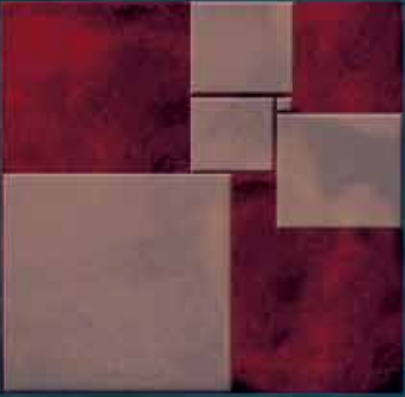


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# ÉTUDES BALKANIQUES

LV/1

*Mirabilia: Miraculous and Magical*



Guest Editor  
Vanya Lozanova-Stantcheva

Sofia · 2019



# ÉTUDES BALKANIQUES

Sofia · 2019 · LV · 1

ACADÉMIE BULGARE DES SCIENCES  
INSTITUT D'ÉTUDES BALKANIQUES & CENTRE DE THRACOLOGIE

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DID THE OTTOMANS SEE UFOS?  
AN 1838 OTTOMAN DOCUMENT ABOUT UNUSUAL  
CELESTIAL PHENOMENON

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*Abstract: The paper deals with an Ottoman document preserved in the Oriental Department of Sts. Cyril and Methodius National Library in Sofia. The document reveals that in October 1838 a heavy storm broke over in the night, followed by appearance of a round-shaped bright light. It illuminated the whole horizon and afterwards broke into pieces that fell down on the earth. The unusual celestial phenomenon was observed by the Ottoman soldiers camping nearby Mardin as well as the locals. They reported the case to the sultan, who was informed also of the opinion of the local men of religion, whose interpretation associated the phenomenon with a divine sign of forthcoming military victories.*

*Keywords: UFO, Ottoman Documents, Unusual Celestial Phenomena, Mahmud II, Mehmed Ali Pasha*

Since ancient times the mankind is a part of the Universe. Its micro cosmos is related to the universal/divine macro cosmos. The celestial bodies and natural phenomena, that is, the planets, the stars, the elements, are perceived as miracles or a divine message. Notwithstanding their visual appearance and reasoning, they had inevitably sparked curiosity and fear, as well as impulse for searching a reasonable and plausible explanation depending on the education level and the worldview of societies that happened to live in various parts of the world and in different ages.

Some natural phenomena still raise the question of whether the mankind is unique in the Universe. The folkloric-mythological paradigm suggests that the space beyond the human habitus is populated by gods, mythological he-

roes and supernatural creatures, while the maniacal ufologists and phenomenologists are convinced that not them but aliens must have visited and even cultivated the Earth. In both cases the magic and the miracle are inevitable attributes in the perception of these supernatural phenomena. The process of gaining knowledge of the “unexplainable” heavenly dynamics involves also the exploration of numerous accounts. Our intention here is to shed light on such an account coming from the lands of the one-time Ottoman Empire.

### *An 1838 Ottoman document dealing with UFO?*

In the fall of 1838, on 19 October at midnight, the populace of an Ottoman province in Southeastern Anatolia observed an unusual natural phenomenon that reminds a UFO<sup>1</sup> and had been perceived as a divine sign of forthcoming military victories for the Ottoman sultan. Two days later, on 21 October 1838 Es-Seyyid Hacı İsmail Hakkı, the substitute judge (*naib*) of the provincial center Mardin, reported in detail to the Ottoman government what had actually happened. The original report is now preserved in the Oriental Department of Sts. Cyril and Methodius National Library in Sofia<sup>2</sup>, and Evgeni Radushev was the first scholar to provide a brief description of it<sup>3</sup>.

