



# Double palimpsest: History and myth in the poetry of the Gallipoli campaign

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**Richard Hibbitt and Berkan Ulu**

University of Leeds, UK

## Abstract

The Ottoman defeat of the British and French imperial forces during the Gallipoli campaign of 1915, known in Turkish as the Çanakkale Wars, had already shown how the theatres of war would extend beyond Europe. While much of the poetry in English that came from Gallipoli is well known in the Anglophone world, the Turkish poetry from Çanakkale is less well known outside Turkey itself. This article analyses selected Gallipoli poems written in both languages in order to show how they had similar recourse to overlapping narratives of history and myth in their efforts to place the experience of war within a wider transhistorical and transcultural framework. By reflecting on the different uses of this double palimpsest, it aims to show how a transnational and transcultural approach to memorial culture can develop our understanding of how the Great War was written.

## Keywords

empire, English war poetry, history, memory, myth, religion, Turkish war poetry

Much of the European literature inspired by the First World War reflects on the harrowing experiences of the carnage on the Western Front and its wider repercussions. In particular, the immediacy, accessibility and practicality of poetry as a means of both catharsis and commemoration have resulted in its profound association with the war. As Jane Potter (2012: 20–1) has shown, the poetry from 1914–18 is by definition transnational: the ‘English poetry’ by American, Australian, Canadian, English, Irish, New Zealand, Scottish, Welsh and other poets forms part of a specific canon of world literature, together with poetry written in Arabic, French, German, Russian, Turkish and other languages.<sup>1</sup> Although to Western readers the poetry of the First World War is often synonymous with

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## Corresponding author:

Richard Hibbitt, School of Languages, Cultures and Societies, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK.

Email: [r.hibbitt@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:r.hibbitt@leeds.ac.uk)

the fields and trenches of Flanders, this vast body of work also encompasses different theatres of the conflict, such as the Eastern Front, the Dardanelles, East Africa, Mesopotamia and Palestine. This article takes as its subject matter selected poems written in English and Turkish about the Gallipoli campaign of 1915–16, known in Turkish as the Çanakkale Wars. Its focus is on the poets' recourse to both history and myth as models through which the Great War could be represented and located in a transhistorical context. Poets on both sides drew on various historical narratives as well as the allegorical potential of myth, which is durably adaptable to different geopolitical configurations. A different yet similar operation of referentiality is at play here: beyond their initial dichotomous status as 'fact' and 'fiction', history and myth share the function of recounting and trying to make sense of human behaviour. Moreover, analogous to the merged referentiality to real and fictional places discussed in recent works of geocriticism, history and myth overlap as narratives of the past with symbolic potential for both writing and remembering the First World War.<sup>2</sup>

The Treaty of Versailles in 1919 led to territorial changes not only in central Europe but also across the globe, as the sovereignty of former German colonies and concessions in Africa, Asia and the Pacific was transferred to different Allied powers. It also contributed to the wider onset of decolonization, exemplified by the fact that the British Dominions of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa signed the treaty separately, as did the British colony of India, all becoming founding members of the League of Nations in their own right. In the case of the Ottoman Empire, which was formally dissolved in 1922, the defeat in World War I accelerated a process of collapse which had started with successive wars against their neighbours in the preceding decades. Ryan Gingeras (2017) has shown how Ottoman rule ended without the consent of most Balkan, North African, Levantine or Mesopotamian citizens, as the post-Ottoman borders were established in the wake of foreign conquest. In this respect the process of 'de-ottomanization' was to a large extent not a form of decolonization, because nationalism and popular agency played a lesser role in the removal of lands from the Sultan's domain. The signing of the Armistice of Mudros in October 1918 and the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 led to the partitioning of the empire and the ceding of most non-Turkish territory to the Allied powers, including the creation of the British Mandate for Palestine and the French Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon. It also led to a rise in Turkish nationalism, culminating in the Treaty of Lausanne and the birth of the Turkish Republic in 1923. The aftermath of the war is specifically important with regard to the role that the Çanakkale Wars played in the creation narrative of modern Turkey; in retrospect it can be recast as an early Turkish victory, rather than a late Ottoman one. Günay Uslu (2017: 28) has argued that 'the landscape of the Dardanelles is one of the most important *lieux de mémoire* for modern Turks'. It will be shown below that the poetry on both sides of the conflict drew on a variety of overlapping sources, in order to imbue this locus with a significance that both reinforced and questioned narratives of national self-determination.

The main historical antecedents for the Gallipoli campaign were the religious wars between Christians and Muslims that lasted intermittently between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries, known as the Crusades or the wars of the Cross (*al-hurub al Salabiyya*). In 1354 the Byzantine fort and surrounding peninsula at Gallipoli had been captured by the Ottoman Turks; the strategic importance of the Dardanelles straits for access between

the Balkans and the Black Sea remained crucial at the start of the twentieth century. The topos of the Crusades informed perception of the current conflict for soldiers on both sides. In his memoir of the war, Norman Woodcock, a young soldier from Leeds, wrote: 'We conjured up some vivid images of what it would be like to land on a foreign shore and fight the Turks on the way to Constantinople – we had all read adventure stories and seen pictures of the Orient in books' (Woodcock and Burnett, 2014: 48). Many of the Turkish poets writing about Gallipoli alluded to the Crusades, emphasizing the fact that the soldiers were defending not only the Ottoman Empire but also Islam itself; from the Ottoman perspective, the attack in the First World War was yet one more conflict after several centuries of fighting against their neighbours, including the Crimean War and the more recent Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913.<sup>3</sup>

