

Levantines and the British Consular Service

Dr Lucia Patrizio Gunning, UCL.

Abstract:

Levantines and the British Consular Service

When the Foreign Office took over the British diplomatic representation in the Ottoman Empire from the Levant Company in 1825, a wave of newspaper articles attacked the reliability of the service due to the consistent presence of ‘Levantines’. Debates in Parliament discussed their engagement and inquiries assessed their involvement and the suitability of their employment in the context of the newly created government organisation.

Due to the mistrust provoked by the press, for a number of years the government tried to eliminate the Levantines from the consular service in the Ottoman Empire and substitute them with British personnel.

But when it came to it, the British born personnel lacked the understanding and familiarity with local habits, knowledge and ability to speak the language, and trust of the locals, which had made the Levantines a precious and fundamental part of the service.

In the particular context of the search for antiquities for European museums, moreover, it was especially on this typology of personnel that British diplomats came to rely with increasing success. This paper will examine the perception of Levantines and their involvement in the British consular service in the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century and explain why, rather than being eliminated, their use consolidated with time, especially in the Aegean.

George Wheler, in his renowned volume *A Journey into Greece by George Wheler Esq; in Company of Dr Spon of Lyons*, celebrated for the views of the Parthenon before its despoliation by Elgin, described the British factors who ‘live gentilely, become rich, and

get great Estates in a short time.’¹ He noted how their consuls were greatly respected, had the best reputation amongst the European consuls, and at the Custom House their word was taken by the Turkish authorities instead of searching vessels.

In 1813, the British traveller John Oliver Hanson noted in his journal that amongst the European powers represented in the Levant, the British were ‘the most considerable in point of wealth, respectability and power’ and their consul ‘the most feared and looked up to.’² Many of them spoke foreign languages and were ‘married to women of the country’ showing great hospitality and generosity toward the travellers.

Successive members of the Company served as consuls through the years. They established themselves in the Levant and set up family. Their diplomatic representation combined with their trade and they counted on the support of the Company to maintain a high standard of living and to work efficiently. Indeed they were financially supported by *consulages* - fees charged by the Levant Company on imports and exports.

However, as a result of the liberalisation of trade in the nineteenth century, the privileges of trade given to the Company in the sixteenth century were slowly eroded away. The ideas of free trade theorists like Adam Smith advocated that the exclusivity granted to these chartered companies was restrictive to free trade and universal wealth, and needed to be abolished.

In 1825, therefore, after years of sharp decline in profits and following the acquisition of the protectorate of the Ionian islands in 1815, the Company was invited to

¹ George Wheler, *A Journey into Greece by George Wheler Esq; in Company of Dr Spon of Lyons* (London 1682), pp.245-6.

² J.O. Hanson, *Recollections of Smyrna and Greece*, (1813), British Library, Add Mss 38591, fols 50-1.

surrender its charter. Since it was 'no longer connected with the protection of public interest', its privileges could be interpreted by the public, and Parliament, as a damaging restriction to trade in the Levant.³

The protectorate in particular had created a specific and complicated duty to look after the Ionians wherever they travelled or resided, within the territory of the Ottoman Empire. Ionians were now seen as Franks, or foreign subjects, and were not subject to the laws of the empire. Suddenly therefore, from being merchants looking after a community of merchants to protect their interests, the consuls found themselves having to deal with political, criminal and religious issues within the wider community. They were neither trained to do this, nor were they set up for this kind of representation.

France, Austria and Russia had started to use their own consular offices for political gains, and it was felt that the British consular service in the Ottoman Empire needed to be focused on political goals and to observe and counteract the activities of the other powers at the Porte.

The Foreign Office took over in 1825 with the initial intention to absorb the diplomatic and consular services and to reform its personnel entirely. It was envisaged that the appointment of fully British born personnel would revolutionise and clean up the service and make it more efficient.

But there was little understanding of the exact requirements of the service, of the financial costs, the practical requirements, or of the fact that different places had

³ A.C.Wood, *A History Of The Levant Company*, (1935, Oxford University Press), p.201

different customs, and that an understanding of these was essential for the proceedings of a diplomatic posting.

The change over to the Foreign Office therefore, was not as smooth as had been expected. Economic priorities in London clashed with the financial and local requirements of the service. *Consulages* were abolished by the Foreign Office, and thus a major source of revenue came to an end. This decision affected the income and quality of life offered to the consuls and failed to consider the consequences of a badly remunerated representation on the personnel.