The report reads as follows:

„The humble servant reports about the following:

This year, on the thirtieth day of the holy month Receb<sup>4</sup>, on Thursday at midnight, around half past four o'clock, in accordance with the command of God a heavy storm burst and deep darkness enveloped all around. At this moment a wondrous bright shine (*nur-i 'azim 'alâmeti*), as big as a round tray (*sini*), appeared in the sky from the direction between Mecca and the East, lighting up and illuminating the whole horizon as though it was a day. [Then] all the

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<sup>1</sup> Here the term UFO (unidentified flying object) is used not in its more widespread reference to an extraterrestrial spacecraft, but to “any airborne object which by performance, aerodynamic characteristics, or unusual features, does not conform to any presently known aircraft or missile type, or which cannot be positively identified as a familiar object” as defined by the United States Air Force (USAF) in 1954. See [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Air\\_Force\\_Regulation\\_200-2,\\_Unidentified\\_Flying\\_Objects\\_Reporting](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Air_Force_Regulation_200-2,_Unidentified_Flying_Objects_Reporting) – 10.02.2019.

<sup>2</sup> Sts. Cyril and Methodius National Library, Oriental Department, OAK 265/33.

<sup>3</sup> Evgeni Radushev, Sofya'da Osmanlı Arşiv Evrakı, *Kulavuz Dergisi*, 2014, N 50.

<sup>4</sup> 19 October 1838.

people became afraid and began praying for mercy. Afterwards the bright shine (*nur-i 'azim*) broke into pieces in the sky, falling down to the earth. This divine miracle has been seen and observed [by the populace] not only in Mardin, but also by the regular Ottoman troops camping in the village of Harzem<sup>5</sup>, as well as by many others. According to the soldiers' accounts when the bright shine (*nur-i 'azim*) fell apart on the earth, the edges of their scimitars and bayonets, stacked in the guard's shelter, shined like candles and their shine remained bright despite the efforts of the soldiers to clean them up. A few minutes later this large piece of light vanished completely. The Muslim theologians of Mardin claim that this is a divine sign (*'alamet*) of the victorious future of our sultan, as well as an omen for the wellbeing of all the Muslims. [This event] was reported to Your Majesty since such meaningful events are quite rare and therefore they should be scrupulously recorded. It was written on the second day of the great month Shaban in the year 1254<sup>6</sup> by the humble servant Es-Seyyid Hacı İsmail Hakkı, substitute kadi (*naib*) of Mardin, who prays for the eternity of your life.”

This account is quite important not only because it bears evidence about an observation of an unusual natural phenomenon, but also because it is one of the very small numbers of surviving documents that attest such events. The survival of this particular piece of evidence is impressive, too, since the records of the Mardin court do not contain information about this event<sup>7</sup>.

### *An unidentified flying object or something else?*

It seems that the 1838 Mardin case was not an exception. Some months later a similar case was reported from the province of Denizli in Western Anatolia. According to a recently published Ottoman document, on 20 May 1839 a fast moving and watermelon-shaped bright light as big as 3–4 meters appeared in the sky again from the direction of Mecca. The lightning ball “landed” in the skirts of a nearby mountain and illuminated the whole vicinity<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Today the village of Ziyaret, district of Kızıltepe in the region of Mardin.

<sup>6</sup> 21 October 1838.

<sup>7</sup> Arzu Şahin, 1806–1840 (H. 1221–1256) Tarihli Mardin Şer'iyye Sicilinin Tanıtımı ve Fihristi, *Fırat Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, vol. 23, 2013, N 2, p. 263–288.

<sup>8</sup> Muzaffer Çetin, Nurkadın Esra Çetin, Ali Yıldız, *Tarihi Belgeler Işığında Denizli*. Denizli: Denizli Büyükşehir Belediyesi Kültür Yayınları, 2016, p. 150–151.