Poets on both sides found further analogies with ancient Greek mythology, particularly Homer's *Iliad* and Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica*, the story of Jason and the Argonauts. *The Iliad* recounts an earlier amphibious operation between the Achaeans – as Homer calls the Greeks – and the Trojans in the same area; the ruins of the ancient city of Troy, located on the Asiatic side of the Dardanelles at Hisarlik in the province of Çanakkale, are less than ten miles south of the Gallipoli battlefields. Noting that the victors of this encounter were the seafaring Achaeans, some Allied soldiers likened themselves to the Greek heroes of antiquity, who undertook a similar journey into the eastern Mediterranean. On the Turkish side, the victory at Gallipoli could be used to avenge the narrative of *The Iliad* and to recast the Çanakkale Wars as a victory over Greece.<sup>4</sup> An early twentieth-century conflict between three competing empires (British and French against Ottoman) could therefore be construed as a variation on both the Crusades and classical mythology. This essay will discuss examples from both sides of the conflict before considering the wider implications of this recourse to history and myth as ways of writing about the First World War.<sup>5</sup>

I

For many Allied soldiers, the location of Gallipoli invited comparisons with the Hellespont and the Trojan War before the campaign had even begun. *The Iliad* recounts the story of how the Achaeans defeated the Trojans despite heavy losses on the battlefield and the threat of having their ships burned. This myth provided an appealing model; the subplot involving the argument between the Achaeans' leader, Agamemnon, and their greatest warrior, Achilles, also lent itself to analogies between the commanders and the soldiers. By chance the names of the ships that constituted the first line of the Allied fleet to enter the straits on 18 March – *Queen Elizabeth*, *Agamemnon*, *Lord Nelson* and *Inflexible*, guarded by *Prince George* and *Triumph* – display not only how classical references were part of Allied military nomenclature, but also how figures of history and myth are juxtaposed with appropriate adjectives and nouns in the all-purpose lexicon of valour and leadership (Macleod, 2015: 21). One of the most renowned examples of this anticipation comes in a letter written in February 1915 by Rupert Brooke (1968: 662–3) to his friend Violet Asquith, daughter of Herbert Henry Asquith, the Prime Minister, upon learning of his imminent departure for the Dardanelles.<sup>6</sup> Brooke's enthusiastic sense of anticipation is rendered more poignant by the fact that he was never to fight at

Gallipoli, dying on a French hospital ship on 23 April 1915, two days before the landings, from sepsis caused by an infected mosquito bite. The allusions in his letter both to Ancient Greek (seen in the use of the Homeric adjective ‘polyphloisbic’, meaning loud, roaring or boisterous) and to the Crusades epitomize the double palimpsest for the campaign.

In *Stand in the Trench, Achilles! Classical Receptions in the British Poetry of the Great War*, Elizabeth Vandiver analyses the receptions of both Greek and Roman classical tropes, showing that they were used by soldiers from all educational backgrounds.<sup>7</sup> Vandiver (2010: 232) argues that the narrative of the Trojan War was initially used to ennoble the experience of the Great War and to encourage recruitment: ‘in poems that claim direct connection with Troy, the Homeric paradigm is most frequently used to deny – or perhaps it would be better to say, to transcend – the realities of battle’.<sup>8</sup> This paradigm could also be adapted to different contexts. For example, in poems about the Western Front, Belgium represents the besieged city of Troy, with the British troops representing the Greeks coming to liberate the Belgians from German occupation. In poems about Gallipoli, classical references are often employed to add a mythical dimension to descriptions of the surroundings. They frequently mention the Gulf of Saros, north of the Gallipoli peninsula, and the islands of Imbros, Lemnos and Samothrace. Despite Greece’s neutrality during the first years of the war, Imbros and Lemnos became bases for the Allied troops, used for landing practice and respite during periods of leave. The soldiers were aware of the mythological connotations, as shown by the reference to the ‘Trojan Shore’ in the second stanza of A. P. Herbert’s ‘The bathe’, which celebrates the solace of swimming in the sea during a break from the fighting (Herbert, 1916: 20).<sup>9</sup> Lemnos was also the first destination of Jason and the Argonauts in their quest for the Golden Fleece, which constitutes the intertext for John Hargrave’s poem ‘Lemnos harbour’. Instead of looking back to the past, this juxtaposition of the classical myth with contemporary history is seen from the perspective of the Argonauts themselves, fellow sailors who could scarcely imagine the developments in ship design, as shown by the first of the two stanzas:

Within the outer anchorage  
The ancient Argonauts lay to;  
Little they dreamt – that dauntless crew  
That here to-day in the sheltered bay  
Where the seas are still and blue,  
Great battle-ships should froth and hum,  
And mighty transport-vessels come  
Serenely floating through. (Hargrave, 1916: 49)

A different reference to the myth of Jason is found in the Australian poet Leon Gellert’s ‘The riddle of the Sphinx’, written in Egypt in December 1914 as the Anzac troops prepared for war. Here Gellert uses the inscrutability of the Egyptian sphinx to represent the uncertainty of the soldiers’ future. The ‘teeth of Jason’ in the final stanza refer to the dragon’s teeth sown by Jason in a field at Cochis, which sprouted and grew into warriors (*Spartoi*); taking Medea’s advice, Jason throws a stone into their midst so that they kill each other rather than attacking him. In Gellert’s poem the warriors are not enemy

soldiers, but refer possibly to the Allied troops themselves, or perhaps to the combatants on both sides: what will be their common fate?

