

The Beginning of an Independent Greek State¹

(The story behind the Greek commemorative stamps of 1930)²

By Frans van Limpt

When the Greek uprising started in 1821, it was not the result of a well-thought-out strategy, but rather a series of mutually reinforcing events. The subjects of the Ottoman Empire were generally left to themselves as long as they paid their taxes and did not revolt: otherwise, the government would show no mercy and brutal repression would follow.

But the Empire also had some flaws: because of its vastness, many high positions in the outer areas were held by Greeks, Serbs, Albanians, etc.

Over the years, many of these officials had taken the opportunity to "start their own business", often with the help of their own private armies, and became less and less concerned with the central authority. Add to this the revolutionary wind of change which swept over Europe that also reached the Greek Intelligentsia, evoking a kind of national spirit. The successful businessman Rhigas Fereos (fig.1) (from Veria, in the Pelion area) had a far-sighted, almost prophetic view in this regard. He was not so much opposed to the Turks as to the thoroughly corrupt Ottoman rule. He had a vision of a multi-ethnic state in which everyone, regardless of rank, status or even faith, would be equal. Practically oriented as he was, he opted for one uniform language: Greek, more particularly the simple everyday Greek version, the present day "dimotiki".

In 1797 he was betrayed by a Greek to the Austrian police, who after interrogation handed him over to the Turks. In 1798 he and a few of his supporters were executed. But the revolutionary fire did not die out. In Epirus and the Peloponnese, armed gangs had existed for some time in a more or less loose setting, on the one hand in the service of the Pasha, on the other hand as "klephts" who thus worked on their own account. The word klepht means thief. In Dutch we know the word "geus", which originally meant beggar, bum, for the same kind of people. And these klephts" were only too happy to disrupt the public order for their own benefit.



The Philiki Etairia



A secret society was founded under this name in 1814 (fig.2). This Society of Friends, as the translation reads, sought to restore ancient Greece and / or the Byzantine Empire. It is no coincidence that it was founded outside Greece, in Odessa on the Black Sea, as there were large Greek communities abroad, in cities such as Marseille and Geneva, Venice, Moscow and in Odessa as well. Many of them were merchants and shipping magnates who had settled abroad for practical reasons: there they were not subject to Ottoman laws, and they paid much less tolls. They were often highly educated and held in high esteem locally. And because of their

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² Hellas 491-508, with addition of some other illustrations.

widespread contacts, they were very well informed about what was happening in the rest of Europe.

The movement's slogan was "The Liberation of the Motherland". But how big that motherland should be, and who should or shouldn't be living there, they still had to work out. However, given their training, proven capacities and enthusiasm, they quickly set up an efficient organization that attracted interested parties from all over the empire: Greeks, Romanians, Russians, Serbs, Albanians and even some disaffected Turks! Their first leader was Alexandros Ypsilantis (fig.3), a Greek from a prominent family who held a high position in the Russian army.



Incidentally, not everyone was equally happy with these revolutionary developments. There was quite some opposition, both internally and externally. Externally, especially England, France, Austria and Russia, after the French Revolution (1789), the era of Napoleon, and the Vienna Congress (1815), had had enough of all the commotion and change, and wanted peace and quiet. In Greece itself,



some groups were also turned against the revolution. The warlords with their local gangs saw their trade in jeopardy if all this would result in an orderly state, in which there would no longer be any room for their private practices. The Greek officials in Turkish service were also no enthusiasts for reasons that were all too understandable. But above all, the Greek Orthodox Church feared for its privileges and, of course, for the dangers threatening its believers in the Turkish territory. Illustrative in this regard was the reaction of Patriarch Gregorios V (fig.4), who spoke out vehemently against revolutionary ideas and actions, and even threatened to excommunicate all those who would get involved with the

revolutionaries.