As a matter of fact, there is a special branch of Ottoman geographical works dealing with “wondrous”, “magical” and “unusual” natural phenomena, celestial phenomena including. However, most of these works deal with “information” of legendary origin and have little to do with records of personal observation<sup>9</sup>. With regard to the aforementioned two Ottoman documents dating from 1838 and 1839 which are reports of local officers to the sultan himself one might hardly doubt the reliability of these accounts. In those years, when the Ottoman press made its first steps, these types of documentary evidence are one-of-a-kind.<sup>10</sup> The earliest news in the Ottoman press dealing with similar phenomena appeared only in 1890. On 21 Receb 1307/13 March 1890 the newspaper *Sabah* published the news under the headline “A Wondrous Observation” (*Bir Temaşa-i Garib*). It retells a story told in the then French press according to which one afternoon the populace of the French town of Saint-Malo observed three “suns” aligned above the horizon in the sky. The “sun” in the middle was brighter than the others, and the unusual phenomenon was observed in the course of an hour<sup>11</sup>.

Throughout the ages moving or static luminous, spherical objects have been observed. For instance, in the second quarter of the sixteenth century “a frightful globe of fire” revolved and moved towards the convent of Santa Clara in the Spanish town of Zafra (in the region of Extremadura). It appeared during a stormy weather and was perceived as a “miracle”<sup>12</sup>. The earliest scholarly report of such a phenomenon dates back to 19 February 1783.

<sup>9</sup> See Marinos Sariyannis, *Ajā'ib ve Gharā'ib: Ottoman Collections of Mirabilia and Perceptions of the Supernatural*, *Der Islam*, vol. 92, 2015, N 2, p. 442 – 467.

<sup>10</sup> In the 1830s the Ottoman press, as well as some financial records contain reports about unusual cases of “vampirism” in the Bulgarian town of Tarnovo (Tirnova) and the Macedonian town of Bitola (Manastır). See Zeynep Aycibin, Osmanlı Devleti'nde Cadılar Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme, *OTAM: Ankara Üniversitesi Osmanlı Tarihi Araştırma ve Uygulama Merkezi Dergisi*, 2008, N 24, p. 55 – 69; Michael Ursinus, Osmanische Lokalbehörden der frühen Tanzimat im Kampf gegen Vampire? Amtsrechnungen (*masârif defterleri*) aus Makedonien im Lichte der Aufzeichnungen Marko Cepenkovs (1829 – 1920), *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, vol. 82, 1992, p. 359 – 374; Marinos Sariyannis, Of Ottoman Ghosts, Vampires and Sorcerers: an Old Discussion Disinterred, *Archivum Ottomanicum*, vol. 30, 2013, p. 191 – 216.

<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.haberuzay.com/2013/10/123-yl-once-yasanan-bir-ufo-olay.html> – 10.02.2019.

<sup>12</sup> José M. Vaquero, Ball Lightning: a Renaissance Account from Zafra (Spain), *History of Geo- and Space Sciences*, 2017, N 8, p. 53 – 56.

It was observed in Rio de Janeiro during a thunderstorm along with a sudden change in temperature and strength of wind<sup>13</sup>. Such phenomena are occasionally observed and photographed in modern times, too<sup>14</sup>. The scholars refer to them as *ball lightning*. The French mathematician, physicist and astronomer François Arago (1786 – 1853) was the first to draw scholarly attention to them in his 1837 – 1838 voluminous publication on thunder.<sup>15</sup> However, scholars do not have yet a generally accepted plausible explanation of the very nature of these phenomena. Some claim that such phenomena appear due to a sparked electric charge during stormy weather. Others exclude the storms as a factor since such phenomena had been observed in calm weather too. Some scholars believe that it is an atmospheric phenomenon whose nature is completely meteorological, stressing their similarity with the phenomena to be seen in the funnel shaped tornados. According to the latest hypotheses the ball lightning is a gas bubble which turns into plasma, the fourth physical condition, due to a high temperature or a strong electromagnetic field created by microwaves as a result of a normal lightning. Because of the high temperature inside it, the plasma-turned-gas bubble radiates a bright light<sup>16</sup>. Ball lightning could appear not only outdoors but also indoors. There are reported cases in airplanes and buildings, in which the ball lightning penetrates through the windows or the chimneys. Sometimes, quite rarely, the ball lightning could disintegrate into several smaller bubbles. A similarity of this was probably observed in Saint-Malo in 1890, when three “suns” appeared above the horizon according to the abovementioned press reports.

