THE HOUSES OF PHANAR, REVISITED*

CHRISTINE PHILLIOU
University of California, Berkeley

Houses are physical structures. Homes are affective spaces, where people reside and where they interact in socially specific and historical contingent ways. In patrimonial systems, like the Ottoman Empire was, homes and houses could also become households—spaces, and units, of political and administrative power—in addition to spaces of social interaction and personal habitation. The present exhibition, *All Phanar is Here*, is concerned with the built environment and physical remnants of Phanariot houses and the Phanar quarter of Istanbul more broadly—and that is a very novel and fascinating project. It is novel and fascinating in part because the phenomenon of the Phanariots has been studied in many contexts and ways but always as an abstraction. The Phanariots had a rich life of ideas and a complicated life in imperial and provincial politics and Church administration. They have not been systematically examined for their role in creating and inhabiting physical spaces, nor have they been associated with a distinctive built environment, until now. Turning our attention to their physical and material presence, aside from being an intrinsically interesting and new pursuit, also allows us to address some fundamental problems regarding their social organization, identity, and self-understanding.

What are buildings without the people who built and inhabited, bought and sold and rented them? In order to gain an appreciation for this built environment and material culture, then, which is the subject of the exhibition, we begin with a discussion of people, and their social and political relations which led to the construction and evolution of the houses, homes, and households of the Phanar. Who were these Phanariots? Why are their houses and material life distinct and valuable? And why have they not been the focus of sustained attention in scholarship until now?

As many contributions in this volume will attest, the term "Phanariot" was and remains polysemic—it has had a range of meanings, and those meanings shift according to context. In time, these contexts shift from the sixteenth to twentieth century and, in more complicated ways, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the Phanariots were still active and, at the same time, remained the subject of discussion and scholarship by figures who were often opposed to them. In terms of geography, these contexts range from Istanbul to Moldavia and Wallachia, to Bulgaria/eastern Rumelia, to islands such as Chios, and even Jerusalem and Sinai—and of course to Athens where Phanariots reinvented themselves in the new context of independent Greece. Linguistically, when we talk about the Phanariots we may be talking about them in their Greek context or Romanian, Bulgarian, or of course Ottoman Turkish, but perhaps French, German, Russian, or English contexts, too. And as a social group, or set of interconnected social groups, we are talking about groups that are local, national—involving multiple nations, such as Greece and

* Christine Philliou, "The Houses of Phanar," in *Biography of an Empire: Governing Ottomans in an Age of Revolution* (University of California Press, 2010), chap. 1.



Fig ❶ *Metochion of the Archbishopric of Mt Sinai*, Léon Marie Eugène de Beylie, *L'Habitation Byzantine: Les Anciennes Maisons de Constantinople*, Supplement (Falque-Perrin & Leroux, 1903), pl. 6.

Romania—and imperial—Ottoman but also Russian—forcing us to consider them in the classes of merchants, clerics and state functionaries, who were bureaucrats, to an extent, and even princes, while also being "abject slaves" all the while.[1]

Despite, or perhaps because of, all this polysemy, posterity has not been kind to the Phanariots. They are rarely remembered, and when they are, it is generally in a negative light. In Romania, the Phanariots tend to be remembered as fellow Christians who, despite, or ironically because of their shared religion, were more rapacious and exploitative than the Ottomans/Turks themselves. The Romanian nation and Bulgarian Church had to struggle for freedom from the "double yoke" of the Phanariots/Greek Church on the one hand and of the Ottoman state on the other. In Greece, the connotations are equally negative, if not more complicated. The term "Phanariot" is associated with corrupt, duplicitous, servile, yet elitist and scheming fellow Greeks who were collaborators with their repressive Turkish/Ottoman overlords. They are the foil to the brave but simple peasants and local priests who fought for independence. They were also, though, among the key leaders of the movement for Greek independence and came to form a faction among the ruling groups of the new Greek state in the 1830s and after. This all complicates the place of the Phanariots in Greek national memory but somehow never absolves them of their other sins.

