
The heritages of the modern Greeks

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Introduction

What makes the heritages of the modern Greeks unique? They stand between East and West in the sense that they belong neither to the Catholic and Protestant West nor to the Muslim East; their Roman heritage is more eastern than western; yet they have been dominated by Catholic as well as Ottoman occupiers. Although I am against the concept of Greek (or any other) exceptionalism, I believe that when foreigners deal with modern Greece they need to be sensitive to cultural differences, which are the result of specific historical experiences. Especially in times of crisis such as the one the Greeks are going through today, the world – and especially Europe – needs to show sympathy and solidarity with their plight. Nevertheless, this shouldn't inhibit us from looking critically at what Greeks – and I mean chiefly Greek intellectual and political elites – have made of their collective heritages. Indeed, to do so is especially topical, since the present economic crisis in Greece is bringing about a profound crisis of national identity.

In formulating the title of my lecture, I was inspired by the title of Arnold Toynbee's last book, *The Greeks and their Heritages*, which was published post-humously exactly 30 years ago, in 1981 (Figure 1). The photograph on the cover of Toynbee's book shows part of Monastiraki Square in Athens seen from the north – from the bottom upwards: the Pantanassa church (probably built in the 17th century on the site of a Byzantine church; formerly part of a monastery after which the square is named), the 18th-century Tzistaraki mosque, and part of the Acropolis. Hidden from view, but visible from another angle, are the columns of Hadrian's library, and the 1890s underground station.

In his book, among other things, Toynbee supports the controversial view that the smaller amount of cultural memory later Greeks have inherited from earlier Greeks, the better it has been for them. Toynbee argues that the Classical Greeks were fortunate to have inherited little except oral

poetry from the Mycenaeans, because they could make a fresh start with a clean slate. He presents the heritages of the modern Greeks as a burden – and in some cases even an incubus – since their legacies from ancient Greece and Byzantium continually threaten to dominate and overshadow them.

The nationalisation of the past

The Greeks of the last 200 years have possessed ample historical material with which to form their national identity. Compare the Germans, who for their ancient past have only Tacitus' *Germania*, a brief and impressionistic ethnography written by an outsider who warned that his aim was to comment on the Romans of his time as much as on the Germans. Tacitus left the modern Germans a great deal of leeway to invent and imagine their own antiquity. By contrast, the sheer volume of ancient Greek history and culture can be a rich source of pride and of inspiring models of moral conduct, intellectual rigour and artistic endeavour, but it can also be confining and even crippling.

Since the Greek Enlightenment began in the late 18th century, Greek intellectuals have been asking the following questions about their relationship with Hellenic antiquity and Byzantium:

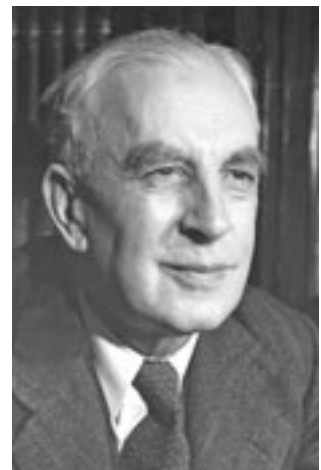


Figure 1. *The front cover of The Greeks and their Heritages, by Arnold Toynbee. Toynbee (1889-1975) was a Fellow of the British Academy.*

- Of the various legacies that the modern Greeks have inherited, are there some that could profitably be highlighted to the detriment of others, and if so which?
- Are there any genuine cultural continuities that can be traced from ancient to modern Greece, or can the connections be made only by means of an artificial revival?
- In the first case, what kind of continuities might these be, and in which areas of life might they be manifested – language, geography and landscape, history, ways of life, popular beliefs, customs and attitudes?
- Is it possible to fit all periods of Greek cultural history into a single schema? Is there a level at which the apparent discontinuities reveal themselves actually to be continuities?
- If so, how might this level be discovered and this schema devised? How to achieve a synthesis that would overcome the apparent antitheses? How to develop a unified field theory of diachronic Greek culture?

The cultural heritages of a nation are partly a matter of choice on the part of intellectual and political elites. The decision to adopt or to emphasise a particular heritage is a gamble with high stakes: will the adoption of this heritage appeal to a significant portion of the population, and will it be recognised and accepted by the world at large?