The uprising breaks out

Another, albeit unintended, main player in the developments was Ali Pasha, the "Lion of Ioannina" (fig.5). He had been appointed by the Sultan in 1780 to rule Epirus and Southern Albania. He hardly spoke any Turkish, but did speak fluently Greek and Albanian, his mother tongue. Over the years he had built his own little kingdom, which he protected with all possible means, even against the Turks. In fact, he had been cunning enough to let his sons control parts of the Peloponnese (the so-called forward defense!). All this prompted the Greek revolutionaries to contact him and try to get him on their side. Ali was only too happy to accept: he was immediately available, of course on very reasonable terms, to become the ruler of the new Greek state. But this went a bit too far for the Greeks. When the sultan, Mahmoud II, got wind of this in 1820, a friendly invitation followed to Ali Pasha to "come and talk at the palace in Istanbul". That didn't seem like such a good idea to Ali, however, and he prepared for an armed confrontation as the sultan had already sent a successor on his way to the rebellious Ali with an army of 20,000 men with orders to take Ioannina.



The Greeks gladly took advantage of this internal quarrel to stir things up somewhat more: expecting the sultan would not have time for them now, Germanos, bishop of Patras, raised the revolutionary flag on March 25, 1821 above the Lavra monastery at Kalavrita (fig.6). That was the signal for a general uprising, and the



momentum would later be encapsulated as the first National Holiday for the Greek state.

The first shots were fired by the Maniots from the southern Peloponnese who, led by Petrobey Mavromichalis (fig.7), attacked the Turkish garrisons in Monemvasia, Kalamata and Navarino.

The sultan's invitation to the local officials to attend a "conference on the events" in Istanbul was wisely rejected by most: they joined the uprising!

The Sultan's revenge was swift and, as always, relentless. On Easter Sunday, 1821, he had Gregorios V, Patriarch of Constantinople, hanged at the gate of his own church, the Agia Sophia, although Gregorios had condemned the rebellion and had punished the revolutionaries with excommunication. The sultan's reasoning had always been that the shepherd is primarily responsible for the flock's misconduct! At the first real battle, at the symbolic place of Thermopylae, on April 22, 1821, Athanasios Diakos (fig.8) was the first casualty: 700 Greeks stood no chance against 18,000 Turks.

At the same time, Alexandros Ypsilantis had crossed the Russian-Turkish border with an army of good-willing but not very experienced men. However, they were no match for the Sultan's well-trained troops: in June 1821, they were slain at Dragatsani in a matter of hours. Many more defeats would follow.



But if the sultan had thought that was the end of it, he was horribly wrong: this was just the beginning of a dramatic mutual reckoning. Following the sultan's example, hundreds of Greek prominent figures were murdered in the Turkish area. The Greek response was that as the insurgents conquered more ground in the Peloponnese, more and more Turkish soldiers and civilians were killed as well. This in turn led to Turkish massacres on Rhodes, Kos and Cyprus and above all on Chios, where almost the whole population was violently killed. It was this massacre in particular that sparked a wave of horror and indignation across Europe: public opinion was clearly on the side of the Greeks, but their governments did nothing (yet).

One of the few positive events for the revolutionaries was that in 1822 Captain Konstantinos Kanaris (fig.9) sunk the ship of the Turkish Admiral Kara Ali. (More about shipping in the following paragraphs).



Here, too, "the noble klepht" Markos Botsaris was killed (fig.10), when he made a nighttime attack on the Albanian mercenaries of the Turks; opinions are still divided whether this was the result of a misunderstanding or of betrayal; the mutual relations between the various klepht leaders were not always amicable!

The Philhellenes



Many Western intellectuals were Philhellenes, that is, they had studied the classical authors and they harbored an idealistic, romantic image of what they saw as the ideal Greece. The unspoiled descendants of the ancient Greeks still lived there, with their own standards, values and customs, which they still cherished against all oppression. These Philhellenes held fundraisers and, in many cases, went to Greece themselves to lend a helping hand. It must have been a cultural shock when they came face to face with these rough, undisciplined insurgents, who above all had an eye for their own interests only and were therefore constantly at odds with each other. On the other hand, the Greeks too, must have been extremely surprised when they saw these noble, fancy and eloquent auxiliary troops who came from Western European countries and even America to offer their assistance.