But what many national actors and intellectual historians forget is that the Phanariots were the creations and products of Ottoman governance—or, I should say, they remember in a way that is always conjoined with recrimination for their collaboration with the Turks. The Phanariots possessed incredible knowledge and skills, which they used with dexterity, and they fought fiercely for status and prestige on several stages. While the prolific material that they produced for a Greek-speaking audience, particularly in the eighteenth century, showed the depth of their engagement with the Greek Classical and Byzantine tradition, at least as the face they chose to present to that particular, internal audience. When we broaden the scope of our inquiry, as I have tried to do in my earlier work, we see that they were also going to great lengths to earn status and prestige on an Ottoman stage, and conditions of belonging and legitimacy on that stage were often distinct.[2] In what follows, I offer the standard

1 Sir Steven Runciman, *The Great Church in Captivity: A Study of the Patriarchate of Constantinople from the Eve of the Turkish Conquest to the Greek War of Independence* (Cambridge University Press, 1968), 360–84, esp. 362.
2 Christine Philliou, "Worlds, Old and New: Phanariot Networks and the Remaking of Ottoman Governance, 1800–1850" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2004); Christine Philliou, "Communities on the Verge: The Phanariot Ascendancy in Ottoman Governance," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 59, no. 1 (2009): 151–81; Christine Philliou, *Biography of an Empire: Governing Ottomans in an Age of Revolution* (University of California Press, 2010).

narrative about the Phanariots, provide some framing comments about the significant blind spots of that narrative, and touch on the kinds of revelations that are possible when we truly situate the Phanariots in their physical context of the Phanar, in the Ottoman capital, and in the context of Ottoman governance.

PHANARIOTS, DISTILLED

Let's try to distill all of these different perspectives on and contexts for the Phanariots into an irreducible, value-free definition of the Phanariots, a kind of consensus definition that might find agreement across all of these national groups and scholarly approaches, past and present. The Phanariots were a group of interconnected elite, Orthodox Christian families who operated in and around the Phanar district on the Golden Horn in *intra muros* Constantinople/Istanbul, Phanar being the quarter where the Ecumenical Patriarchate was located starting in the seventeenth century.[3] Their initial formation as a group—an elite, a class, a caste, or a clique, one may call them—involved the accumulation of commercial wealth and political influence in the Patriarchate through acquiring clerical and lay offices for themselves, their family members and network of dependents in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This all took place in the post-classical era of the Ottoman Empire, especially in the late seventeenth century when the Köprülü dynasty of grand vezirs overhauled the basis of Ottoman governance and bureaucratized the empire. In this era, personal connections to Ottoman sultans and grand vezirs, who recognized the value of particular Phanariots' knowledge of European languages and medicine, led to the elevation of particular figures such as Panagiotis Nikousios, thanks to his role in the final Ottoman conquest of Crete in 1669, and later members of the Mavrokordatos clan—Alexandros earned his title of Minister of the Secrets (ἐξ ἀποῤῥήτων) after his service as a chief negotiator for the Ottomans at the Treaty of Karlowitz in 1699.



Fig ❷ *The Prince of Moldavia, Michail Soutzos*, Louis Dupré, *Voyage à Athènes et à Constantinopole, ou, Collection de portraits, de vues et de costumes grecs et ottomans, peints sur les lieux, d'après nature, lithographiés et coloriés* (Imprimerie de Dondey-Dupré, 1825), pl. 38. Ömer M. Koç Collection.

These elevations in status for particular physicians, confidants and advisors, and negotiators under the new circumstances of the eighteenth century led to an expansion in power and a proliferation in numbers associated with these families. The expansion

3 Runciman, *The Great Church in Captivity*, 362. Technically, many of the houses analyzed as part of this exhibition, the Phanariot houses that is, were outside the sea walls, even though the region as a whole was *intra muros*, i.e., inside the land walls of the historic peninsula of Constantinople.