Faced with a rich variety of heritages, Greek intellectual leaders first chose to promote the one that enjoyed the greatest international prestige. For this reason, most Greek intellectuals in the lead-up to the War of Independence tended to place the emphasis on Classical antiquity as the heritage that their modern compatriots should make their own. Indeed, some Greek intellectuals felt that, as a nation, the Greeks possessed nothing but their ancient past. When Byzantium began to be discovered and rehabilitated by Western scholars, some Greek intellectuals added the Byzantine heritage to the Hellenic one as a component of Greek national identity. These intellectuals felt that the Byzantine legacy was closer to the modern Greeks than the Hellenic one, partly because of the shorter chronological distance, but chiefly because of the unifying factor of Christianity. On the other hand, Greek elites did not want to abandon their Hellenic legacy, and they were probably sensible to divide their stakes between two heritages: Hellenic antiquity and Byzantium, and indeed not to confine Hellenic antiquity to the Classical period alone. This decision appealed to the Greeks' sense of uniqueness as the heirs of both the pagan culture of ancient Hellas and the Christian culture of late antiquity and Byzantium: after all, they are the only people to speak a version of the language in which Classical Greek literature and the founding texts of Christianity were written.

Nationalism sees the nation as eternal and essentially unchanging; it fosters an undifferentiated approach to the

past that is tantamount to the denial of history. Discontinuities and contradictions are transcended to produce a seamless linear national narrative. In the mid-19th century, Greek elites led by the historians Spyridon Zambelios and Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos set about finding ways of fusing the two apparently antithetical legacies of pagan Hellas and Christian Byzantium into a new synthesis which Zambelios called the 'Helleno-Christian idea'.¹ Zambelios and Paparrigopoulos went so far as to claim that Divine Providence had fashioned Classical antiquity in such a way that Greek language and culture would be capable of receiving and disseminating the Divine Word once the Incarnation had taken place.

According to the Classicist and anthropologist Effie Athanassopoulos, this 'fusion between Orthodoxy and Hellenism' that 19th-century Greek intellectuals were seeking to formulate was 'an indigenous rather than a European version of [Greek] national history'.² Paparrigopoulos went on to develop a unified history of the Greek nation since pre-Classical times (from Agamemnon to George I, as the linguist G.N. Hatzidakis aptly put it³), while a little later in the 19th century the folklorist Nikolaos Politis creatively demonstrated that the legacies of ancient Greek myth and Byzantine history were encapsulated in modern Greek folksongs, folk tales, customs and beliefs. Both of these scholars were countering the shocking allegation made by the Austrian historian Jacob Philipp Fallmerayer in 1830 that not a single drop of ancient Hellenic blood flowed through the veins of the modern Greeks.⁴ Paparrigopoulos and Politis argued that the connections between ancient and modern Greece were not the result of an artificial revival, but of a natural survival.

Classical Athens has been nationalised in modern Greece. Dora Markatou has recently pointed out how in 1930, during the events celebrating the centenary of the founding of the modern Greek state, a procession to the Acropolis was staged in imitation of the Classical Panathenian procession, except that the peplos of Athena was replaced by the Greek national flag;⁵ in this way the emblem of the patron goddess of a city was replaced by the emblem of a nation, and Athens was treated as a synecdoche for the whole of Greece.

Byzantium has been similarly nationalised: according to the tripartite schema of Greek cultural history proposed by Paparrigopoulos (ancient, medieval and modern), the Byzantine period represented what he called 'medieval Hellenism'. The nationalisation of the Byzantine past in the 19th and early 20th centuries was connected with the so-called 'Great Idea' of recapturing Constantinople;⁶ according to this ideology, the 'virtual' nationalisation of Byzantium would eventually lead to its actual incorporation into the modern Greek state.

Vangelis Karamanolakis has recently noted that the decision by the mid-20th-century Byzantinist Faidon

¹ S. Zambelios, *Άσματα δημοτικά της Ελλάδος εκδιδόμενα μετά μελέτης ιστορικής περί μεσαιωνικού ελληνισμού* (Corfu: Hermes, 1852), p. 464.

