

# Corsairs of the Mediterranean Sea Adventures of Greek sailors of the XVIII century

An uprising against the Ottoman Empire began in Greece in 1821. The difficult war lasted almost 9 years and ended with the creation of an independent Greece. Without victory at sea, the success of the uprising would be impossible. Where did the Greeks get the necessary number of warships and experienced sailors to challenge the powerful Ottoman fleet?

Almost 50 years before these events, the war between the Russian and Ottoman empires in 1768-1774 ended. A peace treaty was signed in the village of Kuchuk-Kainarji (now Bulgaria). An important role in the conclusion of peace on favorable terms for Russia was played by the sailors and marines of Count Orlov, who fought in the Mediterranean. Among them were Greek corsairs, who showed bravery, initiative, and the highest professionalism during the hostilities. This exhibition is dedicated to them.



**Fragment of an old map of the battle of 1772 in the Gulf of Patras - Greek corsair ships frigates *Saint Nicholas* and *Slava* (Gloria), xebec *Zabiyaka* (Bully), polaccas *Madon* and *Auza* together with Russian battleships *Chesma* and *Graf Orlov* destroy the Ottoman fleet.**



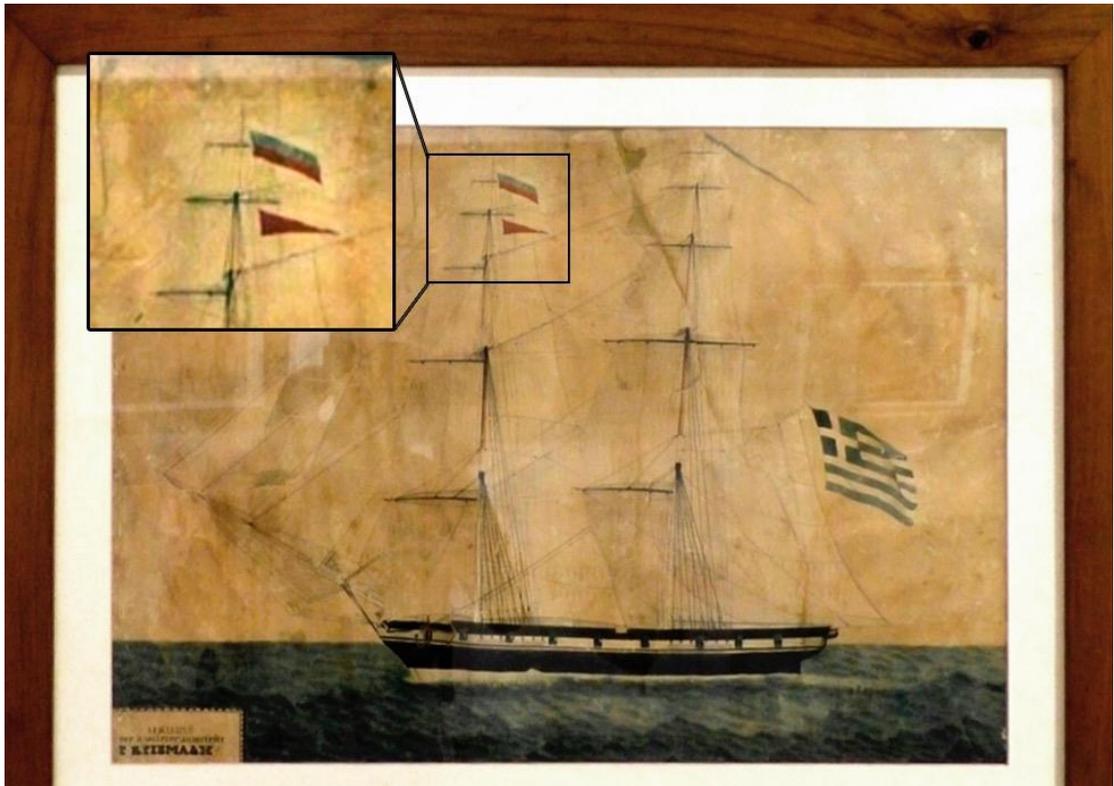
# Kuchuk-Kainarji peace treaty

According to one of the terms of the peace treaty, Russian merchant ships received the same privileges as French and British to navigate in Ottoman waters. Russia had goods, but did not have the required number of merchant sailors to trade with the whole world! This niche was occupied by Greeks. They began to receive patents from the government of the Russian Empire for the right to fly the merchant flag of Russia. The main requirement for Greek shipowners was that at least half of the crew of their merchant ships was Russian. Russian sailors received good maritime practice on Greek ships. And the Greeks received freedom of navigation.



