the Pargiotes: the deal they obtained for them, involving full compensation for loss of property, was outstandingly good in the circumstances. Lest we should have too Hellenic an image of the place, he tells us early on that Parga "consists of one street, and a few narrow lanes. The houses are extremely poor, but have a pretty appearance ..."[17] Moreover, he uses the names of Byron and Hobhouse, both to blacken the Pargiotes' reputation, and to bolster the image of Ali:

> Though we are not altogether prepared to assert with Mr. Hobhouse, that 'the character of the Parganotes is 'amongst the worst of the Albanians,'' we see not reason to conclude that it was at all better, at least while the country behind it remained unsettled: for some years past, indeed, the tranquil state of the neighbouring territory has necessarily kept them at home.[18]

It is the authority of Ali Pasha which has tranquillised the neighbouring territory, and kept them at home.

> The character of a people is long preserved in their national songs. All that were sung by those Albanians of the coast, who accompanied Lord Byron and Mr Hobhouse, 'were relations of some robbing exploits;' and 'one of them,' says Mr Hobhouse, began thus: – "When we set out for Parga, there were sixty of us," and the burden was –
>
> 'Κλεφτεις ποτε Παργα,
> Κλεφτεις ποτε Παργα.'
> 'Robbers all at Parga,
> Robbers all at Parga.'[19]

From the book which, a decade earlier, described Byron's first excursion to Greece, Barrow thus uses Hobhouse's own words to defend Ali Pasha and Castlereagh. He soon implicates Byron too:

> But however reprehensible the conduct of this chief [Ali] may have been on many occasions, we are not sure that it is either advantageous to our interests, or (what is more important) to those of the people whom he rules by delegation, that we, in England, should invidiously inquire into all the circumstances of his life, and exhibit his character in the most odious colours, while most of his accusers have been supplied with all their knowledge, and gained all their information, from the extended civilization which he has effected, and from the personal civility which they have received at his hands. To this reprehensible conduct Lord Byron is no party. 'I have,' says his lordship, 'no complaint to make, but am indebted for many civilities, (I might almost say for friendship) and much hospitality, to Ali Pasha.'[20]

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**17:** *Quarterly Review*, May 1820, p. 113.
**18:** Ibid pp. 124-5.
**19:** Ibid. The Hobhouse quotation is from *A Journey through Albania* ... I 167.
**20:** Ibid, p. 128. The Byron quotation is from *Childe Harold* II, *Additional Note, on the Turks* (CPW II 209).

Barrow (who makes no reference to *Parga*, the poem) ends with a flat denial that the evacuation of the town was anything like the affecting scene painted by Foscolo and Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh*:

> Yes, gentle reader! The families marching out – the priests preceding – the sons following – the procession to the sepulchres – the disinterment of the bones – the *huge* pyre of wood – the firing of it in solemn silence – the troops of Ali, and the deputation of the citizens – the threat of putting to death their wives and children, and dying with arms in their hands – the success of General Adam in stopping the march of the Mussulmans – the burning out of the pile – and the silent embarkation – ALL, ALL THIS MACHINERY AND EVERY PART OF IT, we most positively and unequivocally assert, – and pledge ourselves for the truth of the assertion, – to be an absolute and positive falsehood: and we do not hesitate to appeal, for the truth of our statement, to Major General Sir Frederick Adam, and to Lieut. Colonel Gubbins, who delivered up the place; the latter of whom had been eight months commandant of the garrison and civil governor of the town, and remained in Parga three days after its occupation by the Turkish troops.[21]

Gubbins' name certainly inspires confidence.

Byron's silence about all these things – the cession of the town to Ali, the *Edinburgh* article, the pastiche-poem, and the implicatory *Quarterly* article – which would enlist him and Hobhouse as Castlereagh-supporters! – is deafening. Only in small but important details of *Don Juan* III can we infer a reaction to them. As Cecil Y. Lang points out,[22] he never even refers to Ali's death – a sign either that he was ashamed of his own former allegiance to him,[23] or that he was simply not able to make up his mind as to whether Ali had been a good influence on his life or a bad.

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**21:** *Quarterly Review*, May 1820, p. 136.

**22:** See Cecil Y. Lang, *Narcissus Jilted: Byron,* Don Juan*, and the Biographical Imperative*, in *Historical Studies and Literary Criticism*, ed. McGann, Madison 1985, p 157.

**23:** See, for example, BLJ III 111-12 for Byron's ambiguous attitude to a typical Ali atrocity; or BLJ IV 299 for Byron's courteous letter to Ali of June 25th 1815, one week exactly after Waterloo, promising him a pair of pistols.