The most famous of the Philhellenes was undoubtedly Lord George Gordon Noël Byron (fig.11). This English poet, dandy and romantic arrived in Mesolonghi in January 1824 (fig.12 & 13) with suitcases full of beautiful uniforms, nine servants and his personal physician (the Dutchman



Dr. Julius van Millingen). However, he soon fell ill and died on April 19 of the same year during the siege of Mesolonghi, without having been

able to make a direct contribution to the Greek cause. He owes his fame mainly to the fact that through his poems, letters, notes and all kinds of actions he made Europe aware of the Greek drama. And, of course, because he fully met the demands of the Romantic era: young, rich, showy in comings and goings, and with a dramatic ending. No wonder that "Lordos Vyron" has been honored in many places in Greece with statues, squares and streets, parks and stamps.

Incidentally, especially from his diary and other writings, it appears that in reality he had very clear thoughts about the actual situation in Greece: he hated the Greek quarrels and fights and was convinced that the Greeks had to deal with their internal problems first before they could expect any outside help. He detested their endless discussions when it came to questions about the leadership, and above all, their incompetence, greed for money, and cruelty to opponents. As he once remarked with a sigh: "I admire Greece immeasurably but I hate the Greeks"!



The Greeks at sea

Given the geographic circumstances, Greece could benefit from a substantial fleet. It was therefore particularly convenient that most islands had joined the uprising. Now trade and maritime transport were mainly in the hands of Greeks and Albanians. And they had about 600



merchant ships at their disposal. Most were supplied by the islands of Psara (today still only about 400 inhabitants!), Spetses and Hydra (27,000 inhabitants in 1821, now 3,800). An additional advantage was that these ships were often equipped with cannons: at the time, it was simply part of the necessary equipment: piracy is a phenomenon of all ages: it goes back to Homer. All this posed a major problem for the sultan: the way over sea was in danger of being barred. And transporting troops and supplies over land had the risk of long delays due to the long detour and the risk of attacks in hostile territory.

Undoubtedly the most legendary captain was Bouboulina (fig.14). Her name was actually Laskarina Pinotzis, but she had taken the name of her second husband. Both her first and second husband died at the hands of Turkish pirates. She thus became the heiress of shipyards and a merchant fleet. When the war for freedom broke out in 1821, she had her ships converted into warships at her own expense; she herself commanded the Agamemnon, as she did during the siege and liberation of Nafplion (1822). (In the meantime, she had become the lover of the klepht Theodoros Kolokotronis (fig.15), whose family was known as one in which no one ever had died of natural causes!).



Financially ruined, she returned to Spetses in 1824, where she was murdered in 1825 by the father of a girl who had been stolen by her son. Her adventurous life later served as a model for all kinds of romantic legends.

In the same year Andreas Miaoulis (fig.16) from Hydra chased the Turks with 40 ships, but the latter took refuge with Ibrahim Pasha in Egypt (fig.17), who had just modernized his fleet with the help of French officers and engineers. Of course, Ibrahim offered his services, but not for free: in exchange for assistance, he wanted to have



control over Crete and additionally that his son would become governor of the Peloponnese. The sultan saw this as a fair deal and agreed. The Egyptian fleet set sail. The Greek merchantmen were no match for them and after beating them, Ibrahim's troops landed in the Peloponnese in January.

The guerrilla tactics used by the Greeks now proved unsuccessful against the Western-trained soldiers of the Egyptian army.



Moreover, the Turks advanced further in the north and the situation threatened to become hopeless. On April 10, 1826, Mesolonghi fell after a dramatic breakout attempt by the Greeks (fig.18), of whom only 1,800 of the 9,000 survived.