Oh answer me, thou silent gazing face,  
 All-gifted with the wisdom of the years,  
 These teeth of Jason, – will they bring thee grace,  
 Or bring thee tears? (Gellert, 1917: 25)

One of the most striking Gallipoli poems is by Clement Attlee, future leader of the Labour Party and Prime Minister from 1945 to 1951, who saw active service there as an officer in the 6th South Lancashire Regiment. Attlee wrote poetry throughout his life, including ‘Lemnos 1915’, a sonnet in iambic pentameter with an unexpected volta. The octet introduces the traveller’s long-held desire to visit the landscape of *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, combining characters from both texts. The first line of the sestet, ‘Happy the traveller whose eye may range’, alludes to the well-known opening line of Sonnet 31 of Joachim du Bellay’s *Les Regrets*: ‘Heureux qui comme Ulysse a fait un beau voyage’ (‘Happy the person who like Ulysses has gone on a beautiful journey’). Attlee’s sonnet emulates the ironic contrast with the traveller who regrets having made a journey; despite the beauty of the landscape and the richness of its classical heritage, the speaker longs to exchange the thyme-scented hills of the Aegean islands for the smell of fried fish in the East End of London. The poignancy of this poem derives from the implicit critique of the war: devoid of any description of fighting or reference to the enemy, the title alone gives the poem its historical context. Consequently, the apparently bathetic ending – the unexpected rhyme of ‘Helles strait’ with ‘Mile End Gate’ – takes on a more profound significance in its genuine expression of the soldier’s homesick longing for peace:

Many a time I’ve longed these ways to go,  
 To wander where each little rugged isle  
 Lifts from the blue Aegean’s sparkling smile  
 Its golden rocks or peaks of silent snow.  
 The land of magic tales of long ago,  
 Ulysses’ wandering and Circe’s wile,  
 Achilles and his armour, Helen’s smile,  
 Dear won delight that set tall Troy aglow.

Happy the traveller whose eye may range  
 O’er Lemnos, Samothrace and Helles’ strait,  
 Who smells the sweet thyme-scented breezes . . . Nay!  
 How willingly all these would I exchange  
 To see the buses throng by Mile End Gate  
 And smell the fried fish shops down Limehouse way. (Attlee, 1991: 33)

In other poems the classical references are used to reflect on exile and death. On 27 August 1915, an anonymous poem entitled ‘Outward bound’ was published in *The Times*.<sup>10</sup> It was written by Nowell Oxland, whose death notice was published in the same newspaper just three days afterwards (Anon., 1915: 5). Oxland had taken part in the

landings at Suvla Bay on 6 August and was killed in action three days later. ‘Outward bound’, written in eight stanzas of ottava rima, reflects on the poet leaving behind his native Cumberland for an uncertain future. The final two stanzas, quoted below, allude to Tyndareus, King of Sparta, who had hosted Agamemnon and Menelaus during their exile as children and had earlier been sent into exile by his own brother. The poem’s final line – ‘We shall go not forth again’ – may be an allusion to H. G. Wells’ book *The War That Will End War*, published in 1914; it may also be read as a prediction of the inevitable loss of life faced by the soldiers, including the writer’s own death:

Though the high Gods smith and slay us,  
 Though we come not whence we go,  
 As the host of Menelaus  
 Came there many years ago;  
 Yet the self-same wind shall bear us  
 From the same departing place  
 Out across the Gulf of Saros  
 And the peaks of Samothrace;

We shall pass in summer weather,  
 We shall come at eventide,  
 When the fells stand up together  
 And all quiet things abide;  
 Mixed with cloud and wind and river,  
 Sun-distilled in dew and rain,  
 One with Cumberland for ever  
 We shall go not forth again. (Oxland, 1917: 334)<sup>11</sup>

The most developed use of classical intertexts in the poetry of Gallipoli occurs in Patrick Shaw-Stewart’s untitled poem known as ‘I saw a man this morning’, written in July 1915. A former Oxford classics scholar, Shaw-Stewart went to Gallipoli with the Hood Battalion (Royal Naval Division), the same company as Rupert Brooke.<sup>12</sup> The poem was composed on Imbros while Shaw-Stewart was on leave and written in the back of his copy of A. E. Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad*. The addressee of the first line may be a fellow soldier, the speaker’s own reflection, or both. The opening stanzas play on the ambiguity of the word ‘shell’, before invoking *The Iliad* in order to question the purpose of the soldiers’ presence:

I saw a man this morning  
 Who did not wish to die  
 I ask, and cannot answer,  
 If otherwise wish I.

Fair broke the day this morning  
 Against the Dardanelles;  
 The breeze blew soft, the morn’s cheeks  
 Were cold as cold sea-shells.

But other shells are waiting  
 Across the Aegean sea,  
 Shrapnel and high explosive,  
 Shells and hells for me.

O hell of ships and cities,  
 Hell of men like me,  
 Fatal second Helen,  
 Why must I follow thee?

Achilles came to Troyland  
 And I to Chersonese:  
 He turned from wrath to battle,  
 And I from three days' peace.

Was it so hard, Achilles,  
 So very hard to die?  
 Thou knewest and I know not –  
 So much the happier I.

I will go back this morning  
 From Imbros over the sea;  
 Stand in the trench, Achilles,  
 Flame-capped, and shout for me. (Shaw-Stewart, 1986: 59–60)

Shaw-Stewart refers here to the Thracian Chersonese, an ancient Greek name for the Gallipoli peninsula. The striking effect of the short iambic metre, alternating heptasyllabic and hexasyllabic lines with an occasional pentasyllable, is to accentuate the immediacy of the address to Achilles across the centuries. The two questions asked in the poem evoke the uncertainty regarding the soldiers' presence: why are they at war and what will become of them? The invocation to Achilles, a petition for help, has less to do with valour and more to do with knowledge; in other words, to give them the strength to continue rather than to defeat the enemy.<sup>13</sup> As Elizabeth Vandiver (2010: 277) concludes, Shaw-Stewart 'rejects the easy comfort of poems that suggest a parity between Homeric hero and modern fighter'. The comparison with myth is used here as a means to suggest the possible futility of the campaign: 'the fatal second Helen' that has taken the soldiers to fight at Gallipoli is not the abduction that led to the Trojan War, but the consequences of geopolitical machinations that seem far removed from the initial causes of the First World War.