Kuchuk-Kainarji peace treaty, signed by the Russian Empress Catherine II

After the conclusion of the Kuchuk-Kainarji peace treaty and the Greeks obtaining the right to fly the Russian merchant flag on their ships. The Greek fleet increased many times over. If earlier the Greek sea trade was mainly limited only to the Aegean Sea, now the goods were delivered even to America. Many Greeks got rich on this. Greek ships were heavily armed to defend against Algerian, Tunisian and Moroccan pirates. By protecting goods from them, the crews of Greek merchant ships gained combat experience. And when Greek War of Independence began, these ships from trading suddenly turned into warships.



**Corvette *Agamemnon* – ship of Laskarina Bouboulina  
national hero of Greek War of Independence 1821-1829.  
On the foremast there is a Russian merchant flag.  
Marine Museum on the island of Hydra, Greece.**

The archives of Russia contain many documents related to the adventures of Greek sailors: old nautical charts, battle diagrams, ship's logs of corsairs ships, reports on their combat operations.

Here, only a few of the most striking episodes associated with the actions of Greek corsairs in the military enterprise of 1769-1774, known in Russia as the 1-st Archipelago Expedition, will be described.

**Scheme of the siege of the city of Beirut (modern Lebanon) by Greek corsairs in 1772 . Taken from the ship's log of the corsair ship xebec *Greece*.**



The captain of the xebec *Greece* Antonios Psaros ( Αντώνιος Ψαρός ), after the end of hostilities, will move to Russia, where he will become a diplomat and will rise to the rank of Privy Councilor (a civilian rank equal to Lieutenant General).

# The 1-st Archipelago Expedition (Ορλωφικά)



**Count Alexey Orlov**



**Empress Catherine II**

The year 1769. There the Russian and Ottoman empires are at war. Russia has no fleet in the Black Sea, and the Russian Empress Catherine II decides to send the Baltic Fleet to the Mediterranean to strike at the Ottoman rear. Commander of the Russian force was Count Alexey Orlov. This military enterprise was named in Russia the **1-st Archipelago Expedition**, and in Greece - **Ορλωφικά**.



**Route of Russian ships of the 1-st Archipelago Expedition**



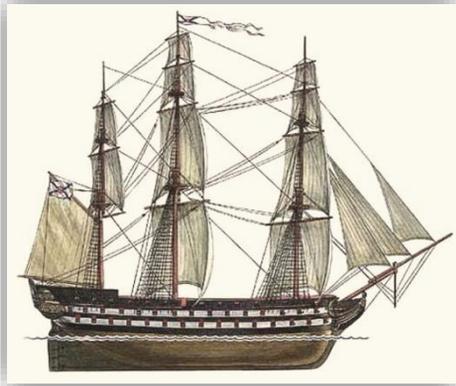
**Schematic of the Battle of Chesme**



**The destruction of the Ottoman fleet in the Battle of Chesme  
in the painting by the artist Ivan Aivazovsky**

In the summer of 1770, the Russian fleet drove the Ottoman fleet into the Chesme Bay, where it was completely destroyed. After that, Count Orlov decided to take control of the entire Aegean Sea, disrupt Ottoman trade and block the supply of food to Constantinople. But he had very few light ships for this. At the time of the victory in the Battle of Chesme, Count Orlov had 8 battleships and only 3 frigates, one of which was Greek. **Then he turned to the Greek sailors - merchants and pirates for help. They became corsairs in the service of the Russian Empire.**