One could hardly be sure of what all these recorded phenomena really were. The accounts imply that most cases are related to the observation of

<sup>13</sup> A. M. M. Farona, J. M. Vaquero, An Early Scientific Report of Ball Lightning from Brazil, *Weather*, vol. 67, 2012, N 4, p. 96 – 97.

<sup>14</sup> See Stanley Singer, *The Nature of Ball Lightning*. New York: Plenum, 1971; Vladimir Lvovich Bychkov, Unsolved Mystery of Ball Lightning, In: *Atomic Processes in Basic and Applied Physics*, ed. Viacheslav Shevelko, Hiro Tawara. Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 2012, p. 3 – 24.

<sup>15</sup> François Arago, Notice scientifique sur le tonnerre, In: *Annuaire pour l'an 1838 présenté au roi par le Bureau des longitudes*. Paris: Bachelier, 1837 [1838], p. 221 – 618.

<sup>16</sup> See Mark Stenhoff, *Ball Lightning: An Unsolved Problem in Atmospheric Physics*. New York: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002; Peter Coleman, Ball Lightning – ‘Flying Fire’, *Weather*, vol. 67, 2012, N 4, p. 95 – 96; H.-C. Wu, Relativistic-Microwave Theory of Ball Lightning, *Scientific Reports*, 2016, N 6: [https://www.nature.com/articles/srep28263?WT.feed\\_name=subjects\\_physical-sciences](https://www.nature.com/articles/srep28263?WT.feed_name=subjects_physical-sciences) – 5.11.2018.

ball lightning. However, the observed phenomena could be also meteors or some other unidentified flying objects that visited the Earth. Nonetheless, it is important to point out that the latest research dealing with recorded UFO cases show clearly that in most cases they were related to sparking of plasma under high magnetic activity conditions or during meteor showers<sup>17</sup>.

The ball lightning is also a local phenomenon observed at relatively low height above the earth surface and accordingly it could be observed only locally. Therefore an existing account of ball lightning observation could hardly be supported by other accounts. In contrast, since the lightning, comets and meteor showers appear much higher in the sky they could be observed from distance and in a far wider perimeter. For instance, meteor showers were recorded in the very same year of 1838 in the volume 30 of the *English Mechanics' Magazine*, dating from 6 October 1838 – 30 March 1839. The magazine includes several reports about meteor showers observed simultaneously in August and more clearly in September and November 1838 in a wider geographical areal comprising England, Austria, Germany, Russia, America and Australia<sup>18</sup>. The same meteor showers of August 1838 were observed also in Switzerland<sup>19</sup>.

### *The 1838 Ottoman “UFO” case and the interpretation by its contemporaries*

The accounts of observation of bright fire-like shining celestial bodies date back to the second millennium B.C.E. Such accounts are available also for the Antiquity, the Middle Age and the early modern time<sup>20</sup>. Some of them deal with comets whose appearance in the past was usually interpreted as a sign of a forthcoming victory at the battlefield.

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<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.vesti.bg/sviat/evropa/britanskite-tajni-za-nlo-6078202> – 23.10.2018.

<sup>18</sup> See *Mechanics' Magazine, Museum, Register, Journal, and Gazette*, vol. 30, October 6th, 1838–March 30th, 1839, London, p. 152, 206 – 207, 307 – 308.

<sup>19</sup> See *The American Journal of Science & Arts*, vol. 39, 1840, N 1, p. 334.

<sup>20</sup> See Jacques Vallee, Chris Aubeck, *Wonders in the Sky. Unexplained Aerial Objects from Antiquity to Modern Times and Their Impact on Human Culture, History, and Beliefs*. New York: Penguin Group, 2009; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_reported\\_UFO\\_sightings](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_reported_UFO_sightings) – 23.10.2018.