The poems discussed above should give a sense of some of the different ways in which poets writing in English drew on both history and myth in order to make sense of their experiences at Gallipoli and connect them to wider questions concerning the effects of war on the human condition. From an aesthetic point of view, the 'quality' of the Gallipoli poems is of course uneven; not every poet knew about different techniques and traditions, and much war poetry is characterized by hackneyed imagery and metres bordering on doggerel. It is also striking how many poems make use of 'high diction' in their lexical choices, employing archaic spellings and syntactical constructions in order to

accentuate this appeal to the double palimpsest of the past. These criticisms notwithstanding, the poems' cultural value lies in the soldiers' first-hand responses to the conflict; in order to express their reactions, they drew on poetic and lexical traditions in the same way as they drew on history and myth. Although women were present at Gallipoli, mainly as part of the medical corps, these poems also reveal the extent to which war poetry is a masculine affair with an essentialist view of gender; the references above to Circe and Helen show how these two mythical women are associated with sorcery and fatal beauty, both of which are said to lead men astray. There is no sense here of any positive female presence, not even through a familiar personification of the homeland as female. We will now turn to some of the Turkish poems in the light of this appraisal.

## II

There are fewer extant poems in Turkish from the Çanakkale Wars.<sup>14</sup> The majority of these poems were written not by combatants, many of whom were illiterate, but by professional observers. In June 1916 the Ottoman government sent a delegation of poets, artists and film makers to the peninsula in order to record the events and provide patriotic materials to reinforce the war effort. In broad terms, we can perhaps see the Turkish poems as 'top down' in comparison to the 'bottom up' ones written by the Allied soldiers. As a result, the experiences of the Ottoman soldiers of all ethnicities are mediated through a different set of experiential, cultural and linguistic codes. This practice can also be read from a postcolonial perspective, because the collective experiences of heterogeneous groups are constructed through the official language of the imperial power. As we shall see, many of the poems emphasize the heroic valour of the Ottoman soldiers, rooted in a tradition of war writing with the purpose of 'memorializing great military deeds as part of the history of the people' (Brosman, 1992: 86). To some extent these poems can be seen as propaganda; for our purposes, it is also interesting to see how the official Ottoman poetry employs variations on the same tropes found in the lay poetry written by Allied soldiers.

The recurrent religious imagery in the Turkish poetry constructs the narrative that the soldiers were defending not only the Ottoman Empire but also Islam itself. This is immediately apparent in the short ten-line poem written in 1916 by Sultan Mehmet Reşad V himself: 'Manzûme-i Hümâyûn (Çanakkale Gazeli)', which translates as 'Poem from His Royal Highness (Ode to Gallipoli)'.<sup>15</sup> Reşad (1844–1918), penultimate Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, ruled under the shadow of the nationalist government led by Enver Pasha, often referred to as *Jön Türkler* (Young Turks). Like all examples of *Dîvan* literature, the literary tradition of the court, Reşad's ode is written in Ottoman Turkish, a language heavily influenced by Persian and Arabic (Doğan and Tıǧlı, 2005: 45). The Sultan's poem, written for maximum rhetorical effect in five separate couplets, reinforces the official view of the Ottoman perspective on the campaign, emphasizing the valiant character of the soldiers. With reference to his title as the commander of all Muslims, the Sultan alludes to Constantinople, not Mecca, as 'the heart of Islam', an idea shared by many nationalist Ottoman Turks at the time. The lack of references to the Turks themselves acknowledges the presence of the other ethnic groups fighting on the Ottoman side, including Arabs, Armenians, Greeks, Jews and Kurds, among others.<sup>16</sup>

The final image of the Sultan prostrating himself is an act of humbleness; he subjects himself to no other power than God, which can be read as both an allusion to the Crusades and a message to the Allied forces that the Ottomans will not yield to the pressure of the West:

Savlet etmişdi Çanakkal'aya bahr ü berden  
Ehl-i İslâmın iki hasm-ı kavîsi birden

Lâkin imdâd-ı ilâhî yetişip ordumuza  
Oldu her bir neferi kal'a-i pûlâd-beden

Asker evlâdlarımın pîşgeh-i azminde  
Aczini eyledi idrâk nihâyet düşmen

Kadr ü haysiyyeti pâmâl olarak etdi firâr  
Kalb-i İslâma nüfûz etmeğe gelmiş-iken

Kapanıp secde-i şükrâna Reşâd eyle duâ  
Mülk-i İslâmı Hudâ eyleye dâim me'men. (Reşad, 1916: 1)

The two mighty enemies of Islam together  
Have assaulted Gallipoli from land and sea.

Yet the divine help rallied in aid of our army  
And each of our men turned into a castle of steel.

At length, the enemies realized their impotency  
Before our resolute soldier sons

And fled with broken honour and dignity  
While they hoped to capture the heart of Islam.

Now, Reşad, prostrate yourself in gratitude,  
May God thus grant peace for all lands of Islam.

The formal court poetry represented by Sultan Mehmet Reşad's ode is contrasted with some of the poems that focus on the fighting itself, albeit from a safer distance. Born in 1871, Ahmet Nedim was one of several poets who were too old to enlist, but who wrote poems in order to maintain public morale. Inspired by newspaper reports, his long narrative poem 'Salat', written in November 1915, recounts over 98 lines the story of a man who encounters a soldier performing the eponymous daily Muslim prayer on the battlefield. Nedim's poem places the anecdote in a religious and geopolitical context: one of the two enemies of Islam is named, the bomb-throwing English or so-called 'civilized' British, represented here by General Ian Hamilton, Commander of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force at Gallipoli, and Sir Edward Grey, Foreign Secretary from 1905 to 1916. The poem reinforces the view that the soldiers' faith in Allah will protect them:

İngiliz'in vakit vakit gemilerden, siperlerden . . .  
 Yine bolca gülle, bomba savurduğu bir gündü.  
 Hızlı hızlı geçiyordum, tehlikeli bir yerden.  
 Birden bire gözlerime büyük bir şey göründü.