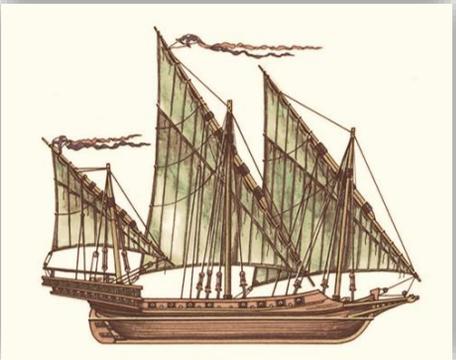
## The main types of ships used by Russian and Greek sailors in the 1-st Archipelago Expedition of 1769-1774



**Ships of the line** – were the most powerful ships in the fleet. Armament: 50 - 80 cannons, located on 2-3 decks, three masts with straight sails, a crew of 400 - 700 people. Powerful weapons, medium speed, low maneuverability, large draft. Corsairs were not used.



**Frigates** – were universal ships designed both for operations with battleships and for cruising operations - reconnaissance, destruction of enemy merchant and warships, and protection of their merchant ships. Armament: 10-36 guns, placed on 1-2 decks, three masts with straight sails, a crew of 50-300 people. Medium armament, high speed, average maneuverability and draft. Used by both Russian sailors and Greek corsairs.



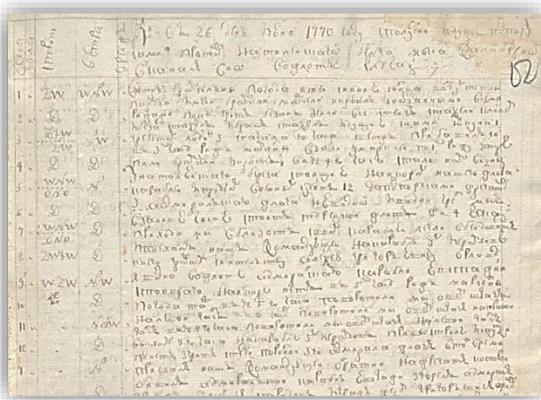
**Xebecs** – were sailing and rowing ships with three masts and lateen sails. Very fast and maneuverable with shallow draft. Not very good sailing on tailwinds due to the lack of square sails. Length 25-35 meters, armament 16-24 guns. Used by Greek corsairs.



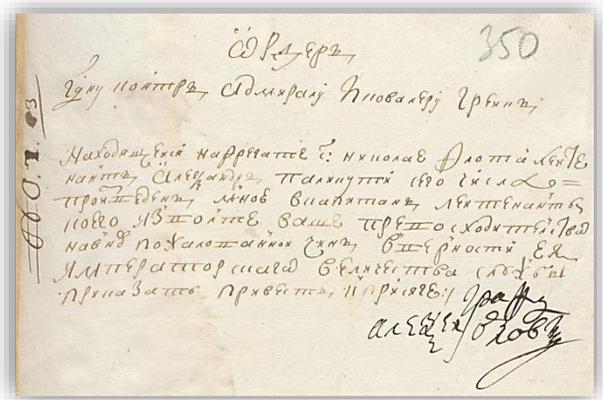
**Polaccas (or polacres)** – were sailing ships similar to the xebec. The presence of square sails makes it possible to sail well on tailwinds, but requires more than on the xebec of the crew. Used by Greek corsairs.

## Greek corsair frigate *Saint Nicholas*

The first Greek frigate to join Count Orlov's fleet was *Saint Nicholas*, commanded by Alexander Palikutti. The frigate participated in the Chios, Chesme, Patras battles, in the capture of Beirut in 1773 and in other corsair raids. In October 1771, Captain Palicutti died suddenly during a raid. It is presumed that he was buried, in the monastery of St. John the Evangelist on the island of Patmos. The frigate *Saint Nicholas*, after the end of hostilities, left for Russia in 1775, where it became one of the first ships of the Black Sea Fleet of the Russian Empire. The ship took part in the next war with Ottoman Empire, in 1788, in a naval battle near the fortress of Ochakov, captured a Ottoman 64-gun battleship.