For instance, the Italian historian Alberto Guglielmotti (1812 – 1893) refers to the statements given by two witnesses, Sereno and Caracciolo, who claim that on the eve of the Lepanto battle, on 20 September 1571, the Christian soldiers had suddenly seen “a colossal fire in the shape of a shining, flaming column... to cross the sky over a long period of time”. The witnesses perceived the phenomenon as a good omen for a great victory in the forthcoming battle in the Ionian Sea<sup>21</sup>. Indeed, on 7 October 1571 the allied Christian naval forces defeated the Ottoman fleet in a battle that took place near the shores of the Greek town of Nafpaktos/Lepanto.

According to Ottoman narratives, during the reign of Sultan Murad III (1574 – 1595) in the evening of the first day of the Holy month Ramadan in the lunar year 985, that is, on 12 November 1577 a brightly shining comet appeared and lightened the whole sky over the Ottoman capital Istanbul in the course of 74 nights. On the order of the sultan the court astronomer Takiüddin Mehmed (1526 – 1585) interpreted the phenomenon as a good omen for the forthcoming Ottoman conquest of Iran<sup>22</sup>. This phenomenon that lasted two months and a half became eventually part of the daily life in the Ottoman capital and was depicted in several miniatures. A similar phenomenon was observed during the reign of the next sultan Mehmed III (1595 – 1603). Transylvanian and Italian sources relate that on 15 October 1595 a “huge comet” had appeared for an hour or two in the sky right above the soldiers of the Wallachian prince Michael the Brave (1593 – 1601) camping near the fort of Târgoviște, occupied at that time by Ottoman troops. The phenomenon was similarly perceived as a good omen since three days later, on 18 October 1595 the Wallachian prince succeeded to take over the fort. Later on, in 1665, this phenomenon was depicted in a German engraving<sup>23</sup>.

The unusual celestial phenomenon recorded in the above cited 1838 Ottoman document was also perceived as a good omen. The phenomenon happened to be seen in a very critical moment for the rule of Sultan Mahmud II (1808 – 1839). During his reign he had to deal –rather unsuccessfully– with

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p. 200.

<sup>22</sup> See A. Süheyl Ünver, *İstanbul Rasathanesi*. Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1985; Nectet Sakaoglu, III. Murad, In: *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 5. İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1994, p. 498 – 503.

<sup>23</sup> Calin N. Turcu, *Encyclopedia of UFO Observations from Romania (1517–1994)*. Bucharest: Ed. Emanuel, 1994: <http://www.asfanufo.ro/index.php/istorie/114-primele-semnalari-ozn-romanesti> – 15.12.2018.

the two Serbian revolts (1804–1813; 1815) and the Greek war for independence (1821–1829) that ended up with the establishment of two new modern states: Serbia and Greece. This failure pushed on the sultan to carry out a drastic military reform in 1826 by disbanding the Janissary corps, once the emblem of the victorious Ottoman state, and replacing it with a new military force, the so-called “Victorious Mohammedan Army” (*Asakir-i Mansure-i Muhammediyye*). In 1831–1832 the situation in the Bosnian province was also uneasy since the local captains refused to obey to the Ottoman authorities.

Yet the sultan had to deal not only with his Christian subjects but also with some of his disobedient provincial governors. In 1832 the army of the governor of Egypt Mehmed Ali Pasha (d. 1849), led by his son Ibrahim Pasha, took over the Palestinian fort of Akka and subsequently the Syrian forts of Damascus and Aleppo. The troops of the governor of Egypt reached almost to the heart of Anatolia, the important city of Konya, where they defeated the last efficient military units of the Ottoman sultan Mahmud II. The latter had no other option but to declare Mehmed Ali Pasha not only governor of Egypt but also governor of Syria and Crete, and his son Ibrahim Pasha was declared governor of Palestine and the South-Anatolian province of Adana, respectively. However, the tension between the sultan and the two disobedient provincial governors remained in force, especially in the southern Anatolian provinces. Hence Ottoman troops were stationed there.