² Quoted from her Abstract for the conference 'Re-imagining the Past: Antiquity and Modern Greek Culture', Birmingham, June 2011.

³ *Το πρόβλημα της νεωτέρας γραφομένης ελληνικής υπό Κ. Krumbacher και Απάντησις εις αυτόν υπό Γεωργίου Ν. Χατζιδάκι* (Athens: P.D. Sakellariou, 1905), p. 609.

⁴ J.P. Fallmerayer, *Geschichte der Halbinsel Morea während des Mittelalters*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart 1830), p. iv.

⁵ In D. Plantzos and D. Damaskos (ed.), *A singular antiquity: archaeology and Hellenic identity in twentieth-century Greece* (Athens: Benakis Museum, 2008), p. 311.

⁶ Dionysis Mourelatos, in Plantzos & Damaskos, p. 198.

Koukoules to focus his monumental study of 'the culture and life of the Byzantines'⁷ on their private rather than their public life 'was justified on grounds of national expediency: public life in Byzantium was deemed to be associated with the institutions of the Roman Empire, whereas private life was seen as a continuation of the ancient Greek world.' In this way Koukoules believed that his work provided scientific proof of the continuity of the Greek nation since antiquity.⁸

The Byzantine art historian Manolis Chatzidakis wrote in 1964 that 'Byzantine art is European, and the only art between East and West which kept alive that spirit of Greek humanism now recognised as pre-eminently the basis of European values.'⁹ Here Chatzidakis presents Byzantium not only as the link between ancient Hellas and modern Greece, but between ancient Hellas and modern Europe.¹⁰

Just as one can talk about the Hellenisation of the Byzantine past, Vasilis Makridis has pointed out the way that the ancient Hellenic heritage has been appropriated by Greek Orthodox Christianity.¹¹ The fusion of the ancient Greek and the Byzantine traditions has recently been critiqued by the political scientist Periklis Vallianos, who points out that the early Christian Fathers stated quite categorically that ancient Greek thought is incompatible with Christian theology.¹² This fusion postdates the Greek revolution: in 1819 the Patriarch of Constantinople, Gregory V, defended the study of the Ancient Greek language against those who wished to use Modern Greek as the medium of education; but he wanted the ancient language to be studied without its pagan content.¹³

Some advantages of the ancient heritage

The adoption of such rich heritages by the Greeks as a nation and their resulting sense of being uniquely privileged has been a two-edged sword. On the one hand, their ancient and medieval cultural heritages undoubtedly give Greeks an individual and national self-respect, and many Greeks have taken the responsibilities of their inheritance very seriously and have been inspired to excellence in various fields by their glorious past.¹⁴ Others, however, have been content to rest on their ancestors' laurels, in the belief that the Greeks have already done so much for humanity that the rest of the world now owes them a living.¹⁵ Greeks have been haunted by the spectre of ancient Greece, which has provided them with prestige but has sometimes threatened to suck their lifeblood.

Be that as it may, the fact that the Greeks possess these inheritances makes them different from those neighbouring

nations that have other pasts. Without Greece's Classical heritage there would have been no Philhellenic movement in Europe and America in the 1820s; Winston Churchill would not have been so determined that Greece should not go communist in the 1940s; and the European Economic Community would not have welcomed Greece as a member so readily in 1981. Greece's antiquities have been a rich source of symbolic capital.¹⁶ In particular, Greece's tourist industry has always been boosted by the country's antiquities, both in the form of ancient sites and objects displayed in museums.

It is possible in parts of Athens and Piraeus to feel one is standing on the same spot where particular ancient Greeks have stood – not to mention St Paul – and where historical events of world importance have taken place. There is no doubt that modern Greece would be the poorer – both culturally and economically – without its ancient heritage. This heritage provides everyday Greek life with a rich frame of reference: on the most banal level, Greek antiquity supplies a rich repertoire of given names for individuals (despite occasional opposition from the Orthodox Church, which prefers its flock to be baptised with the names of Christian saints), as well as names for ships, streets, hotels, restaurants, cafes, bars, night clubs and all kinds of manufactured goods, as well as a wealth of visual motifs – columns and pediments, the key pattern, and sculpted or painted human figures – that are used on products or for purely decorative purposes. In short, the modern Greeks are casually familiar with the antiquity that surrounds them.