Page of the ship's log of the frigate *Saint Nicholas*, which describes the battle of Chesme, in which it took part.



Order of Count Orlov to confer the rank of Lieutenant Commander to the captain of the frigate *Saint Nicholas* Alexander Palikutti.



The Battle of Patras as depicted by the painter Jakob Philipp Hackert. In the center of the picture, between two large ships - the frigate *Saint Nicholas*

## The Battle of Patras 1772

After the Battle of Chesme and the hostilities of 1770-1771, the Ottoman Empire no longer had warships in the Aegean Sea, but they were still in the Sea of Marmara, Adriatic, off the coast of Tunisia. The Ottomans wanted to unite these squadrons into a single fleet and destroy the Russian fleet in the Greek Archipelago.

Count Alexey Orlov, having received information about these plans from intelligence, sent several squadrons of corsairs in different directions of the Archipelago in order to determine the advance of the Ottoman fleets and prevent them from uniting.

Greek corsairs (frigates *Saint Nicholas*, *Slava*, xebec *Zabiyaka*, polaccas *Madon* and *Auza*) found a Ottoman squadron of 9 frigates and 16 xebecs in the Gulf of Patras. To help the Greek sailors, 2 Russian battleships approached (*Chesma* and *Graf Orlov*).

Despite the fact that the Ottomans had an advantage in the number of guns: 630 versus 224, the Ottoman ships were successfully attacked, driven aground and burned. The Ottomans lost 19 ships. Only 6 xebecs survived. On the battleship *Chesma*, 1 officer was killed, 5 sailors were wounded. On the corsair xebec *Zabiyaka* 1 sailor was wounded. The Russian and Greek sailors had no more losses. After the Battle of Patras, until the end of the war, the Ottomans no longer tried to attack Russian and Greek warships in the Mediterranean.



Fragment of the map of the Battle of Patras

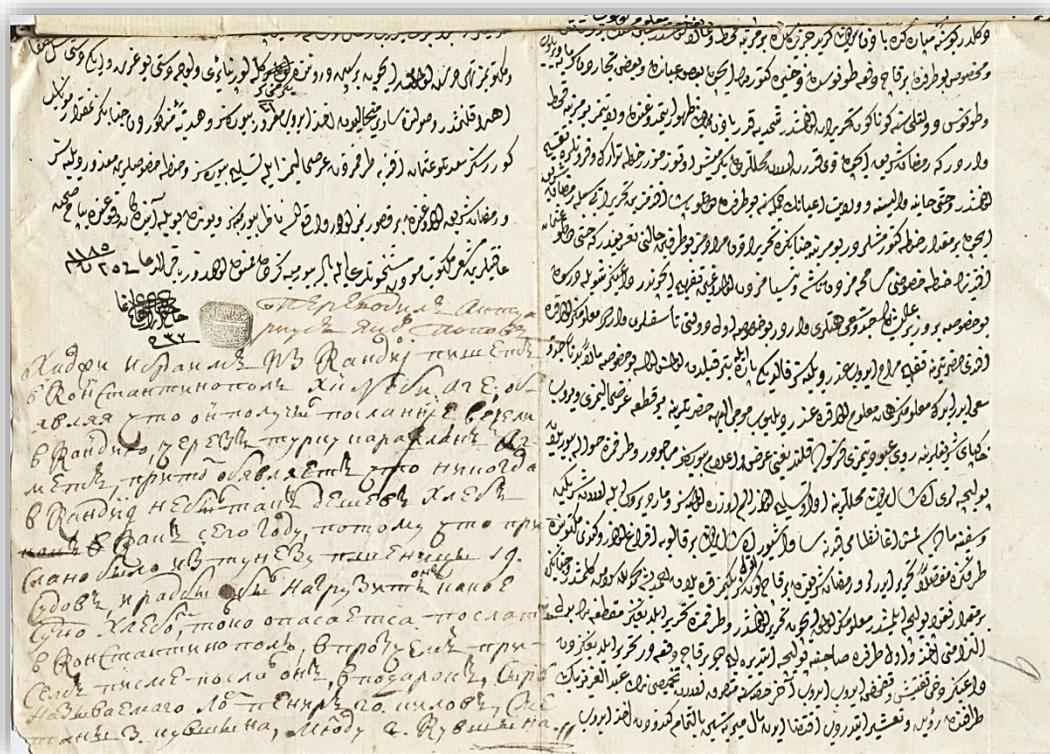
# Raid of Panagioti Alexianos to the Nile Delta, Egypt