Fig ❸ *The Princess Eleni Soutzos*, Louis Dupré, *Voyage à Athènes et à Constantinople, ou, Collection de portraits, de vues et de costumes grecs et ottomans, peints sur les lieux, d'après nature, lithographiés et coloriés* (Imprimerie de Dondey-Dupré, 1825), pl. 39. Ömer M. Koç Collection.

happened when, in a moment of rising conflict with Russia, which called into question the loyalties of local, indigenous elites of Moldavia and Wallachia, Istanbul-based Phanariots were given eligibility to administer the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia on behalf of the Ottoman state. These were semi-autonomous tributary states to the Ottomans north of the Danube River, with elites and church properties already connecting to Istanbul. There, around 1709–1710, the Mavrokordatos and a group of other families based in Phanar began taking turns, often in rapid and costly succession, as "princes" (beys, voyvodas, hospodars, ἡγεμόνες) or glorified tax farmers of these realms. Those who stayed in the capital included not only the sons and other family members of the Phanariot princes but members of these prominent families who occupied the uppermost positions of the Grand Dragoman and the Dragoman of the Fleet. The former, as interpreter at the Ottoman Court, managed foreign relations with European states and the latter, as right-hand man to the Kapudan Pasha, the Grand Admiral of the Ottoman navy, managed naval operations and the governance of Aegean islands, where most inhabitants were Christian and many were Greek-speaking.

The families that were part of the most prominent stratum of Phanariots often claimed descent from Byzantine noble families—the Kantakouzenoi being a prime example. These claims were crucial to the Phanariots' self-presentation in Europe and to their self-image, although such claims were often fictive and more of a strategy to garner status and legitimacy. Such claims were also necessary for the rich intellectual life that the Phanariots sustained, engaged as they were with the Greek tradition of letters, as well as the new ideas coming out of Europe in this era of the Enlightenment. In this consensus narrative about the Phanariots, we note that they remained active until the Greek Revolution of 1821, and the Phanariots as a group were reconstituted anew, on a smaller scale, within Ottoman realms, while many abandoned Ottoman dominions for Greece, Russia, and other points west; at the same time, the Phanariots became known as a faction within the new power structure of independent Greece.

Sir Steven Runciman, in his 1968 classic *The Great Church in Captivity": A Study of the Patriarchate of Constantinople from the Eve of the Turkish Conquest to the Greek*

War of Independence, dedicated an entire chapter to the Phanariots and, in so doing, introduced them anew to modern scholars. There, he gave us a characterization of the Phanariots that is as erudite as it is incomplete. He wrote:

> "With the spread of the Renaissance a respect for the old Greek civilization had become general. It was natural that the Greeks, in the midst of their political disasters [under Ottoman domination] should wish to benefit from it. They might be slaves now to the Turks, but they were of the great race that had civilized Europe. It must be their destiny to rise again. The Phanariots tried to combine the nationalistic force of Hellenism in a passionate if illogical alliance with the oecumenical traditions of Byzantium and the Orthodox Church. They worked for a restored Byzantium, a new Rome that should be Greek, a new centre of Greek civilization that should embrace the Orthodox world."[4]

First, we need to disentangle Runciman's anachronistic assumptions about race and modern national sentiment that are being projected on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries here. Before we go on to address the incompleteness of Runciman's characterization of the Phanariots, we must concede that he has distilled at least one core paradox of the Phanariot phenomenon. And that is: on the one hand, the Phanariots as individual families and as a group/collective were products of an imperial, autocratic state formation where their identity as non-Muslims, and specifically Christians, was a key determinant of their horizons. In that formation, association with Orthodox Christianity was along ecumenical lines that transcended boundaries of language and ethnicity, analogous in some ways to Islam as a universal/ecumenical category of belonging. The Phanariots' power and influence rested on association with Orthodox Christianity, which could only be ecumenical if it were to have a hold on the many Orthodox Christian communities of the Empire that were not ethnically Greek. On the other hand, the Phanariots took pride in their association with the Greek language and Greek letters, an association which lent itself to a sentiment which could easily turn into a proto-national one. Greek, we might say, was privileged as a language and a learned tradition, and non-native Greek speakers (Romanian-, Albanian-, Turkish-, or Slavic speakers) could and did achieve upward social mobility in this Phanariot ascendancy, Greek identity was also used as a tool of domination over non-Greek ethnic and social groups within the Church and beyond, particularly in the eighteenth century. This tension was present throughout the eighteenth century, before the emergence of a modern conception of nations as the political basis for states. While Runciman is not right to assume clean and direct connections to modern national projects, he was very right to pick up on the tensions

4 Runciman, *The Great Church in Captivity*, 378–79.

within this Phanariot ascendancy. Were Phanariots just playing to the different crowds they faced, emphasizing their ecumenical Christianity and their Greekness when it suited them, or were they actually trying to take over the Empire from within? Were they neo-Byzantines and/or were they proto-Greek nationalists?