Contested heritages

One of the chief reasons why the poets Cavafy and Seferis have appealed to European and American readers is that they used ancient Greek myth and history as a major component of their subject matter. Cavafy overcame the problem of dealing with a Classical past that had already been appropriated by the West¹⁷ by focusing on a period of Greek history that had generally been considered to be inferior, even decadent, namely the Hellenistic and Roman eras. Indeed, he often explicitly decentres Classical antiquity by viewing it through the consciousness of some historical or fictional character who lived several centuries after the Classical period. Angelos Sikelianos, a poet who has not reached such a wide international audience, coped with the western appropriation of Classical Hellas by moving in the opposite direction from Cavafy and drawing his inspiration from cults such as the Eleusinian mysteries whose obscure

⁷ Ph. Koukoules, *Βυζαντινόν βίος και πολιτισμός*, 6 vols (Athens: Institut Français d'Athènes, 1948-57).

⁸ In Plantzos & Damaskos, p. 189.

⁹ Quoted by Mourelatos in Plantzos & Damaskos, p. 200, from E. Matthiopoulos, 'Η ιστορία της τέχνης στα όρια του έθνους', in E. Matthiopoulos and N. Hadjinicolaou (eds), *Η ιστορία της τέχνης στην Ελλάδα* (Herakleio: Panepistimiakes Ekdoseis Kritis, 2003), pp. 468-9.

¹⁰ This view is somewhat similar to the one expressed by Robert Byron, as quoted by Dame Averil Cameron in her lecture.

¹¹ At conference 'Re-imagining the Past', Birmingham, 27 June 2011.

¹² *The Athens Review of Books*, July-August 2011, pp. 35-7.

¹³ For more on the encyclical issued by Patriarch Gregory V and the Holy Synod in March 1819 see P. Mackridge, *Language and national identity in Greece, 1766-1976* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 140.

¹⁴ Cf. Mackridge, op.cit., p. 51: 'the change of name provided the modern Greeks with a new history and new models for behaviour (the great intellectual, military, and political figures of Classical Greece) – in short, a new identity of which they could feel proud and of which they could aspire to be worthy.'

¹⁵ Compare the words of a London Greek called Saki, quoted by Zoe Williams in *The Guardian*, 24 June 2011: 'When we built the Parthenon and the Acropolis, the rest of Europe was still living in the trees.'

¹⁶ Y. Hamilakis and E. Yalouri, 'Antiquities as symbolic capital in modern Greek society', *Antiquity* 70 (1996), 125-6.

¹⁷ This is the question posed by Antonis Liakos as 'Who owns Hellenism? 'Hellenism and the making of modern Greece', in Katerina Zacharia (ed.), *Hellenisms: culture, identity and ethnicity from antiquity to modernity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p. 217; mentioned by Averil Cameron in her lecture.

origins date from pre-Classical times. Seferis converted the psychological burden of the Classical past into a poetic asset, since his network of references to the well-known myths of Odysseus and the house of Atreus enabled him to explore the problems of dealing with the Greek past and the Greek present in a way that has universal resonance. These are all instances of Greek attempts to discover and develop what Seferis called 'Greek Hellenism' as distinct from Europeanised Hellenism.

The fact that Greece's Classical past has already been appropriated and repackaged by Western Europe is probably the chief reason why, for the last 200 years, Greek intellectuals, with the exception of linguists, have insisted that the pronunciation of Greek has not changed since the time of the Classical Athenians, that they alone have preserved the genuine pronunciation, and that the so-called Erasmian pronunciation used by western Europeans since the Renaissance is a perversion of the Greek language. For some Greeks, the reform of the pronunciation of Ancient Greek by Erasmus has implied that western Europeans believe they have a greater right to see themselves as the genuine cultural heirs of Classical antiquity than do the modern Greeks, from whom Italians and other Europeans had begun to learn to read and pronounce Ancient Greek around 1400. Having been content to pronounce and write Ancient Greek as their early Greek teachers did, the Europeans proceeded to change their way of pronouncing and writing Greek to what they considered to be earlier and more authentic ways of doing so. In this way they cut themselves loose from the contemporary Greeks and sailed off in a different direction, confident that they no longer needed their help.