Furthermore, the Foreign Office did not reconfirm the employment of dragomans and clerks.⁴ The role of dragoman, in particular, had often been passed from father to son with a trust existing between the Company and its employees which had formed an essential part of their relationship. The decision to leave them out left many officials without work, unable to care for their families and with no means of support. This affected their behaviour and loyalty, and damaged the reputation of the British in the area.

The new consuls appointed by the government were hostile to the dragomans and their reports relate how these officials, at this stage unpaid, yet remunerated through the benefit of British protection, extracted bribes from the locals when releasing certificates.⁵ For those officials who were lucky enough to be retained within the Levant service, or for those who were newly appointed, a meagre salary would be the only

⁴ Werry to Foreign Office, 26 January 1826, FO78/147, fol.177 and fol.237.

⁵ Lucia Patrizio Gunning, *The British Consular Service in the Aegean and the Collection of Antiquities for the British Museum*, (Routledge, 2009), p.25.

compensation to diplomatic life. At Frances Werry's consulate in Smyrna, the reorganisation had created chaos. By eliminating most of his staff, Werry had been left, at an old age, with an enormous burden of work:

I wish simply to call to your attention that there is independent of the Vice Consul duty, considerable business in the *Cancellaria*. That an English and an Italian Greek and French Clerk, both which receive a Salary of about £120 per annum, besides an under Clerk, are constantly occupied, that they were paid out of the fees of office which were generally sufficient, under the old Tariff ... By act of Parliament these fees will be much reduced ... I consequently beg your kindness in regulating these particulars, to observe that in giving me additional duty to perform, adequate remuneration may be granted me, and at all events, that in lieu of promotion being granted to my long and urgent solicitations, my post may not be rendered more onerous than it was before the Levant Consulates were transferred to the Crown. There is considerable unavoidable Expense attending *la representation* [sic] of the Post and that though Economy is the order of the day, Mr. Canning would I am sure wish appearances to be maintained in the proper manner, neither extravagantly, but certainly not shabbily.⁶

By reorganising the districts, scrapping interpreters and clerks and failing to provide accommodation for its consuls, the Foreign Office created a profession that was lonely, badly remunerated and gave little opportunity of personal satisfaction and career.

⁶ Nathaniel Werry to Bindwell, 9 Feb.1826, FO 78/147, fol. 235a.

Appointment under the Levant Company had been by vote of the factors; but this was no longer the case under the Foreign Office administration.⁷

The Levant Company's system of selection, in the restricted circle of the factories, had allowed its members to put forward and support friends and relatives for appointment in the consular service. Generation after generation of dragomans and consuls became diplomatic representatives for the Levant Company, with members of consular families working in different parts of the same geographical area. Amongst these, Wilkinson, Biliotti and Werry, for example, were recurring names in the Aegean.⁸

These appointments had assured a smooth and efficient continuation of the Levant service throughout the tenure by the Levant Company. However, it was on precisely this typology of personnel, that the Foreign Office and the press, chose to focus their attention for a number of years.

In England, public opinion was directed by the press, which strongly resented the concession of a state monopoly to a private company and the employment of its personnel in the diplomatic conduct of state affairs.

Rather than focussing on the newly created organisation that allowed a change of circumstances in the Levant service therefore, the press chose to attack one particularly vulnerable aspect of it: the employment of Levantines.

⁷ Foreign Office to Cartwright, 16 Apr.1829, FO 78/185, fols 9-11.

⁸ Cartwright to Liddell, 10 May 1824, FO 78/136, fol. 316.

Defined as: ‘Men of English descent domiciled, sometimes over several generations, in the Levant’⁹, the Levantines were a particular feature of the service in the Ottoman Empire. A later description in the Parliamentary Papers extended the definition to include also those consuls sent directly from England who had been employed in the Levant for many years.

Levantines understood local traditions, could speak the language and had a precise understanding of what was expected from a foreign diplomat in the Ottoman Empire. For this reason, their employment had been a natural solution under the Levant Company, but it appeared to pose difficulties at Foreign Office level.