Exasperated by the tragic end of the place and the Turkish atrocities, the klepht Jorgos Karaïskakis (fig.19) gathered a gang of avengers and in blind



fury murdered 1,500 Turks near Arachova. He erected a pyramid of their skulls next to the local

church. On May 6 of the following year, he was killed when the Acropolis of Athens was recaptured by the Turks.

There was one consolation for the Greeks: political opinion abroad had started to change. In Russia, Alexander V had died in December 1825. He was succeeded by his brother Nicholas I (fig.20), who, unlike the deceased, was very Philhellenic, also out of self-interest: he dreamed the same dream Catherine the Great once cherished: restoration of the old Byzantine Empire with Constantinople as the capital of Orthodoxy, with Russia as ruler and Greece as its loyal subject! So, Nicholas was in favor of intervention. The Greeks had already asked the British government for intervention in 1824, but at that time, for reasons of its own, the request was denied. Now the situation was different. The French were also in favor and so, after endless preliminary discussions and reservations, they reached an agreement in London on July 6, 1827. Note: The Austrians were against any form of mediation or intervention and therefore did not participate. And the Greeks, primary stakeholders were not even invited to the talks!

The treaty included an armistice, followed by mediation. The aim was an autonomous Greek state within the Ottoman Empire. Sanctions were added to the Treaty in case the involved parties would reject the mediation. The text clearly was pro-Greek. For example, in case of a Turkish refusal the parties threatened to send consuls to Greece: that would form a de facto diplomatic recognition! Moreover, the instructions for the ambassadors were full of contradictions. The Greeks who immediately accepted the truce were allowed to continue the fight on land and at sea; the Turks who rejected mediation were not allowed to do so. An allied fleet had to ensure that parties adhered to the treaty, "without taking part in the hostilities between the contending parties"! And the British admiral Sir Edward Codrington had been told by the British consul in Istanbul not to act "in a hostile spirit", but to enforce his orders "by cannon shot" if necessary!



The Battle of Navarino

On September 8, 1827, a Turkish-Egyptian fleet had anchored at Navarino Bay. The Allied fleet was ordered to go there as well and to keep a particularly close eye on things. It was under the overall command of the British admiral Sir Edward Codrington, with De Rigny as vice-admiral for the French delegation and baron Lodewijk van Heiden (born in the Dutch province of Drenthe) on behalf of the Russians (fig.21). Letellier, the chief French adviser in Egyptian service, had organized the Ottoman fleet in the shape of a horseshoe three rows thick in the narrow bay. On September 12, Codrington was the first of the Allies to arrive at the scene, followed by De Rigny on September 20 and Van Heiden the next day. On October 27, Codrington's flagship sailed into the bay, followed by the others. Due to lack of space, they anchored in between the enemy ships. The tension was immense. The request of Captain Fellowes of the frigate Dartmouth to a Turkish frigate near him to





move up a bit, resulted in mutual abuse, threats, gunshots and finally cannon roaring. All hell broke loose (fig.22). The battle, which had started at about three in the afternoon, ended at about seven with the near-total destruction of the Turkish-Egyptian fleet. Three quarters of her ships had been destroyed, the number of dead and wounded has never been officially reported but is estimated to be around 7,000. The Allies lost 177 soldiers and counted 520 wounded.

It was a bizarre result; England and France were not proud of their victory: after all, they had defeated and destroyed the fleet of a friendly nation! And that had never been the intention. The English king spoke of an "untoward/unfortunate event", Codrington was ordered to return to Britain and received a medal for his services, the French stated that what had happened should not happen again. Only for the Russians the victory was a good motive to also go to war on land, after having showered Van Heiden with honors first.

The English and French took advantage of this Russo-Turkish war to quickly reach an agreement with Ibrahim Ali Pasha, who then withdrew his troops from the Peloponnese. This happened in the winter of 1828-1829 under the watchful eye of a French expedition corps.