Panayiotis Alexianos commanded the Greek corsair frigate *Saint Paul*. In October 1772, along with the feluca of another corsair, Captain Palamides, he broke into the port of Damietta in the Nile Delta, Egypt. Seeing two Ottoman frigates in the harbor, Alexianos directed his ship between them and opened fire from two sides. At this time, Palamidis captured merchant ships standing in the port. After both Ottoman frigates sank, the Greek corsairs left Damietta harbor. Not far from the port, they captured an Ottoman ship with the important Ottoman commander Selim Bey and a large number of Ottoman officers. Several flags were also captured on the ship. Count Orlov was so pleased with this victory that he gave his share of the loot to the corsairs, taking only the Ottoman flags, which he immediately sent to the Empress in St. Petersburg.

At the end of hostilities, Panayiotis, along with his brother Anton, moved to Russia, served in the Russian Navy, and both became admirals.



Panayiotis Alexianos



Letter captured by Alexianos on the Ottoman brigantine  
(in the lower left corner - translation of the text of the letter into Russian language)

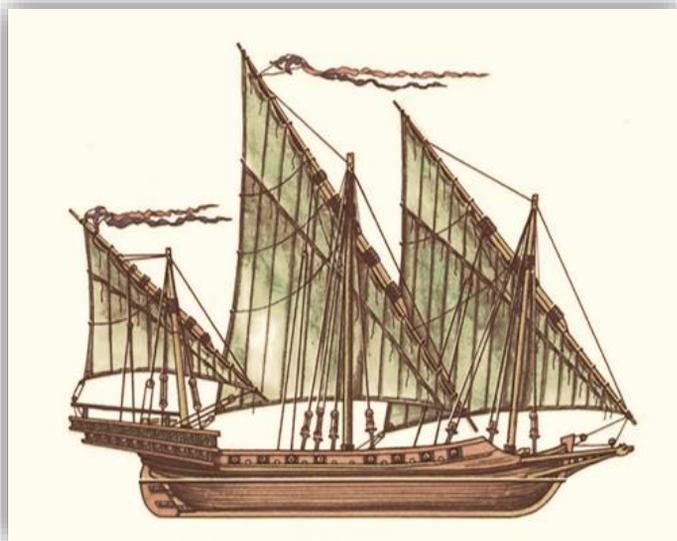
## ***Xebec *Zabiyaka* (Bully)***

Xebec *Zabiyaka* - Greek corsair ship, participated in the Battle of Patras in 1772, the raid on Beirut in 1773 and in numerous corsair operations, the Xebec's crew captured the fortress of Castro Rosso on the Klides islands of the coast of Cyprus, as well as several Ottoman merchant ships.

The model xebec *Zabiyaka*, kept in the Central Museum of the Navy in St. Petersburg - probably the last model of Greek corsair ships that have come down to us since the time of the 1-st Archipelago Expedition. It was created by the outstanding Russian shipbuilder Alexander Katsanov when he was in the port of Naousa on the island of Paros. There he, along with 300 assistants, was engaged in the repair of ships. He made this model as a gift to Empress Catherine II. The model was made on a scale of 1:48 with high detail and compliance with all sizes, so that, in the future, it would be possible to create a real xebec from it.