Another contested heritage is that of ancient Macedonia, which allows its possessor to dream not only of a greater Macedonia in the Balkans but also of an imagined geography that encompasses all the territories conquered by Alexander the Great, including Egypt and a vast region stretching as far east as India.¹⁸ It is ironic that, more than 2000 years after the Athenian orator Demosthenes warned the Greeks that Alexander's father, Philip II, was threatening to destroy their liberty, many modern Greeks see Philip as one of the great heroes of their history for having unified the Greek nation, even though this initiated a process that would soon lead to the suppression of Athenian democracy. This positive view of Philip II was implicit in the recent Greek-sponsored exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, 'Heracles to Alexander the Great'.¹⁹ Official and unofficial Greeks accuse the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia of hijacking their heritage, whereas what the archaeologist Dimitris Plantzos calls 'Greece's insistence that its hereditary rights be the sole basis for resolving the

"Macedonia issue"' has perhaps hindered Greece's efforts to convince the international community that its behaviour towards its northern neighbour is justified.²⁰ Detaching the modern geographical area of Macedonia from its distant past might perhaps enable one to see the modern Macedonian question in a more realistic light.

Ancient versus modern Greece

As I have already suggested, there tends to be a hierarchy of Greek heritages, in which the playing up of one heritage tends to entail the playing down of the rest. An indication of the international privileging of ancient Hellas over modern Greece is the fact that Microsoft Word underlines the adjectives 'new' and 'modern' (unless they are capitalised) when they are placed immediately before the word 'Greek', as though the collocation of 'new' or 'modern' with 'Greek' is such a contradiction in terms that it is ungrammatical.

A notable example of the sacrificing of the modern in favour of the ancient is the Vrysaki quarter of Athens, which was demolished in the 1930s to make way for the excavation of the ancient Agora by the American School of Classical Studies. The American archaeologist Craig Mauzy recently stated that 'as Vrysaki was demolished, evidence of five thousand years of human habitation was uncovered.'²¹ These 5000 years apparently didn't include the 20th century. However, Mauzy is a member of a team currently carrying out a virtual reconstruction of Vrysaki based on available plans, photographs and eyewitness memories: the very neighbourhood that was demolished for archaeological purposes has now become the object of archaeological research.

Most scholarly work on ancient Greece has been carried out by non-Greeks. But until recent decades modern Greece too used to be presented to the West by people armed with a Classical education who viewed modern Greece through the distorting lens of ancient Hellas.

I would like to refer to two instances quoted by Vassiliki Kolocotroni at a recent conference.²² First, the 24-year-old Virginia Stephen (later to become better known as Virginia Woolf) wrote in her diary during her visit to Greece in 1906: 'The modern Greece is so flimsy and fragile, that it goes to pieces entirely [sic] when it is confronted with the roughest fragments of the old.'²³ Woolf's journal presents a conventional view held at the time that no relation existed between the modern and the ancient Greeks. And she adds: 'They do not understand Greek of the age of Pericles – when I speak it.'²⁴

Secondly, the 73-year-old German philosopher Martin Heidegger set off on his only visit to Greece in 1962 after

¹⁸ For a recent British newspaper article mentioning contemporary connections between Greece and the Kalash tribe in north-west Pakistan see Declan Walsh, 'Taliban threat closes in on isolated Kalash tribe', *The Guardian*, 17 October 2011.

¹⁹ See James Romm, 'Who was in Tomb II?', *London Review of Books*, 6 October 2011.

²⁰ Plantzos, in Plantzos & Damaskos, p. 25.

²¹ Craig Mauzy (American School of Classical Studies at Athens) at conference 'Greek (Hi)stories through the Lens', King's College London, June 2011.

²² At conference 'Re-imagining the Past', Birmingham, 28 June 2011.

²³ This is illogical: if ancient Greece is in fragments, it must have been fragile.