Böyle büyük görünen şey küçük bir insandı,  
 Fakat bana çok dokundu ayaklarım bağlandı.

Ateşlerin yaladığı bir düzlükten geçerken  
 Güllelerin cehennemlik yağmurundan kaçarken  
 Yolun biraz kenarında tek başına bir nefer,  
 Pervasızca bombalardan, ateşlerden, her şeyden

Kendisine, süngüsünden bir mihrapçık kurmuştu.  
 Sonra onun karşısında namaza durmuştu.

Ne havada ıslık çalan ve düştüğü yerlere  
 Kızgın çelik dahmelerle ölüm saçan güller  
 Ne, semada ifrit gibi, vızıldayan teyyare . . .  
 Ne dünyalık bir düşünce, ne bir korku, ne keder.

Onun demir yüreğini oynatmaktan âcizdi,  
 Sanki toplar, şarapneller tehlikesiz, sessizdi!

Potinleri yanındaydı, onun büyük saygısı  
 Kunduralı ibadeti görmüyordu muvâfik.  
 Böyle temiz bir yüreğin bütün işi, kaygısı,  
 Elbet Hak'kın rızasına olmalıydı mutâbık.

. . .

Ey medeni İngilizler! Daha varsa getirin  
 İnsanları, küme küme öldürecek şeyleri . . .  
 Getirin de şu cenneti cehenneme çevirin.  
 Bak onlar korkutur mu bir Müslüman neferi?

Bunu hâlâ anlamıyor ne Hamilton ne Gray  
 Müslüman'ı korkutamaz Allah'ından başka bir şey. (Nedim, 2009: 48–52)

It was one of those days when the English at intervals  
 Were richly hurling their bombs away.  
 My eyes caught the sight of something monumental  
 As I trotted through unsafe ways in dismay.

The regal sight was that of a layman so plain  
 Yet, I got struck, I felt my feet were chained.

Going through a bare opening washed by flames,  
 Running away from the hellish rain of cannonballs,

On the side of the road, on these great plains,  
A soldier there was answering the prayer calls.

Carefree amid all the bombs and bullets at his *salat*  
With his bayonet as his *mihrab* praying to Allah.<sup>17</sup>

His boots were next to him, his great reverence  
Regarded *salat* with boots an offence.  
All that troubled this pure heart so clean  
Was to get God's blessing and tolerance.

...

O, the civilized British, come what may,  
Everything that can kill man in clusters,  
And turn this paradise to hell, and pray,  
You really think that they will scare the Muslim soldiers?

Hamilton, or Grey, by now they should have known.  
Nothing terrifies Muslims but God, and God alone.

Other poems place this faith in Islam in a historical context. Celal Sahir Erozan was a renowned poet and part of the literary delegation that visited the battlefields (Yilmaz, 2010: 1634–5). Published soon afterwards, 'Ordunun Duası' ('Prayer of the army') is an invocation to God that alludes in its central stanza to the past greatness of the Ottoman Empire. The term *Turan*, originally a Persian word meaning 'the homeland of Turks', refers to the ideal of uniting people of Turkic origin across the world under one Turkish banner. Still adopted today by certain political parties, the idea was devotedly supported by many throughout the Great War, including Enver Pasha himself. It was common practice for the defenders of *Turan* to assume that such idealism could unite all Turks against the oppression of the West, with particular reference to the Turkic populations of today's Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Kirghizstan, Georgia, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. By personifying *Turan* as a woman yearning for her *khan*, Erozan is alluding to the rulers of the Golden Horde, the great Central Asian state originating in the thirteenth century. Mount Kut (*Kut Dağı*), the name of a legendary mountain in Turkic mythology, also serves here as symbol of a glorious past:

Ulu Tanrı'm, ay yıldızlı al bayrağın  
Gölgesi hiç üstümüzden eksilmesin;  
Düşmanların göz diktiği bu toprağın  
Ana kalbi bizim için vursun; âmîn.

Ulu Tanrı'm, esir olan güzel Tûran  
Daha kaç yıl hâkânına hasret çeksin?  
Sen nasib et, altın ordu, elde Kur'an,  
Otağımı Kut Dağı'nda kursun; âmîn.

Ulu Tanrı'm, bak önünde dize geldik,  
 Vatan için can vermeğe ettik yemin;  
 Biz vaktiyle üç dünyayı sarsan eldik,  
 Kolumuzda o güç yine dursun; âmîn. (Erozan, 1915: 185–6)

O, Lord Almighty, may the shadow of the red flag  
 Of the star and crescent never wane above us,  
 May the heart of this land that our enemies covet  
 Beat for us only, Amen.

O, Lord Almighty, how many more years  
 Should this beautiful enslaved *Turan* yearn for her *khan*?  
 Please grant the army made of gold, holding the Quran,  
 Set its pavilion on Mount Kut, Amen.

O, Lord Almighty, here we kneel before you  
 And take vows to wreak vengeance from those men.  
 Once we were the hand that shook three continents,  
 May you grant the same strength, Lord, Amen.

Erozan's poem thus demonstrates how it is possible in a few lines to interweave elements of religion, history and myth in its patriotic appeal to Allah for protection. This reference to three different narratives also constitutes a variation on the essentialist view of gender: the mythical motherland of *Turan* is represented by woman yearning for a man, who will both protect her and deliver her from imminent threat. If both Circe and Helen represent powerful temptation and distraction in some of the English poems, this unnamed female presence in 'Ordunun Duası' is subservient and more desirable: here the union between female and male is seen as a symbol of freedom and the restoration of past imperial glory.