It was not until 1858, thirty three years after the transfer to the Foreign Office, that a Select Committee on the consular service enquired in Parliament about the nature and quality of personnel employed in the Levant. The consensus was that the British consular service lacked a consular code. In the absence of a set of specific instructions that would guide him through the everyday difficulties of his job, the consul had to ‘rely on his own common sense and on public opinion in the community in which he resided.’¹⁰

The nature of the personnel inherited from the Levant Company was, at this stage, a specific preoccupation. The Committee appears to have been fuelled by, and to a

⁹ *Report of the Select Committee on Diplomatic and Consular Services*, PP1870 (382), VII, QQ1129-39, 1387, in: Platt, *The Cinderella Service*, p. 156.

¹⁰ Quarterly Review, CV (Jan.1859), 81-85, in: Iseminger G.L., “The Old Turkish Hands: The British Levantine Consuls, 1856-1876”, *Middle East Journal*, vol.22 n.3 (Summer 1868) pp.297-316.

degree guided by, articles, predominantly in *The Times*, which in parallel with the happenings in Parliament attacked the Levantines employed in the service.

Have not the result of the peculiar mode of conducting our commercial establishments in the Levant been that the consulates have a good deal fallen into the hands of families established in those countries and familiar with the customs and usages of those countries?¹¹

This was in response to the following piece which had appeared in *The Times*:

The third most frequent and most obnoxious way of recruiting British consuls in the Levant is from a set of half-English, half Levantine families, who may be said to have acquired a kind of hereditary right to Consulships. They are supposed to be Englishmen, although they have perhaps never been in England, and are supposed to know the country, although they have perhaps never been beyond the place where they were born ... They are connected by interest and almost always by family ties with the country where they ought to represent English interests alone ... They are, in many instances, very respectable men; but they have too many local interests not to be suspected of a bias in favour of them; they remain for a long number of years in the same place, and get, as it were, identified with it, losing their character as Englishmen. If we want to reform this and raise the whole body, infusion of fresh English blood and English ideas is required.¹²

¹¹ *Report of the Select Committee on Diplomatic and Consular Services*, PP1857-8 (482)VIII, Q2864, page 249, 3 June 1858.

¹² *The Times*, 22 May 1858.

The 1858 Committee compared British consuls to their French counterparts, who were always appointed directly from France and were thus less ‘orientalised’ and more respected.

If the consular agent be a Levantine, or be mixed up very much with the natives, he certainly does not command that respect from the Turkish authorities which the representatives of a great power like that of Great Britain ought to command.¹³

The Times also questioned the honesty of the consuls:

The dishonesty which is commonly charged against some Levant consuls has, of course, its excuses. The English standard of commercial and political morality is not applied to an Eastern consul. But our Government ought to take care to have it applied. They compel the Levant consul to take to underhand practices by giving him the pay of a clerk while directing him to take the position of a magistrate...¹⁴

High expectations combined with the pitiful salary, was in fact precisely the reason which made a certain typology of people uniquely able to accept, and retain, postings in the Levant.

A later enquiry in 1870 debated this point to some extent. It emerged that salaries were never enough to conduct diplomatic business properly, and consuls were expected to invest into settling themselves in a new post. Leave to go back to England to visit family which was limited to only one month including travel, resulted in salary being cut in half, and this made the leave of absence unaffordable altogether. This was an

¹³ *Report of the Select Committee on Diplomatic and Consular Services*, PP1857-8 (482)VIII, Q2867.

¹⁴ *The Times*, 25 July 1855, p. 9.

additional element that made the Levant consuls loose contact with the 'English ways and become more and more like the people amongst whom they lived.'¹⁵

In 1871 George Jackson Elderidge from Syria testified that the government failed to pay its staff 'enough to enable them to live decently. Men could hardly be expected to expatriate themselves out of pure patriotism'¹⁶ and certainly could not travel with the consular salary. Biliotti, Cumberbatch and others suggested that a cumulative period of leave every three years, without deduction of salary, could be the answer to allowing consuls to return to England to re-acustom themselves with their British habits, as no travel home had so far been possible for a number of them due to the salary deduction and the limited time available.¹⁷

The 1870 enquiry therefore, perfectly pictured the reasons that made the Levant consular service continue to rely on that very personnel that the press and the enquiries in parliament continued to criticise. The limited salary, the complicated political circumstances and the necessity to understand the language and meet local customs, made newly appointed officials coming directly from England almost completely inadequate, if not a liability.

Although both *The Times* and the Committee pointed out the necessity of moving from their posting regularly, because business and family ties could get in the way of

¹⁵ Gordon, L. Iseminger, 'The Old Turkish Hands: The British Levantine Consuls, 1856-1876' in *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Summer, 1968), pp.303-4.