²⁴ There may well be some intended humour in this sentence, especially in view of Woolf's use of the dash; yet the other passages concerning the modern Greeks in the journal are totally negative. For instance: 'Like a shifting layer of sand these loosely composed tribes of many different people lie across Greece; calling themselves Greek indeed, but bearing the same kind of relation to the old Greek that their tongue does to his. [...] you must look upon the modern Greeks as a nation of mongrel element and a rustic beside the classic speech of pure bred races.' Jan Morris (ed.), *Travels with Virginia Woolf* (London: Pimlico, 1997), pp. 210-13, 220-1 [1st edn 1993].

what he called ‘a long hesitation due to the fear of disappointment: the Greece of today could [= might] prevent the Greece of antiquity [...] from coming to light.’²⁵ This process may also work in reverse: ancient Greece can, in some people’s minds, prevent modern Greece from coming to light: Kolocotroni commented that Heidegger doesn’t mention having met a single living Greek on his journey.

There seems to be an international obsession with connecting the modern Greeks with the ancients. Each of the daily features on the Greek crisis published in the *Guardian* during the first week of August this year included a short piece entitled ‘What can the Ancient Greeks do for us?’ There would have been no equivalent if the series were about Ireland or Spain or Portugal.

But Greeks too tend to focus on their distant past rather than their present or their recent past; the heritage of the distant past looms so large that most Greeks are uninterested in and uninformed about their own more recent (Ottoman and Balkan) past, which, to a large extent, made them what they are: it’s telling that when Greek Americans parade along 5th Avenue in New York on Greek independence day (25 March), some of them dress as ancient soldiers rather than as the warriors of 1821 who fought for independence (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Greek warriors in the 2009 Greek Independence Day parade in New York City. Source: www.thegreekwarriors.com

While it is very common for nations to strive to construct their collective identity through a unique perception of their historical past,²⁶ Greeks are unusual in radically playing down their present and many aspects of their recent past. With the exception of acts of rebellion against foreign rulers, the period from 1453 till today tends to be marginalised. What is alive – together with the historical and cultural developments that led up to it (what David Brewer calls ‘the hidden centuries’²⁷) – is shunned in favour of what is dead.

An excellent historical documentary series on the War of Independence entitled ‘1821’, broadcast on the Greek Sky

television channel earlier this year, was greeted with outrage by a large section of the audience for attempting to dispel nationalist myths. Commenting on these negative audience reactions, the historian and political scientist Thanos Veremis wrote ‘that the modern Greeks conceive of their identity as the result of reference to their collective past and that this makes their relationship with the present problematic’.²⁸

What Stathis Gauntlett has called ‘the Neohellenic strategy of validating the modern by reference to the ancient’²⁹ became internationalised with the Greeks’ demand for independence in the 1820s: Greece’s very existence as a modern nation was premised on its ancient past. As Roderick Beaton has pointed out, this was the first time a nation had put forward a claim to independence not as an innovation but as a restitution. It is difficult for the modern Greeks to ‘receive’ ancient Greek and Byzantine culture objectively and critically, and without feeling an unearned pride in being Greek. There is all too often an uncritical reverence for an idealised, sanitised version of Hellenic antiquity. Nevertheless, it’s obvious from my frequent references to contemporary Greek scholars in this lecture that a large number of Greek academics are nowadays engaged in a clear-eyed critical scrutiny of Greece’s heritages.

The Greek language question

The Greek strategy of validating the present by reference to the past probably originated in an influential idea among educated Greeks dating back to Roman times, that a word or form in their own contemporary spoken language is only valid as long as it is attested in some ancient text. This led in modern times to the ‘language controversy’, which Toynbee attributed to what he called the ‘debilitating fantasy’ that failure to emulate the language of Classical authors means intellectual and moral failure.³⁰ According to Toynbee, the language question is ‘the supreme example of the bewildering and inhibiting effect of the Greeks’ heritages from the past on Greek life since as long ago as the latter part of the Hellenistic Age’.³¹ The language question is the subject of the last section of the main text of Toynbee’s book, where he sums up his thoughts on the subject by saying that ‘The *katharévousa* is a product of the Modern Greeks’ mistrust of themselves in the face of Hellenic predecessors for whom they have felt themselves to be no match.’ By contrast, he continues, ‘the development of the *dhêmotikê* in the works of eminent Modern Greek poets is the fruit of a confident belief that the Modern Greeks can confront the Hellenic Greeks as their equals.’³²

Together with the Greek landscape, the Greek language is the central feature that has been common to all phases of Greek history and culture. The Greek language has often been viewed by Greek intellectuals as a monument that

²⁵ M. Heidegger, *Sojourns: the Journey to Greece*, tr. J.P. Manoussakis (Albany, 2005), p. 4 [original title: *Aufenthalte* (Frankfurt, 1989)].