One of the most striking historical references in the Turkish poetry comes at the end of Mehmet Akif Ersoy's long narrative poem 'Çanakkale Şehitlerine' ('To the Martyrs of Gallipoli'), the best-known Turkish poem dedicated to the campaign.<sup>18</sup> At the time of the first Allied naval attack on 18 March 1915, Ersoy was on the Arabian Peninsula on a mission for *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa*, the Ottoman Secret Service. Upon reading a newspaper report illustrated by a photograph, he is said to have secluded himself from his companions before returning with the first draft of the poem (Düzdağ, 1988: 270–5). In 'Çanakkale Şehitlerine' description of the combatants and the fighting is followed by references to Saladin (1137–93), who captured Jerusalem and repelled the Third Crusade, and Kilij Arslan (1079–1107), who won three battles during the Crusade of 1101.<sup>19</sup> The direct address to the Ottoman martyrs of Gallipoli as vanquishers of the Crusaders places them in a historical lineage of noble defenders of Islam where, like the appeals to myth in the Allied poems, past and present merge into a single temporality. An analogy can be made with the similar referential technique used in the naming of Allied ships as *Queen Elizabeth*, *Agamemnon* and *Lord Nelson*; Ersoy refers to Saladin, Kilij Arslan and the Prophet Muhammad, placing the emphasis on history and religion rather than a combination of history and myth:

Sen ki, son ehl-i salibin kırarak salvetini,  
Şarkın en sevgili sultânı Salâhaddin'i,

Kılıç Arslan gibi iclâline ettin hayran . . .  
Sen ki, İslâm'ı kuşatmış, boğuyorken hüsrân,

O demir çenberi göğsünde kırıp parçaladın;  
Sen ki, ruhunla beraber gezer ecrâmı adın;

Sen ki, a'sâra gömülse taşacaksın . . . Heyhât!  
Sana gelmez bu ufuklar, seni almaz bu cihât . . .

Ey şehid oğlu şehid, isteme benden makber,  
Sana âğuşunu açmış duruyor Peygamber. (Ersoy, 2007: 9–11)

You, who broke the last blow of the Crusaders,  
Made the most loved Sultan of the easterners,

Saladin, and Kilij Arslan alike, proud,  
You, who broke the circle of steel on your chest unbowed,

The circle around Islam strangling her in despair,  
And you, whose name haunts and lives in every lair.

You would burst out of centuries if they could bury you in years  
Alas, you can't be confined to skies, nor to this war in tears.

O, son of martyrs, don't look up to me for lament or elegies,  
There stands the Prophet with arms wide open in peace.

Our final Turkish example is Halit Fahri Ozansoy's poem 'Çanakkale', which recasts the Turkish victory at Gallipoli as a victory over Greece. Ozansoy (1891–1971) was one of the crucial figures involved in the creation of a national Turkish, rather than Ottoman, literature in the early years of the Turkish Republic. Although he did not visit Gallipoli as part of the delegation, he responded to the victory through poems and newspaper articles between 1916 and 1917. 'Çanakkale' is a less traditional poem than the others discussed here, both in terms of its predominantly secular imagery and its form. The opening distich can be read as a reference to the Ottoman victory over the Byzantine Greeks in 1354, while also referring to further Ottoman victories over the intervening 600 years. The remainder of the poem, written in rhymed couplets with varying meters, casts doubt upon the veracity of the classical myth. Ozansoy distinguishes here between the glory of verifiable history and the unreliability of legend and myth, dismissing Homer's *Iliad* as 'a lie'. But in an interesting rhetorical gambit he then refers to the myth, in order to proclaim Gallipoli a victory of the Turks over ancient Greece and Achilles himself: a historical revenge for a mythical battle that took place not just six centuries earlier, but more than two millennia:

Çanakkale . . . Tarihlerin en yıkılmaz âbidesi;  
Uğulduyor etrâfında altı asrın zâfer sesi . . .

Her ne kadar yaşasa da efsâaneler bugün de,  
“Truva”nın esâtiri harâbesi üstünde  
Çanakkale zaferi bir masal değil, bir hakikat . . .  
Omirus’un destanı şimdi sakat  
Bir heykele  
Benziyor ki asırlarca elden ele  
Gezdi, çoktan hırpalandı.  
“İlyada”nın naklettiği hakikat de bir yalandı . . .  
Hurâfeler karanlığa karışın!  
İşte bugün aynı sahil, aynı toprak sarışın  
Bir hilâlin şâhid oldu hakiki bir zaferine.  
Aşiller’in yosun tutmuş miğferine  
Bundan böyle ışık vermez şeb-çerağlar  
Türk ebedi bir şerefle yaşar, kadim Yunan ağlar . . . (Ozansoy, 1917: 13)

Gallipoli . . . the indestructible monument of history;  
All around you roars the six-century victory.

Though legends still linger today  
Over the ruins of the myth of Troy  
The Gallipoli mastery is not a legend but real  
And Homer’s epic for centuries it grew  
To turn to a broken,  
Tormented statue  
That had changed hands in centuries, battered.  
The story of the *Iliad* was also a lie,  
Illusions of old! Into the dark! Away!  
As the same shores, the same golden land  
Witness the true victory of the crescent today.  
Now over Achilles’ mossy helmet  
The candle of the night never shines;  
The Turk lives in eternal glory while ancient Greece cries.