In order to explore these questions, or perhaps in order to push them aside and move beyond them, we must now consider what is missing from Runciman's formulation about the Phanariots. As mentioned above, the Phanariots were creatures and products of the landscape of Ottoman governance. Namely, all of this capital accumulation, amassing of power and influence at the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and extension of power into provinces, islands, and the inner/upper reaches of the Ottoman Court and government was happening *in* and *because* of their *Ottoman* imperial context and surroundings; they were inserting themselves in and around Ottoman grandees and institutions. That was happening separately, perhaps, or at least in addition to their rich discussions and polemics around the learned tradition they had inherited. For Runciman, the Phanariots'—and, for that matter, the Great Church's—engagement in Ottoman social and political reality is little more than incidental; the title of the book, after all, is *The Great Church in Captivity*, implying that the Church remained the same before, during, and after its captivity. Such a formulation assumes limited contact, let alone interaction with or influence from the goings-on in that Ottoman context. Furthermore, Runciman is concerned mainly with the most visible forms of Phanariot self-presentation—as cultured intellectuals and as power brokers in the Church who managed to garner (read: carve out) key positions close to Ottoman power.

PHANARIOTS, UNVEILED

If Runciman had turned his attention, or assigned any value, to the larger Ottoman context, he would have told us about another paradox. Namely, that the Phanariots were an elite—whether we call them a patriciate, a caste, or a clique—that was *not supposed to happen* in the formal framework of power in the Ottoman Empire. In earlier Ottoman centuries, Christians would have needed to convert to Islam, and many did, in order to achieve a measure of power and belonging. We have countless stories, whether of *devşirme* boys or their children and grandchildren, who comprised the Ottoman state and military elite in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, alongside other stories of stray converts who wrote about their experiences and their newfound belief in Islam.[5] But by the eighteenth century, we notice that the proliferating ranks of secretaries, assistants, and officials in the retinues of these select Phanariot families were staffed by Christians, not converts to Islam. There was no official name for these niches of power that the Phanariots were creating for themselves and their underlings, because Christians were not meant to be occupying positions of power or influence

5 See, for example, Tijana Krstic, *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Stanford University Press, 2011).


P.③②⑨

Fig ❹ *Princesse de Valaquie*, Charles de Ferriol, *Requeil de Cent Estampes representant differentes Nations du Levant tirées sur les Tableaux peints d'après Nature en 1707 et 1708* (Chez Basan, 1714), pl. 79. Ömer M. Koç Collection.

outside the formal Church apparatus. They had no choice but to build an empire—without a name—within the Empire; opportunities abounded at the interstices of the Church and Ottoman imperial and provincial governance, not to mention between the Ottoman and Russian, Habsburgs, and western European states. That 'empire' within was not a nation-state waiting to happen, although it did provide some of the materials—human and intellectual—for what later turned out to be the independent Greek state.

Using these two paradoxes—that the Phanariots were at once part of an ecumenical world of Orthodoxy and a pointedly Greek world of letters and that the Phanariots as a power group were not supposed to exist in the framework of Ottoman governance—as a starting point for an inquiry about the Phanariots shifts our understanding of what we already know about them and forces us to ask different questions, to learn new things about them and their world. This includes the question of their physical surroundings—the built environment and material culture—we can now see better why this has escaped scholarly scrutiny until now. If the Phanariots were only studied for their intellectual life and in ways that remained true to their self-presentation, then there would be no need to investigate their houses or belongings. Their existence in an Ottoman social or physical reality would be irrelevant—they, like the Great Church, were just 'Greeks in captivity', not creatures of Ottoman governance.

The question of houses, homes, and households is already a central one in Ottoman history. There were many kinds of formal elites in the classical period of the Ottoman Empire, all of them Muslim, of course. From the sultan and grand vezir, their households and scribal staff, to their military (*sipahi*s and janissaries) and the learned elite of the *ulema*, formal power was carefully organized and, in the sixteenth century, harmonized across these elites and the institutions they inhabited. Starting from Topkapı Palace, the biggest house for the most powerful person in the Empire, the houses of these elites took various forms but were always more modest than the sultan's palace. We need only recall the words of sixteenth century bureaucrat and intellectual Mustafa Ali about the ways that physical houses—in their size, number of rooms, and furnishings—needed to align with the social station of their owners/inhabitants: "This again will be obvious and clear as daylight to all understanding and cultured contemporaries, namely that everybody's living quarters must be consistent with his status, that his house and residence must fit his taste and rank, so that he stays within his limits, not overstepping his appropriate measure, and does not travel the road of foolish spenders, thinking that that is the proper way for a *sipahi*… ."[6] Social standing, an abstract concept, was expected to be reflected in one's physical, built environment. Such was the conception of social order for an Ottoman gentleman.