In June 1829 the Russians broke the Turkish defenses and advanced towards Istanbul. In panic, the sultan appealed for mediation by England and France! This resulted in an armistice and on February 3, 1830, a new Treaty of London was signed with the Turks. It was roughly a copy of the previous one: Greece would become an independent kingdom, but would formerly remain in the Ottoman Empire as a puppet state, and thus would have to continue to pay tribute to the Ottomans. Its territory would be limited to the Peloponnese and mainland Greece south of the Arta-Volos line. Everything above that line would remain Ottoman (fig.23).



And what followed

Even before the Treaty of London, the Greek freedom fighters had repeatedly tried to reach an agreement, but this had always ended in failure due to mutual distrust and quarrels. It was not that simple either, because in fact there were two parties that were more or less opposites. On the one hand stood the Greeks from the diaspora and the Philhellenes, who still dreamed of the old Greece, but with some modern amendments: a written constitution, a secular state, a codified judicial system, and one national army. On the other hand, there were the klephts who



thought the other parties were only a bunch of interfering foreigners, and they pursued more pragmatic goals. Already in 1823, they had organized a "Diet" in Astros, 30 km. of Argos, but it had only resulted in an aggressive quarrel between the clan leaders Theodoros Kolokotronis and Pedrobey Mavromichalis. They did agree on one subject: Prince Alexandros Mavrokordatos, president of the national parliament since 1822, was to be the new president, but the latter did decline the offer and fled to Hydra for safety. The richest shipowner of this island, Lazaros Koundouriotis (fig.24), offered his mediation, as he had done before, but that was of no avail.

In the spring of 1827, however, things seemed to move in a more positive way: the Greeks had adopted a new constitution, quite different from the version the three great powers had in store for them, not with a king as head of State but a president who would be elected for seven years, assisted by a Chamber of Deputies.

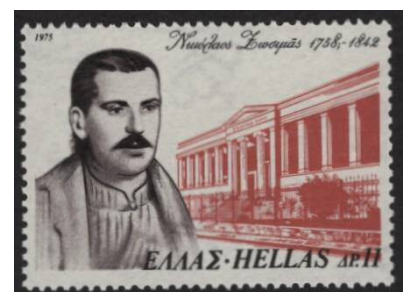
They asked Johannis Kapodistrias (fig.25) to become their first president. He had been active at the Congress of Vienna, served as Minister of Foreign Affairs for Russia, and had been Minister of the "Republic of the Seven (Ionian) Islands". He arrived in Nafplion in January 1828. That town had successfully resisted the Turks in 1822, had never been occupied afterwards and therefore seemed a safe haven.



Kapodistrias, despite all his abilities, was a diplomat with an authoritarian character, was not trusted by the English and French because of his former employer, and was by no means loved by the klephts ... for understandable reasons! When, in an attempt to establish central authority, he had the ill-tempered Pedrobey Mavromichalis imprisoned, he signed his own death warrant. On October 9, 1831, despite all warnings, he attended early mass alone. There he was met by the brothers Konstantinos and Jorgos Mavromichalis who first greeted him kindly and then shot him dead. Konstantinos was lynched on the spot, his brother was immediately arrested, tried and executed. The civil war that followed the assassination lasted until 1834 and has been described by most historians as "the longest and most damaging of any yet known in Greece". The great powers called for peace and unity but in the meantime, cynically enough, they pulled out all the stops to safeguard their own interests and influence. The massacre only ended when Russians, French and British jointly decided to assign Greece a king in the person of Otto, son of the Philhellenic King Ludwig of Bavaria. He should guard the lasting interests of the great powers. Time would tell!



There are two more heroes in the 1930 stamp-series, but in a different category, namely culture and literature. The first is Adamantios Korais (1748-1833) (fig.26). He was born in Smyrna, attended the Evangelical school there, but was taught Latin and Western languages by the preacher of the Dutch consulate, Bernard Keun. He continued his studies in Amsterdam (1772-1779), although his father had sent him there as a representative of his trading house. He went to study medicine in Montpellier, obtained a doctorate, and then left for Paris, where he would devote the rest of his life to the translation and publishing of ancient Greek authors and the creations of a 17-volume Hellenic Library. The books were made available to schools free of charge. The costs were borne by benefactors, The Zosimas brothers (fig.27). Unlike the other Balkan states, over the centuries, the Greeks have cherished and spread their language and literature. They sent students abroad and owned printing and publishing houses in Padua, Venice, Paris and Vienna.