Ozansoy’s idiosyncratic take on the geopolitical stakes of the First World War adds a further dimension to the nexus of history and myth. By ignoring any references to the Allies, the Crusades or Islam (bar the reference to the ‘true victory of the crescent’ in line 12), Ozansoy places Gallipoli in a longer historical context that reframes it not only as revenge for the mythical conflict between the Achaeans and the Trojans, but implicitly as revenge for the Greek War of Independence from the Ottoman Empire between 1821 and 1832, during which Britain, France and Russia had supported the Greeks. There is also an intriguing aporia in Ozansoy’s argument: having dismissed myth as a lie, he then uses it immediately to reinforce the victory of modern Turkey over ancient Greece. We might surmise that the narratives of history and religion are not enough; in order to emphasize the victory at Gallipoli, Ozansoy employs the classical myth to revise our view of the

Achaean's triumph over the Trojans. The same Achilles invoked by Patrick Shaw-Stewart in his appeal for help is now benighted: left in darkness, but still not forgotten.

## Conclusion

This poem confronts, with unflinching clarity, many issues that we had rather forget altogether: the failures of leadership, the destructive power of beauty, the brutalizing impact of war, and – above all – our ultimate fate of death. (Graziosi, 2012: vii)

Barbara Graziosi's appraisal of *The Iliad* in her introduction to the recent Oxford University Press translation could also be applied to the Gallipoli campaign itself. Such metanarrative reflection is similarly evident in the poems discussed above that draw on the overlapping narratives of history and myth. Our analysis has shown that if references to myth are more prevalent in the English poems, references to history – especially the history of the Crusades – are more prevalent in the Turkish ones. Two related reasons might be given for this: the state-sponsored appeal to a glorious victorious past for the war-weary Ottoman forces; and the role played by Islam as a means by which to rally the troops. But these distinct approaches share an appeal to symbolism based on combined narratives. It is here where we propose a potentially controversial hypothesis. Although the tenets of Islam in the poems above are considered part of a historical narrative, all three major Abrahamic religions – Christianity, Islam and Judaism – fuse elements of history and myth in their sacred texts. Moreover, the founding myths of religions become themselves elements of history; tradition is indisputably a fusion of history and myth. In terms of the aftermath of the First World War, the disillusionment at the senseless loss of life evinced by much English war poetry may not have a Turkish equivalent beyond the desire for peace, but the adoption of a revised secular constitution in 1928 by the Republic of Turkey suggests that one common consequence of the Great War was a questioning of the role that religion played in settling questions of national and international politics.

The legacy of the Gallipoli campaign is particularly significant in Australia and Turkey, where the respective annual commemorations of the campaign have become part of both countries' national identity; Jenny Macleod (2015: 3) describes the events at Gallipoli as 'the basis of a foundational myth for Australia, known as the Anzac legend'.<sup>20</sup> The Turco-Australian bond forged out of Gallipoli demonstrates how the double palimpsest of history and myth continues to evolve as identity and memory are shaped over time.<sup>21</sup> What emerges out of this friendship, like the symbolism of the famous unofficial Christmas truce on the Western Front in 1914, relates to the importance of writing and remembering the First World War for its recent centenary and beyond. Although the 'war that will end war' did not achieve its objective, a shared memory based on both history and myth, including poetry, cinema and other art forms, may help us to remember the old lie: *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*.

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Council) Gateways to the First World War Public Engagement Centre: [ahc.leeds.ac.uk/languages-research-innovation/dir-record/research-projects/981/unheard-voices-the-poetry-of-the-gallipoli-campaign](http://ahc.leeds.ac.uk/languages-research-innovation/dir-record/research-projects/981/unheard-voices-the-poetry-of-the-gallipoli-campaign).

## Notes

- 1 See also Marsland (1991). An online anthology of WWI poetry in different languages is available at: [www.loyalbooks.com/book/ww1-poetry](http://www.loyalbooks.com/book/ww1-poetry); it also contains poems in Dutch, Portuguese and Russian.
- 2 Our research draws on a number of historical studies of the Gallipoli campaign, in particular Macleod (2015) and Prior (2010).
- 3 For some Turkish commentators, the Gallipoli campaign was construed as a continuation of the Crusades. See Alp (2006). This is a transcription of the original *Yeni Mecmua Çanakkale Nüsha-i Fevkaladesi*, published in May 1918. The title ‘Vatanıma’ translates as ‘To My Country’; *Yeni Mecmua Çanakkale Özel Sayısı* translates as a special Gallipoli issue of the *New Journal*. See also Koç (2010); this title translates as ‘Gallipoli: A Resolute/Unwavering Song’.
- 4 The Turkish reception of the *Iliad* constitutes an interesting alternative to Western receptions. It is alleged that the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II, known as Mehmet the Conqueror (1432–81), referred to revenge for Hector’s death at the hands of Achilles when he visited the former site of Troy in 1462. See Afyoncu (2009: 41); Wood (1996: 38). Such apocryphal statements exemplify the fusion of history and myth.
- 5 The poems discussed here are taken from the forthcoming bilingual volume *Two Sides of the Straits: An Anthology of Gallipoli Poems in English and Turkish* (Hibbitt and Ulu, 2021).
- 6 The passage reads as follows: ‘Oh Violet it’s too wonderful for belief. I had not imagined Fate could be so benign. I almost suspect her . . . Perhaps we shall be held in reserve, out of sight, on a choppy sea, for two months . . . Yet even that! . . . But I’m filled with confident and glorious hopes . . . Do you think perhaps the fort on the Asiatic corner will want quelling, and we’ll land and come at it from behind, and they’ll make a sortie and meet us on the plains of Troy? . . . Will Hero’s Tower crumble under the 15” guns? Will the sea be polyphloisbic and wine-dark and unvintageable? Shall I loot mosaics from St Sophia, and Turkish Delight, and carpets? Should we be a Turning Point in History? Oh God! I’ve never been quite so happy in my life, I think. Not quite so *pervasively* happy; like a stream flowing entirely to one end. I suddenly realize that the ambition of my life has been since I was two to go on a military expedition against Constantinople.’ Brooke was never to write a poem about Gallipoli, but the draft of a meditative poem posthumously published with the title ‘Fragment’ reflects on the possible fate of his fellow soldiers on the troop ship. See: [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57224/fragment-56d23a820a69a](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57224/fragment-56d23a820a69a).
- 7 ‘Upper-class poets who had public-school educations knew classics directly, through reading the texts in their original languages, while middle- and working-class poets’ familiarity with classics was usually mediated through English-language translations, compendia, handbooks, and adaptations’ (Vandiver, 2010: 28).
- 8 This identification between the British soldiers and the victorious Greeks is one reason why Homer’s version of the Trojan War was more influential than Virgil’s.
- 9 See also: [worldwarpoetry.com/blog/great-war-at-sea/gallipoli/](http://worldwarpoetry.com/blog/great-war-at-sea/gallipoli/).
- 10 Vandiver (2010: 322) notes that the title was posthumously changed to ‘Farewell’ in later collections and anthologies.
- 11 For the full poem see: [warpoets.org.uk/worldwar1/blog/poem/outward-bound/](http://warpoets.org.uk/worldwar1/blog/poem/outward-bound/).
- 12 Vandiver, whose book takes its title from Shaw-Stewart’s poem, gives a detailed analysis of the poem (2010: 263–77).
- 13 Shaw-Stewart survived Gallipoli but fell on the Western Front at Cambrai in 1917.