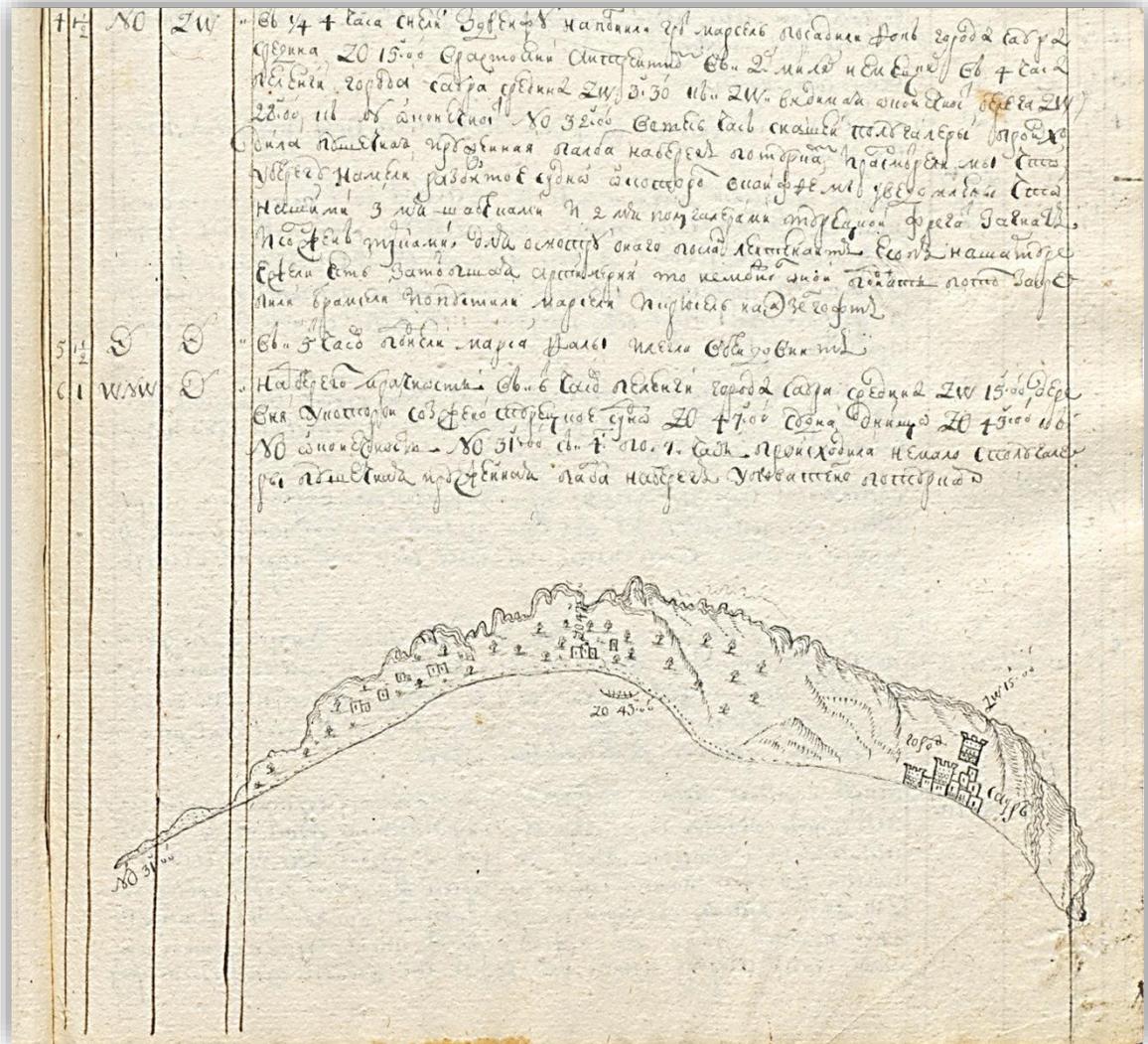
**The model xebec *Zabiyaka***



**Mediterranean xebec - modern reconstruction**

## Xebec Greece

Xebec *Greece* - Greek corsair ship, in 1772, took part in raids off the coast of Egypt and Syria, captured Beirut. The archive has preserved the ship's log of *Greece* with a large number of illustrations, as well as detailed reports on these events by the captain of the xebec, Antonios Psaros (Αντώνιος Ψαρός). After the end of hostilities, Psaros went to Russia, where he continued to serve the Russian Empire as a diplomat. Antonios Psaros rose to the rank of Privy Councilor (a civil rank equal to Lieutenant General).



