

## A reply to Martin Schwartz

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I would not wish to burden the reader with yet more thoughts of my own, but Martin's detailed decomposition of my early hypotheses on the etymology of "rebetiko" (hesitantly advanced as they were) does require a response.

He states his preference (rightly, in my view) for the *rebetiko* spelling rather than the *rembetiko* popularised by the film by Kostas Ferris and the book by Gail Holst. This is borne out in the verse that he himself cites (p. 226 above), that gives an assonance of "rebéti" with "serbéti". But he cannot both have his cake and eat it. His solution to the problematic etymology of *rebetiko* is to derive it from *remvazo*. This claim is based on the assumption that the "mb" in that word would have been pronounced, precisely, as "rebazo" without the "m". But I suggest that this is not in fact the case. Reaching down my trusty Liddell and Scott dictionary I see that in the aorist of that Ancient Greek word (*rembazo*), the "m" is decisively present – thus "ρέμφο... remph...". This would argue against *remvazo* as the *fons et origo*.

Since the only other serious contender in the field appears to be my "*ribāṭ*", I would like to offer further support to that hypothesis. My points will be brief; I may expand on them in a future article.

1. Our circuit of vocabularies could extend to embrace the community of Greeks who live (or once lived) in North Africa, and also the substantial number of Greeks who, over the years, had trading relations with North Africa. For instance, the sponge industry (see my article in this volume). Hundreds of boats once set off every year to sail to North Africa to "harvest" the sea-bottom sponges. In Tunisia, where I have recently been researching Greek-Tunisian relations, there were Greek communities involved in this trade.

2. In all of the coastal towns that would have been associated with this trade, the centre of administration, fortification, transport hub and surrounding market activity was the *ribāṭ* (for instance, Sfax, Sousse, Monastir, etc). The *ribāṭs* were a chain of Islamic fortifications, partly religious and partly military, dating from the 8th century CE and established all along the North African littoral. Some had tall towers that would have functioned as look-out posts, and also perhaps as lighthouses. In their time they were massive complexes, and they have remained to the present day as the principal institutional focus of coastal towns such as Sousse and Monastir. Contrary to Prof. Schwartz's assertion (in an earlier draft he referenced "the exoticism of Arabic *ribāṭ*"), there is absolutely nothing esoteric about *ribāṭ* for Greeks in North Africa, whether as residents and traders or when passing through as sailors and fishermen.<sup>1</sup>

3. Next, the lability of *ribat* (the possibility of vowel changes in a word when it travels). The voice of phonological authority (p. 223 above) declares that the change from the *ā* of *ribāṭ* to Greek *é* is unprecedented; hence the "theory is exceedingly problematic on phonological grounds". History suggests that in phonology nothing is impossible, so let us examine this further. The first vowel of the word exhibits a marked lability. For the capital of Morocco it becomes Rabat. Redhouse, in his dictionary of Ottoman usages, gives *two* possible spellings in Turkish usage – one as *ribat* and the other as *ribat* with the undotted Turkish "ı" that comes close to an English "e". As for the transfer of the second vowel in *ribāṭ* – the long "ā" – into Greek, another question arises. For Schwartz, as above, "a change of such a vowel to Greek *é* is unprecedented". That may be so, but let us suppose that the long "ā" comes into Greek not directly, but that it first passes via the Turkish.

4. For the occurrence of *ribāṭ* in a Turkish context, Schwartz proposes “the poor attestation of *ribāṭ* in Turkish” (*ibid.*). This is arguably nonsense. For the Ottomans there is nothing outlandish about *ribāṭ*. Tunisia, for instance, was under Ottoman rule for 300 years. The Ottomans had a garrison force in Tunis of 4,000 janissaries. Some military forces would have been stationed, precisely, in the *ribāṭs*. I suggest that the Ottoman military and administrative forces would have been very aware of the *ribāṭs* and their military-institutional value. *Ribāṭ* was a normal and everyday term of usage. Furthermore, as a protected space, the *ribāṭ* would also have provided caravanseraï or staging post facilities along main trade routes, and that indeed is one of the meanings that we find in the Redhouse dictionary. Nothing outlandish here – as witnessed in the monumental Ribat-i Sharif caravanseraï to be found in Khorasan province, Iran.

I suggest that the space immediately outside the walled and fortified space of the *ribāṭ* would necessarily have been (as it is today in North Africa) an open territorial space. To provide space for defence, for military display, for ceremonial events, for market traders to operate on market days, and as a hub for the arrival and departure of forms of transport. Possibly also an administratively permitted territorial space for public entertainments (such as carnival activities associated with Easter and post-Ramadan). *Ribāṭ* is a massive socio-administrative fact. Furthermore, it is a term with a diffuse multiplicity of meanings, which accords well with the multiplicity of meanings attributed to the term “rebetiko” in its early discographic usages.

So we have to ask ourselves whether *ribāṭ* is as comfortably present in Turkey as it is in North Africa. Here we can return to Schwartz. Obliging (*ibid.*) he offers us *rebéta* as a “lower-class neighborhood” in both Constantinople and Smyrna usage, and additionally as an “unruly” space where Greeks went for *paneghiri* celebrations. It is not far-fetched to suggest that this *rebéta* might be a semi-institutional space of the kind associated with a *ribāṭ*. Indeed, that the Ottoman *rebéta* must surely have derived from *ribāṭ*. And if that is so, then we can note how the long *ā* of *ribāṭ* has slipped unproblematically into the Greek *é* of *rebéta*. Finally, in looking for further probative evidence, we note that in *ribāṭ* the emphasis falls on the second syllable. The same is true of *rebétis* – in other words, we have *rebét...* rather than *rébet...*<sup>2</sup> And, as an aside, I note that the dytistoniptiron web page cited by Schwartz (*ibid.*), offers رباطى, *rybâtij*, as the landlord or manager of a guesthouse (*pace* Zenker’s *Dictionnaire turc-arabe-persan* of 1866), a sociological identity deriving, precisely, from *ribāṭ*.

At this point I rest my case. Others are welcome to take up the cudgels of this disputation if they wish. It remains only to say that Schwartz’s critique of my dispersive Sufi-related thoughts is cogent, but that the Sufi connotations of rebetiko from the 1930s onwards are nonetheless inescapable and have to be taken into account. The term “dervish”, for example, is a badge of honour in the rebetiko community...

Βρε συ Στράτο, βρε συ Στράτο – σιάξε εν' αργιλέ αφράτο  
Να φουμάρει, βρε, το Μπατάκι – που 'ναι χρόνια, βρε, ντερβισάκι

## NOTES

1. For instance, until the decline of the sponge industry Sfax was also the home of a large Greek community (500-1000 people between 1890 and 1930). The administrative heart of Sfax was the *ribāṭ*, first constructed by the Aghlabids in 800-900 AD. This was also the *kasbah* – the hub of market trading and commercial activity, in which Greeks would have played a role. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kasbah\\_of\\_Sfax](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kasbah_of_Sfax)

2. Note also the similar passage of another Arabic word into Turkish and then to become a special Greek sociological designation – namely “*sarraaf* / *sarraaf*”, صرف, which in Greek becomes “*saráfis*” [money-changer, pawnbroker], see Roza Eskenazi at p. 74 above.