

A Lost Thracian Village—Belgrad (also known as: Petra; Belgrade)

Many former village names in Istanbul's Thracian hinterland were composed of two parts, of which 'Belgrad' is among the most common. Few of these Belgrad villages can be located with certainty, but the ruins of one, long known simply as 'Belgrad', are still familiar. Belgrad was on the itinerary of many western travellers to Istanbul in the past, and is described in numerous memoirs. Yet despite the availability of such sources, we have been unable to unravel key issues in the place's history. Belgrad is today a popular picnic place.

In 1521, Sultan Süleyman conquered the Serbian kingdom and took its capital of Belgrade. This name was given to the place where Serbian prisoners of war were settled in the forest, in the area where the springs supplying Istanbul's water arose. As a plethora of documents down the centuries demonstrates, Belgrad was among the some twelve villages charged with maintaining extensive sections of the city's water supply in exchange for a lightening of their tax burden.

The most visible remnant of Belgrad's past we see today is the stone-and-brick apse and some walls of a substantial church (41.19092°, 28.96243°). They stand close to collapse, wreathed in forest undergrowth; the ground plan can still be traced. The church is known as St George's chapel. But when was it built, and for the use of which community?

Belgrad is widely-known as a bucolic retreat for the personnel of foreign embassies, as well as for local Christians of means. Ernest Mamboury's 1951 guidebook to the city suggests it was a plague in 1638-39 that drove embassy people to flee to the forest¹. Turkish secondary sources typically refer to a plague in the same years as a 'great plague' (*büyük taun*), implying that it is known from Ottoman primary sources—where we have been unable to locate mention of it². Belgrad is described soon afterwards, by the Istanbul Armenian intellectual Eremya Çelebi as a place where indigenous Greeks (*Rum*) and Europeans came to escape the plague and enjoy the water and clean air³.

The Franciscan priest Robert de Dreux visited the English ambassador in Belgrad in 1668, and toured the aqueducts⁴—visiting the aqueducts and dams was the highlight of western travellers' excursions here, and these marvels feature in most accounts. The next ambassador, Sir John Finch, also escaped heat and plague here⁵, while the traveller George Wheler wrote lyrically of the place when he visited in 1675⁶. Belgrad's fame was boosted by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, wife of the ambassador of the time, who in 1717 wrote of the place in her much-quoted letters home⁷.

¹ Personal communication, Colin Heywood

² Personal communication, Nukhet Varlık

³ Eremya Çelebi 31

⁴ de Dreux 75

⁵ Finch 39

⁶ Wheler 204

⁷ Wortley Montagu, letter 36

Mamboury's guidebook also states, again without providing a source, that there were two villages at Belgrade:

'A côté du village de Belgrade s'éleva bientôt un deuxième village où les ambassadeurs construisirent de riches demeures, ce qui ne manqua pas d'attirer bientôt l'élite de la population étrangère et chrétienne. A cette époque, l'Angleterre était représentée auprès du sultan par Sir Sackville Crow qui resta jusqu'en 1660. On suppose, *quoiqu'aucun document n'en fasse mention*, que c'est lui qui fit élever l'église anglicane en pierre et en brique dont les ruines existent encore à l'ancien emplacement du village de Belgrade....'⁸ (my italics)

A preliminary perusal of the papers of the English ambassador of the time, Sir Sackville Crowe, has so far not confirmed the supposition that he built the church at Belgrad⁹.

However, two villages were recorded by the Italian scholar Domenico Sestini, who came to Belgrad in 1778, and noted that one village was inhabited by Europeans from spring until autumn, while the other was inhabited by [indigenous] Greeks, who had a church¹⁰. Henrietta Liston, wife of another ambassador, Robert Liston, wrote in 1812 that the village was 'much scattered, or rather separated into two hamlets... In one of these hamlets several foreign ministers and opulent merchants formerly resided, in good houses now fast going to decay... This is a Greek village, and the church is Greek...'¹¹.

Thus Sestini and Liston both place a church in the Greek village—though Liston states that this village had seen better days, when it had been inhabited by grandees. Later in the 19th century, the two villages recorded by Sestini and Liston are referred to in Ottoman documents as the lower and upper neighbourhoods, and identified respectively with Belgrad and another settlement called K m rc ¹², that is also mentioned frequently in Ottoman documents concerning Istanbul's water supply.

