

CASTELLORIZO AND THE LOSS OF HMS BEN-MY-CHREE

BY IAN BURNS AND GUNTER HARTNAGEL



From a distance Castellorizo has not changed much in 100 years. This recent view from Kaş is not quite what Mustafa Ertuğrul, Max Ittmann and Karl Schmidt-Kolbow saw: they were two kilometres closer with a better view into the harbour. From left to right: Point Niftis; the ancient harbour of Mandraki; the castle on its promontory; the white painted houses of the town (there were many more in 1917) around the modern harbour, with Mount Vigla (273m) rising behind it; Cape Agios Stefanou.

:Gunter Hartnagel

WHEN WRITING THE STORY of *Ben-my-Chree*¹ the chapter I had most difficulty with was the loss of the ship at Castellorizo on 9 Jan 1917. Having access only to British accounts gave a one-sided view of events. Literally, at the last minute, I was made aware of Mustafa Ertuğrul and his memoirs.² Ertuğrul, a Turkish artillery officer, claimed to have sunk *Ben-my-Chree*. As what he had written fitted with what I knew, I rewrote the story of the sinking making use of his memoir.

But there were two artillery batteries; Turkish and German. Just over a year ago, I was contacted by Gunter Hartnagel offering a copy of the German report on the sinking by Major Karl Schmidt-Kolbow.³ Schmidt-Kolbow had overall command of German and Turkish guns, and told a somewhat different story than Mustafa Ertuğrul. Since then Gunter has been an active correspondent and sounding board, his input has been essential throughout this project. He has written an account of the sinking, using the German and Turkish reports, which has been incorporated into this article. To complete the story, Nicholas Pappas (A Sydney-based historian with Castellorizan roots) has provided us with copies of some French reports, and images, from Castellorizo. Unfortunately, the French reports of events on 9 January 1917 have not been located. So, we have been reliant on contemporary French memoirs and histories to fill the gaps. Like all memoirs and histories, they have to be read with care.

The German, French and British official accounts have the advantage of being written within a few days of the events. Mustafa Ertuğrul Aker⁴ did not put his memoirs on to paper until 1934. In compiling them he relied on memory, assisted by any notes or diaries, maps and drawings he may have made at the time. They present a very Turko-centric account. Other published memoirs consulted for this article were also written several years after the events: William Wedgwood Benn, 1919; Docteur Charles Héderer, 1924; Captain L.B. Weldon, 1925; Charles Rumney Samson, 1930. These authors certainly put forward their own points of view and may have revised their perspective over the intervening years.

Before telling our story, let us first sort out the name of the island. Castellorizo or Kastellorízo, Castelrosso, Château Rouge, Meyísti or Megísti, Meis or Kızılhisar; take your pick as the island has had many names with infinitely variable spelling. Generally, the French and British tended to use Castellorizo, and the German and Turkish accounts Meis. Except when quoting directly, this article will use Castellorizo throughout as, with one or two l's, it is the most common spelling in the British records with which I am most familiar.

Similarly, mainland towns and locations had both Greek and Turkish contemporary names, and have modern names that can be completely different. The most common contemporary name, from reports and memoirs, is used in this article. The modern name, where different, is given after the first use of each name.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CASTELLORIZO

The basic fact is that HMS *Ben-my-Chree* was sunk by Turkish and German artillery whilst in the harbour at Castellorizo on 9 January 1917. It was a difficult and laborious task to bring the guns from the inland railhead to the coast. So, what was so important about the island to make this effort worthwhile?

The island's story stretches back into pre-history. It has been fought over and occupied in turn by Hellenistic Greece, Rome, Byzantium, the Knights of St John from Rhodes, Egyptians, Venice and the Ottoman Empire. During the Greek War of Independence (1821-1832) the island was evacuated. Once restored to Ottoman control the population, of largely Greek extraction, quickly returned. Benefiting from a favourable tax situation the island's merchants created a profitable entrepôt trade in wine, olive oil and timber. Following the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, when the tax breaks were cancelled, the island's trade and population plummeted. Within four years Castellorizo's population had halved, largely due to emigration.

A French postcard view of Castellorizo with the French armoured cruiser (1895) Amiral Charner in the harbour, taken during the occupation in December 1915. Amiral Charner was torpedoed off Beirut a year later, there was just one survivor. The town climbs up the hillside from the harbour, almost surrounding the castle on the highest point of the peninsula. Mandraki lies behind the castle, it was the harbour in ancient times but changes in land and sea levels made the change to the modern harbour necessary.

:internet via author