²⁶ Here I am paraphrasing Plantzos, in Plantzos & Damaskos, p. 13.

²⁷ D. Brewer, *Greece, the hidden centuries: Turkish rule from the fall of Constantinople to Greek independence* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

²⁸ Veremis (*Kathimerini*, 27 February 2011) attributes this view to Stelios Ramfos. Cf.: ‘our relationship with the past becomes barren. We don’t

possess it; it possesses us. When you only have a past, you can’t have any perspective’ (S. Ramfos, interview in *Anichnefseis*, 25 May 2010).

²⁹ Conference ‘Re-imagining the Past’, Birmingham, 28 June 2011.

³⁰ Arnold Toynbee, *The Greeks and their Heritages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 52.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 266.

requires constant maintenance and occasionally restoration. *Katharevousa* (the now defunct official form of Greek that resulted from the 'correction' of modern Greek words and forms according to Ancient Greek usage) was the outcome of such a restoration project. It was a prime example of Greek attempts to fuse disparate heritages into a single whole. *Katharevousa* was an alloy made up of features of the Modern Greek spoken language and features taken from the written record of Ancient Greek. This alloy was intended to be more robust, expressive and prestigious than the Modern Greek element alone. Yet far from being an organic synthesis of Modern Greek and Ancient Greek, *katharevousa* was an arbitrary mixture. The unsystematic nature of *katharevousa* made it difficult to master. By contrast, what eventually became today's Standard Modern Greek is a form of the language based largely on the vocabulary and grammar of the spoken language, but enriched with features from the so-called 'learnèd tradition' where there were gaps to be filled in the expressive capabilities of the spoken language. In *katharevousa*, ancient features replaced perfectly functioning features of the spoken language. By contrast, in Standard Modern Greek today, ancient features are used to supplement the spoken language in areas of vocabulary and grammar where it was insufficient for the expressive needs of the modern Greeks.

In the second half of the 19th century Greek poets began writing about themes from ancient Greek history and culture in demotic Greek and translating central Ancient Greek texts such as the Homeric poems into the spoken language. In so doing, they were able to integrate Hellenic antiquity into their own culture instead of feeling dominated and dwarfed by it.

National literature and nationalist dogma

While politicians, publicists and others often make exaggerated statements about the continuity of Greek cultural history and react with indignation to any criticism of Greek behaviour during any historical period, a creative and vivifying critical engagement with antiquity was until recently restricted to the realms of art, and especially literature.

In his story 'Στην Αναστασία' ('At Saint Anastasa's'), published in 1892,³³ the deeply Christian fiction writer Alexandros Papadiamandis narrates a nocturnal visit by a group of villagers to a numinous ruin in the middle of a forest in order to perform the Resurrection service at midnight on Easter Saturday. The narrator has already informed us that archaeologists disagree whether these are the remains of an ancient temple or a church or a Venetian mansion, but the local people are convinced it was a church. He concludes that it is most likely that a temple of Persephone or Hecate had once stood on this spot, which had subsequently been taken over by 'the Christians, natural heirs of defunct paganism'. One imagines, says the narrator, that the 'fine-limbed Dryads and slender Orestiads' that still haunt the ruins, having temporarily 'taken heart at the Christian God's desertion of his fine marble sanctuary', now

lurk in the shadows, observing in amazement the candles and burning incense carried by the Christian worshippers. In this passage Papadiamandis presents the Christians as the heirs of the idolaters, not in the sense of being their continuators but in terms of inheriting the land and the sacred places from them. At the same time, the spirits that the idolaters had worshipped are still in the vicinity, reclaiming their sacred precincts when the Christians' backs are turned. This relationship between pagan Hellas and Christian Greece works better in the context of fiction than on the level of ideological dogma.