Returning to the church: a note captioning a photograph in the album of the Levantine Whittall family states, '...in 1802 a baptism is described in the 'Chapel' at 'Belgrade Forest'...'¹³, which confirms that an Anglican church existed at that date. A church is recorded in Ottoman documents in 1858, when permission to build an annexe was refused, for fear of pollution to the water supply¹⁴.

But again there is enigma. James Dallaway was chaplain to Liston's early 19th century embassy, and describes Belgrad in similar terms to Henrietta Liston, 'as so much less than the paradise described by Lady M. W. Montague...'; he was present at a wedding ceremony between 'two Greek peasants', but gives no hint that it took place in a church¹⁵. Robert Walsh, also chaplain to the British embassy in Istanbul, visited Belgrade in 1832: he concurs about its sorry-looking aspect but does not mention a church in his description of the place¹⁶. Perhaps we are wrong to expect men of the

⁸ Mamboury 575

⁹ Personal communication, Gerald MacLean

¹⁰ Sestini 150

¹¹ Liston 136

¹² Kurt 944,963

¹³ <http://www.levantineheritage.com/whittall3.htm>

¹⁴ Kurt 942

¹⁵ Dallaway 147-48

¹⁶ Walsh 109-12

cloth to notice that a community such as that at Belgrad had a church? Murray's 1874 handbook for Constantinople also ignores the church in its ample description of the forest and the water system and the delights of life in Belgrad—or Petra, as it may have been known in Byzantine times¹⁷.

To consider alongside these latter failures to mention the church at Belgrad is a statement in a recent book on the places in Thrace and Anatolia formerly inhabited by indigenous Greeks, which names their church in Belgrad as Ayios Yeoryios, or St George¹⁸. An archaeological survey of the place also describes it as indigenous Greek (*Rum*), but without showing evidence¹⁹.

The evidence is confusing, and we have been unable to ascertain when the ruined church we see today was built, and which community 'owned' it at any time.

In 1758, the threat posed by expanding settlement at Belgrad and the actions of individual villagers that harmed Istanbul's water supply caused concern, and the importance the authorities attached to keeping it clean was made clear. When a villager called Dimitri built a bread-oven only a few metres from a water-course, along the public road running by the Büyük reservoir (Büyük Bend)—which of all the forest reservoirs supplied the city with the major part of its water—he was reported, and the building was ordered to be demolished²⁰. Walsh observed in 1832 that severe penalties were imposed on anyone in the Belgrad area digging up trees or sinking pits or planting gardens, for fear that there would be water loss. However, he admits that he obtained a *firman* permitting him to dispatch 'several loads of young trees to Pera'²¹.

A crisis point was acknowledged in the 1880s, when the four dams and reservoirs nearest to Belgrad were found to urgently need repair: much water was being lost from the channels to the city. Worse still, in addition to the houses and hotels in the village, the villagers were making a business out of washing laundry there. In recent times the place had grown so much that it had 185 houses, three kitchens (*matbah*), 35 shops, a church and a school and three cow-byres, as well as other buildings, and various different types of land—and it continued to grow²². The authorities proposed that Belgrad should be moved elsewhere, and even found a potential site nearer the coast for this relocation²³, but after detailed discussion nothing happened—in no small part owing to the expense involved. But new construction was forbidden at Belgrad, as were repairs, and the village buildings became dilapidated²⁴.

The threat of cholera sounded the death knell for Belgrad when, in 1892, the question of relocation of the village again came on the agenda. The site previously suggested was not considered this time, in part because Belgrad's people were indigenous Greeks, and officials deemed that they could not be trusted to live in such a strategically important

¹⁷ Murray 131-32; cf. Külzer 285

¹⁸ Çokana 104

¹⁹ Yalçın (2010) 310

²⁰ İAD 138-39; Çolak 182

²¹ Walsh 112

²² Sultangazi 183-87; Çolak 182-83

²³ Sultangazi 186

²⁴ Kurt 940ff

area. In January 1895, all land and property in Belgrad was vacated, and its people were resettled in existing villages and on empty land elsewhere. The church and three houses owned by foreigners were left standing²⁵.

In addition to the ruins of the church at Belgrad, there is a significant wall remnant a short distance away (41.189400°, 28.965979°).

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²⁵ Kurt 947ff