The response was overwhelming: Korais got numerous questions and requests to open new schools, to free children from slavery, for advice on chartering warships, etc., etc. And from his shabby room he replied to all questions, giving good advice and assistance to all who asked for help. Quite rightly, he was later called "Great Teacher of the People."



Dionysios Solomos (1798-1857) (fig.28) was born on Zakynthos (Zante) from a family that became nobles during the Venetian period. He was sent to Italy at an early age to study. After his return to Zakynthos, he would have become an Italian-writing poet had it not been for Spyridon Trikoupis, statesman, writer and orator, who discovered his literary talents. Trikoupis urged him to start writing in Greek, more particularly in "dimotiki". After a few smaller poems, in 1823 Solomos wrote the famous "Hymn to Freedom" in 148 stanzas!

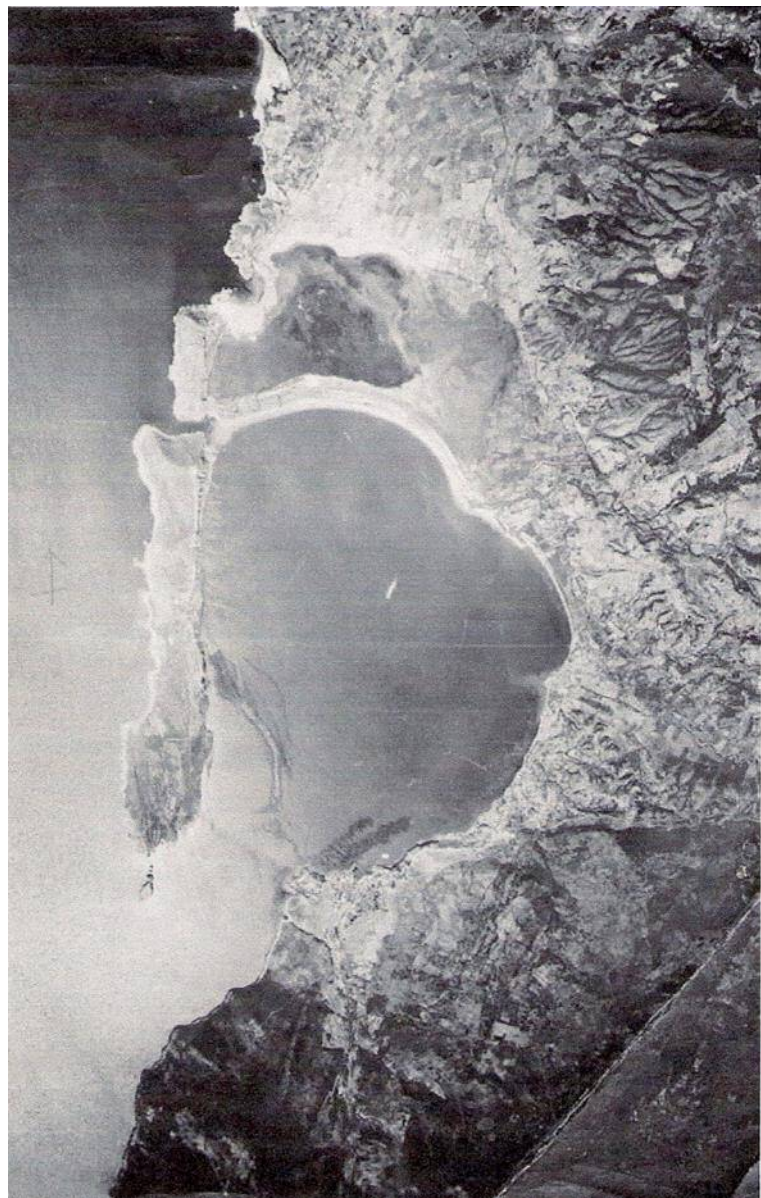
The success was huge and in 1828 the composer Mantzaros (fig.29) added a melody. In 1864 it was officially recognized as the National Anthem of Greece. Solomos's influence has been so great that he is considered to be the most important representative of a whole generation of writers / poets who succeeded him.