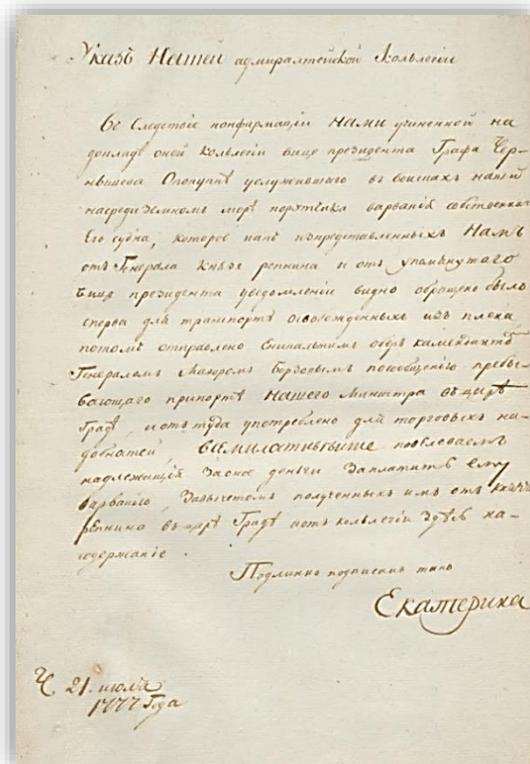
A page of the xebec's ship's log *Greece* for 1772 . The coastline in the area of the city of Tyre of modern Lebanon, during the corsair's raid to the Syrian shores.



# Ioannis Varvakis - the hero of the 1-st Archipelago expeditions 1769-1774 and Greek War of Independence 1821-1829



Ioannis Varvakis



Decree of Empress Catherine II on the  
purchase of his own ship from Varvakis

Ioannis Varvakis was the captain of a pirate ship. When the ships of Count Orlov appeared in the Aegean Archipelago, he went entered Russian service and became a lieutenant of the Russian fleet. At the end of hostilities in 1775, Varvakis moved with his family to Russia. He decided to sell his ship to the Russian Black Sea Fleet, and with the proceeds to buy a small merchant ship and go into business. Organizational issues related to the sale of the brigantine lasted 2 years, until Varvakis was lucky enough to get an audience with Catherine II. The Empress greatly appreciated the Greek pirates. The Varvakis family tradition says that she gave Ioannis 1000 ducats for business development. But archival documents tell an even more interesting story. The Central Archives of the Navy in St. Petersburg contains Catherine's decree on the purchase of the pirate ship Varvakis. The decree was not just signed by Catherine, it was written by her from beginning to end. After that, the ship was immediately bought from Ioannis.

After the sale of the ship, Varvakis went to Astrakhan, where he began to sell fish and black caviar. Having become a millionaire, Varvakis did a lot of charity work.

Varvakis, for example, at his own expense built a canal in Astrakhan, which now bears his name. After moving to Taganrog, he founded the first city hospital and children's shelter there. Varvakis did not forget about Greece either. Ioannis joined the secret society Filiki Eteria (Φιλική Εταιρεία - "society of friends") - an organization of Greeks whose goal was to create an independent Greek state and secretly supplied the Greek fighters for independence with weapons, grain, and money from Taganrog.

And when an uprising began in Greece, Varvakis bought a large consignment of weapons in Tula and transported it to his homelan. He is buried in the center of Athens, where there is a large beautiful marble monument on his grave. A bust of Varvakis was also installed in Astrakhan.



**Bust of Varvakis in Astrakhan (Russia)**



**The canal built by Varvakis in Astrakhan and bearing his name**



**Monument at the grave Varvakis in Athens**

Only a very small part of the Russian archival documents concerning Greek sailors: corsairs, merchants, military men are discussed here. Many documents have not yet been fully studied and are waiting for their researchers.

**The creators of the exposition express their deep gratitude to the Russian State Archives of the Navy in St. Petersburg for the documents provided.**



**Russian State Archives of the Navy in St. Petersburg**

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