6 Andreas Tietze, "Mustafa Ali on Luxury and the Status Symbols of Ottoman Gentlemen," in *Studia Turcologica Memoriae Alexii Bombaci Dicata*, eds. Ugo Marazzi, Alessio Bombaci, and Aldo Gallotta (Instituto Universitario Orientale, Seminario di studi asiatici XIX, 1982), 577–90, 587–88.



P.329

Fig 6 *Gentilhomme Valaque*, Charles de Ferriol, *Requeil de Cent Estampes representant differentes Nations du Levant tirées sur les Tableaux peints d'apres Nature en 1707 et 1708* (Chez Basan, 1714), pl. 80. Ömer M. Koç Collection.

Christians and Jews were, by design, not part of this power structure, although they were allowed to reside in Ottoman domains and were expected to pay taxes accordingly. But we can assume that non-Muslim elites did somehow have to devise physical dwellings for themselves, and we might speculate that those dwellings would reflect the complex, even impossible position they were in as non-Muslim elites that were not supposed to exist in the Ottoman Empire. The way the Phanariots built their houses—and the disconnect between the modest exterior and the often opulent interior—reflected the complexity of their social standing in Ottoman society. This is something which has been pointed out as a curiosity by travelers since the early nineteenth century but which modern scholars are only beginning to appreciate. This quotation from author Thomas Hope, from his ca. 1820 historical novel *Anastasius, or, Memoirs of a Greek* is still a wonderful starting point for our inquiry into both the material and socio-political world of Phanariots:

> "It was with difficulty that I could collect my scattered senses when the time came to step into the nut-shell, all azure and gold, which waited to convey the [dragoman]'s suite to the [Phanar].... Each stroke of the oar, after we had pushed off from the ship, made our light caick [Tur. *kayık*] glide by some new palace, more splendid than that which preceded it; and every fresh edifice I beheld, grander in its appearance than the former, was immediately set down in my mind as my master's habitation. I began to feel uneasy when I perceived that we had passed the handsomest district, and we were advancing toward a less showy quarter. My pangs increased as we were made to step ashore on a mean-looking quay, and to turn into a narrow, dirty lane; and I attained the acme of my dismay, when, arrived opposite a house of a dark and dingy hue, apparently crumbling to pieces with age and neglect, I was told that there lived the [Phanariot] lord. ... A new surprise awaited me within. That mean fir-wood case, of such forbidding exterior, contained rooms furnished in all the splendor of eastern magnificence. Persian carpets covered the floors, Genoa velvets clothed the walls, and gilt trellis work overcast the lofty ceilings. Clouds of rich perfumes rose on all sides from silver censers. .. . The persons of [Phanariot] grandees were of a piece with their habitations. Within doors, sinking under the weight of rich furs, costly shawls, jewels, and trinkets, they went forth into the streets wrapped in coarse, and dingy, and often thread-bare clothing.'"[7]

7 Thomas Hope, *Anastasius, or, Memoirs of a Greek Written at the Close of the Eighteenth Century* (John Murray, 1836 [1819]), 1:52–53.

So the persons of Phanariot grandees were “of a piece with their habitations,” and their habitations were physical manifestations of their paradoxical existence. They were in but not of the Ottoman elite. Their households were in many ways modeled after the households of Ottoman grandees, with requisite adaptations for their differences. They were in but not of Moldavia and Wallachia, where they ruled on behalf of the Sultan. They were Orthodox Christian but also self-identified as Greek (if they were not always Greek-born). And they were dubbed ‘Phanariots’—and left fascinating structures behind in Phanar—but inhabited homes and built households that stretched beyond the Danube to Bucharest and Iaşi and across both shores of the Bosphorus in the capital.