Many thanks to Frans Bruna for some special documents of the era.

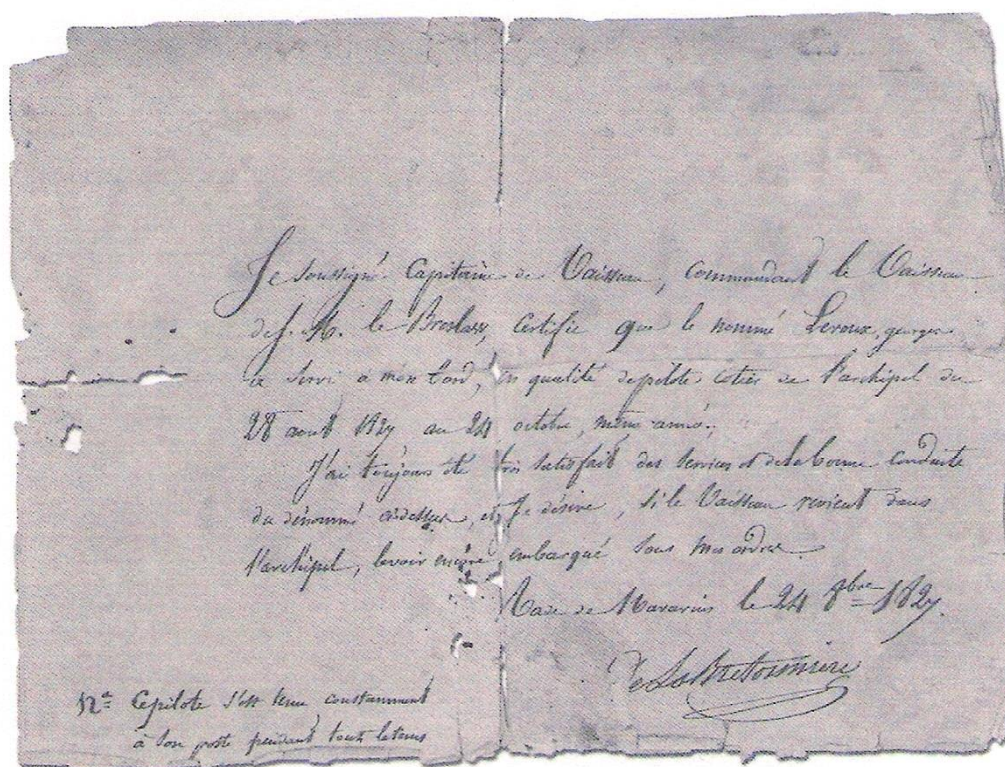
Literature:

- Misha Glenney: The Balkans
- Scholte's Griekenland, Kosmos Reisboeken
- Capitoool Reisgidsen, Griekse Eilanden
- Prof. Dr S. Antoniadis: Het Nieuw-Griekse Leerboek
- Internet: meerdere sites



Navarino Bay, photo from space

A bonus: a certificate, drawn up shortly after the battle of Navarino³



The undersigned, Captain, Commander of the warship Le Breslau, confirms that George Levoux served on a ship in the position of coastal pilot of the archipelago from 08/28/1827 to October 24 of the same year.

Throughout that period, I was very pleased with the service and the good conduct of the above, and wish - in case the ship returns to the archipelago - to see him again under my command.

Anchored at Navarino, October 24 (8vriou!) 1827, De la Bretonnière.



³ From: A. Galinos, "L'armée de Morée (French expeditionary Corps in Morea)" in Philotelia 651 (2008), p.198