- 14 We have collected 22 poems for our forthcoming anthology (see note 5). All of the poems quoted here have been translated from Turkish into English by Berkan Ulu.
- 15 The Sultan's poem was also entitled 'Manzûme-i Garrâ-i Hazret-i Hilâfet-Penâhi' ('Poem from His Most Royal Highness [In Whose Self] the Caliphate Reigns') in other publications. It was published in several newspapers and journals to ensure maximum exposure: *Harp Mecmuas*, August 1916, p. 4; *Tercüman-ı Hakika*, 8 September 1916, p. 1; *Tanin*, 8 September 1916, p. 1; *Tasvir-i Efkar*, 8 September 1916, p. 2; *Servet-i Fünun*, 14 September 1916, p. 1918. Subsequently it was translated into German and Arabic, and set to music in the form of a marching song.
- 16 See Macleod (2015: 7 and 24–5) for a full list of combatants and non-combatants, including Albanians, Libyans, Circassians, Yezidis and Nusayris on the Ottoman side, and Indians, Senegalese, the French Foreign Legion, *zouaves* and the 500-strong Zion Mule Corps on the Allied side. The Ottoman forces were also assisted by Austro-Hungarian artillery units and German officers.
- 17 *Mihrab* is a niche on the wall of a mosque pointing to Mecca that Muslims turn to during *salat*. In Islam, walking in front of a person at prayer is regarded as a disruption to the link between human and God. For this reason, Muslims often place a tall object (often a stick in the ground when they pray outdoors) right in front of them that serves as a *mihrab*. Here the soldier has stuck his bayonet in the ground to serve this purpose.
- 18 Mehmet Akif Ersoy is also the writer of the Turkish national anthem. He is often referred to in Turkey simply as 'the poet'.
- 19 The name 'Kilij Arslan' (Kılıç Arslan in modern Turkish) translates into English as 'Sword Lion'.
- 20 It is interesting to note that neither 18 Mart Çanakkale Şehitlerini Anma ve Zafer Bayramı (18 March Victory [Day] and [Commemorating] the Gallipoli Martyrs Day), marking the success of the Ottoman defence against the initial Allied attack, nor Anzac Day (25 April), the day when the Allied soldiers first set foot on the peninsula, celebrates the end of the campaign. It seems that the Ottomans were content to celebrate the initial victory against the invaders, rather the final victory after months of stalemate and the Allied evacuation in January 1916. As for the Anzacs, the act of landing and fighting at Gallipoli was the basis of their heroism, despite the fact that it ended in defeat and great loss of life.
- 21 In this respect the title of Robin Prior's *Gallipoli: The End of the Myth* takes on its full significance; Prior aims to disprove the counterfactual narratives that Gallipoli might have led to an Allied victory, had certain decisions been made differently during the campaign. This objective also shows how a historian might conceive the distinction between history and myth.

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### Author biographies

Richard Hibbitt teaches French and Comparative Literature at the University of Leeds, where he co-directs the Centre for World Literatures. His research is on aesthetics, poetics and cultural exchange from the eighteenth century to the present day, with a particular interest in the long nineteenth century. He is a general editor of *Comparative Critical Studies*, the house journal of the British Comparative Literature Association. His current projects include *Two Sides of the Straits: An Anthology of Gallipoli Poems in English and Turkish*, co-edited with Berkan Ulu (2021), and

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*Literary Capitals in the Long Nineteenth Century: Spaces Beyond the Centres*, co-edited with Arunima Bhattacharya and Laura Scuriatti (2021).

**Berkan Ulu** is an assistant professor of English Language and Literature at Akdeniz University at Antalya, Turkey. He teaches British poetry modules with emphasis on social, political and technical aspects of the art of poetry. His research interests include war poetry, ekphrasis and the artistic and cultural encounters of British and Turkish poets. His upcoming publications include *Two Sides of the Straits: An Anthology of Gallipoli Poems in English and Turkish*, co-edited with Richard Hibbitt (2021) and *'His Cry of Stark Amaze': Heroism in British, Anzac, and Turkish Poetry of the Gallipoli Campaign* (forthcoming).