Given this tense situation the unusual celestial phenomenon observed in the Southeastern Anatolian province of Mardin in 1838 had been logically perceived as a divine sign of the long-awaited Ottoman victory over the governor of Egypt. However, in the next battle that took place on 24 June 1839 nearby Nizip, between Adana and Mardin, the governor of Egypt defeated again the sultan. At first sight, it seemed that the Ottoman interpretation of the 1838 phenomenon happened to be quite optimistic and eventually wrong. However, after the Nizip battle the Great Powers intervened and according to the stipulations of the 1840 Treaty of London the new Ottoman sultan, Abdülmecid I (1839–1861), regained rule over the provinces of Adana, Syria and Crete, while Mehmed Ali Pasha and his successors kept their rule in Egypt. Accordingly, the unusual celestial phenomenon of 1838 observed by the populace and the Ottoman troops near Mardin brought the long-awaited successful outcome albeit by means of diplomacy rather than of military victory.

In conclusion, one should keep in mind that well until late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when ufology emerged as a new field of scholarly

research, such phenomena were not perceived as a sign of visitation of aliens. Since ancient times until early modern times such phenomena were perceived as unusual natural occurrences and interpreted mostly as good omens of forthcoming military victories. In Ottoman context such interpretations were in force even later, as the 1838 case shows, while in the very same year the French scholar François Arago already tried to give not a superstitious but a scientific explanation of these phenomena.

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## Appendix

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*Ma'ruz-ı 'abd 'aliye-i ma'ruzlarıdır ki*

*İşbu sene-i mubarekede mah-ı Recebül-müreccebin selhi Pencşenbih gecesi sa'at dört buçuk sularında min taraf-ı illah-ı sübhane-hu ve ta'ala bir şedid ve 'azim rüzgâr ve fırtına zuhur ve zülmet-i 'azime peyda ve göz gözü görmez gibi olub*

*ve ol dakikda simada Kible ile Şark miyanelerinde bir büyük sini kadar bir nur-i 'azim 'alâmeti peyda ve gündüz misali bütün afakı ruşen ve tab-nak edüb cümleye bir haf-i 'azim hasıl olub*

*taraf taraf du'a ve tazarru'a başlayub ba'dehu mezkür olan nur-i 'azim simada parça parça olub yer yüzüne düşmeye başlayub bu ayat-i İlâhiye gerek derun-i Mardin'de*

*ve gerek Harzem nam karyede bulunan 'Asakir-i Muntazıma-i Şahane ve sair kimesneler müşahede ve mu'ayene edüb ve 'asakir-i mezkürenin tahrir ve ihbarları üzere ol nur-i*

*'azim yere düşdükte çadır karakolunda bulunan neferatın kılıçları ve süngüleri ucunda şem' misali şu'a verüb ve her ne kadar uçlarını silmişler ise de zail olmıyub bir kaç*

*dakikadan sonra na-bedid olub bu 'alâmet inşallah-ı ta'ala-yı veli nimet-i 'alim olan padişah-ı 'alim-penah efendimiz hazretlerinin ezher-cihetmansur ve muzafferiyetine delâlet edüğü ve cümle*

*ümme-i Muhammed haklarında hayırlu bir 'alâmet oldığını Mardin 'ulemaları efendiler ifade eyleyub bu makule 'alâmet-i hayriye-i nadirenin i'lân ve ifadesi lâzime-i halden oldığı vuku' üzere*

*huzur-i faizü'n-nur-ı rahimanelerine 'arz ve ilâm. Hurrire fi'l-yevmü's-sani min şehr-i Ş'abani'l-mu'azzam sene-i erba' ve hamsin ve mieteyn ve elf.*

*El-'abdü'd-da'i li-devam-ı ömr ve ikbale-hu*

*Es-Seyyid Hacı İsmail Hakkı, en-naib-i Mardin*







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