¹⁶ Iseminger, p.305.

¹⁷ Iseminger, p.306.

conducting the job impartially,¹⁸ it was understood at this point that knowledge of local customs could only come as a result of a long residence. Therefore, if in other areas of the world regularly changing post was a benefit, in the Levant it could constitute a problem: ‘A consul who had been many years at a post acquired local knowledge, and was therefore of immense value and service to the British government.’¹⁹ It was for this reason, both enquiries found, that these important posts were staffed with men who had lived, or served, most of their lives in Turkey.

My research stops with the 1870 Select Committee. Up to that year, the employment of the Levantines, far from having diminished, had in fact consolidated in the Levant service for all the reasons described so far. By this stage moreover, they had become precious collaborators of the British government for a less publicised duty: the search for antiquities for the British Museum.

Within the context of the European race to establish museums in the capitals of Europe, consuls and diplomats in the Ottoman Empire had gained an unparalleled position to source antiquities. Whether to top up their poor salary or in hope of a promotion, there is ample and emerging documentation of their activities in the archives of the British Museum, as well as in the Foreign Office papers at the National Archives in Kew.

¹⁸ *The Times*, 22 May 1858;

Report of the Select Committee on Diplomatic and Consular Services, PP1870 (382), VII, pp.71-81.

¹⁹ *Report of the Select Committee on Diplomatic and Consular Services*, PP1870 (382), VII, p.360.

Charles Thomas Newton had requested an appointment as vice consul in Mytilene after a number of years working as an assistant at the British Museum. There he had observed the potential of a diplomatic appointment and through influential friends he had managed to obtain one for himself in 1852. This appointment gave Newton authority and prestige locally and it provided him with a modest salary. His assistant's description of the locals is interesting and shows that mistrust and suspicion were mutual feelings between the new officials and the old establishment, and towards the locals.

In England you can have no idea of the people we come in contact with here.

Fortunately we are three together, so that we need depend on no one but ourselves for society. It is a curious feeling to know, before people open their lips, they will in all probability be about to tell you an untruth.²⁰

Yet, these feelings were dictated by a lack of understanding of local traditions and the impossibility of speaking the language, a condition that left both unaware of people's real attitudes. Ignorance towards the importance of antiquities and heritage for the modern Greeks, made them assume that the furnishing of the national museum in England had priority over local rights and feelings. But were the Greeks really not able to understand the significance of their antiquities? The evidence, and the accounts, confirm that, on the contrary, they took their heritage very seriously. Newton himself wrote that once he had obtained permission to take a large marble slab with inscriptions that had attracted his attention, on his arrival he found:

²⁰ Colnaghi to parents, 5 Feb. 1853, B.L., Add. MS 59502, fol. 81.

all manner of dormant opposition. First the Turkish Aga of the district ... my next opponent was the proprietor of the field in which the church was situated ... the lady of the manor...denied the right of any one to remove it...I found her already in possession of the field of battle, seated on the stone itself, in the apse of the roofless chapel ... At the sight of our sacrilegious party she became animated with the fury of an ancient Pythoness. She bowed down to the ground at least twelve times, kissing it, and crossing herself each time; then she lit a fire and burnt incense, to purify the place from our presence, and with great horror flung out of the sacred precinct some chicken bones, the remains of our yesterday's luncheon. I saw from the first that she was utterly beyond the reach of persuasion, and in my despair having exhausted my little stock of Greek, began to talk in English to her, a sure way to aggravate an angry native in the Levant.²¹

Newton remained in the Aegean for four years, but in that brief time he found in the Levantine consuls, vice consuls and consular agents there, the most valid collaborators for his search of antiquities. When, in 1859, the British Museum thought to appoint an agent to excavate in Rhodes, Newton wrote to the then Principal Librarian and his good friend Panizzi:

No ostensible agent of the British Government should be sent to the Levant to purchase antiquities...By employing consuls as agents... a much more effectual agency is set on foot. No one can compete with a consul in the market except another consul. His dragoman is in much the same position as a solicitor of a

²¹ C.T. Newton, *Travels and Discoveries in the Levant* (1865, reprint by Georg Olms, New York, 1989), vol.1, p.96. See also Colnaghi to parents, 29 Dec.1852, in BL, Add.MS 59502, fol.67.

small county town in England. He knows everybody's secrets, debts and crimes. Here money will not purchase antiquities in the Levant, but money and consular influence together will do much...I have travelled much, for six years...all the real prizes were sold not to the agent of the British Museum but to the Vice Consul of Mytilene and the acting consul of Rhodes. Mr. Pullam [the agent] would find, when he came to purchase, that he required that particular influence which no-one but a Consul's dragoman can bring into play.²²

Therefore, he continued:

All that he could possibly do for the Museum could be a great deal better done by the present vice consul at Rhodes, Mr Biliotti who has a most extensive connection in the islands and whom I find very well disposed to help me because he is an unpaid Vice Consul and lives in hopes of getting something from the Government.²³

Should the government insist with the appointment of a British agent the French might be alarmed at activity from the British and send their own. Newton pointed out to Panizzi how Biliotti, who was looking for a paid consular appointment, would be the perfect agent instead. Appointing him as a paid consul would be a fair exchange for archeological services. In fact Biliotti was already excavating in the Aegean, and Newton wrote on this point:

I thought the collection so important that I at once purchased a selection but I thought the Museum would do well to take the whole, if a fair bargain can be

²² Newton to Panizzi, March 1859, B.L., Add Mss. 36719, fols 149-54.

²³ Newton to Panizzi, March 1859, B.L., Add Mss. 36719, fols 149-54.

made. I think both Salzman and Biliotti are disposed to be liberal. The latter the more so, as he is our unpaid British Vice Consul at Rhodes and wants advancement in the service.²⁴

The consequent career of Alfred Biliotti as a result of his appointment as British official and the special task of excavating antiquities for the British Museum has been described by David Barchard.²⁵ The antiquities procured by Charles Merlin, are described by Yannis Galanakis who, taking up from where I left off, also tells the story of how Newton helped to organise the local agents into an agency for the collection of antiquities for the benefit of the museum and writes that ‘Merlin’s special interest in the subject was also supported by the realisation that for a consul based in the Piraeus and paid an ordinary salary (i.e., within the diplomatic corps), antiquities provided an opportunity for making small profits.’²⁶

The interaction with these colleagues eventually changed Colnaghi’s view of the Levantines. In a later entry in his diary, we read:

Thursday March 16. 1865. Larnaca to Dali. I left the Marina at 9.30 a.m. and at Larnaca proper took up my travelling companions. Mr. How, an Englishman by name and nature, but born in Cyprus where he has lived all his life. His father died

²⁴ 18 June 1859, BL, Add MS 36719, fols 550-4.

²⁵ Barchard, David, ‘The Fearless and Self-reliant Servant. The Life and Career of Sir Alfred Biliotti (1833-1915), An Italian Levantine in British Service.’ *SMEA* 48 (2006) p. 5-53. http://levantineheritage.com/pdf/The_life_and_career_of_Sir_Alfred_Biliotti-David_Barchrd.pdf

²⁶ Galanakis, Yannis. “On Her Majesty’s Service: C. L. W. Merlin and the Sourcing of Greek Antiquities for the British Museum.” *CHS Research Bulletin* 1, no. 1 (2012). http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hinc.essay:GalanakisY.On_Her_Majestys_Service.2012

while he was a child. His mother was Greek, so he cannot speak English, and yet, such is the force of blood, his thoughts and sympathies are those of a true Briton. He is well acquainted with the island, and under rather a rough exterior, proved himself a good companion, and very useful in searching after antiquities.²⁷

The search for antiquities was an aspect of the consular duties that did not enter into the official government enquiries onto the consular service, at least until 1870. It however became one further and important element that allowed to justify and, in fact to promote, the appointment of Levantine personnel by the Foreign Office. And it is for this reason that their use within the service was never really shelved.

Do you think that the commercial interests of this country have suffered from the inferiority of our consuls in the East? - I did not admit that there was inferiority in our consuls in the East. We have some extremely able men; and we have naturally some people who are not such as we should like to have; but, generally speaking, they are efficient men, and some of the very best are what is generally called Levantines.²⁸

With special thanks to Francesca Hillier from the British Museum Archives and Thomas Kiely, Charo Rovira and Nicholas Salmon from the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities, British Museum.

²⁷ D.E. Colnaghi's account of a visit to Dhali, 1865, Greek and Roman Department Archives, British Museum.

²⁸ *Report of the Select Committee on Diplomatic and Consular Services*, PP1870 (382) VII