Dimitris Tziouvas has noted that the writers of the Generation of 1930 brought an aesthetic approach to the relationship between the past and the present. For Seferis, the ancient past is not 'a closed and given whole' but 'an open fragment, giving the opportunity to complete and restructure it through memory'.³⁴ Seferis, like other modern Greek poets inspired by antiquity, gives free range to his imagination, so that he participates and communicates with the past in the present. This is a subjective, personal relationship with the past as opposed to a 'national' one, and it inspires creativity rather than admiration or imitation.

Byzantium, Orthodox Christianity and modern Greece

Unlike the links between modern Greece and ancient Hellas, the Byzantine Christian tradition has remained unbroken in the form of the Orthodox Christian liturgy and many of its associated rituals and customs. It is probable that a majority of Greeks consider Orthodox Christianity rather than their Classical heritage to be the most important and emotionally affecting aspect of their national identity. In rural Greece, particularly, the way of life is imbued with the traditions of Orthodox Christianity: the religious calendar moves round from year to year together with the agricultural calendar. Christian festivals provide respite from work, excursions to country chapels, and occasions for merry-making that involve eating, drinking, singing and dancing. The lives of rural Greeks accord with the eternal seasonal patterns of nature and with a millennial tradition of religious practice, and their physical existence is constantly enriched by their spiritual life.

We therefore need to make a distinction between two quite distinct legacies from Byzantium that are often conflated: Byzantium as the nurturer of the Christian Orthodox tradition, and Byzantium as empire.

From the 1840s until 1922, many Greeks believed that the Greek nation had a historic mission to take over a large part of the Ottoman Empire and re-establish a Christian state with its capital in Constantinople. This belief was known as the Great Idea. Toynbee sees the Great Idea – whose successful progress he observed during his first stay in Greece on the eve the Balkan Wars in 1911-12 and whose destructive consequences he witnessed in Asia Minor in 1921 – as being a result of the Greeks' focus on their Byzantine heritage in terms not of Orthodox Christianity

³³ An English translation by Garth Fowden is published in A. Papadiamandis, *The boundless garden: selected short stories*, ed. L. Kamberidis

and D. Harvey, vol. 1 (Limni: Denise Harvey, 2007), pp. 179-99.

³⁴ Plantzos & Damaskos, pp. 287-8, 291.

but of empire. Those Greeks who believed that Constantinople, rather than Athens, would be the most appropriate political and cultural centre for the modern Greek nation saw Byzantium, rather than Classical Hellas, as their genuine inheritance.³⁵

The ideologisation of the Byzantine empire as the missing link between the ancient and the modern in the nationalist ideology of the continuity of Hellenism has given rise to conflicts. There is sometimes a tension between viewing something as a sacred building or icon on the one hand, and as an archaeological monument or museum exhibit on the other. Nobody complains when an ancient temple is presented as an archaeological exhibit, and few people object when statues are removed from the precincts of pagan temples and placed in museums. But some buildings are bones of contention. The most notorious example is the Rotunda in Thessaloniki, a pagan building that was erected on the orders of the Roman tetrarch Galerius in 306 AD but became a church dedicated to St George only a few decades after it was built; indeed, it is one of the oldest surviving buildings in the world to have been used as a church. It became a mosque after the Ottoman conquest, and it was officially classified as a monument after the incorporation of Thessaloniki into the Greek state. The Rotunda has been a site of contestation between Church and State for a number of years: many Orthodox Christians consider the building to be a church, and that therefore religious services should be performed there; by contrast, the State considers it to be an archaeological monument that should be preserved as a museum and used as a venue for artistic performances.³⁶

What about icons? Some Greeks have viewed their removal from their liturgical context in churches to be preserved as exhibits in museums as not only the confiscation and secularisation of ecclesiastical property, but as tantamount to the desecration of sacred objects.³⁷ For instance, in his short story 'Λαμπριάτικος ψάλτης' ('The Easter chanter'), published in 1893, Papadiamantis protested when the collection of icons assembled by the recently founded Christian Archaeological Society³⁸ was placed on display in the National Archaeological Museum: 'Almighty God! a Museum, as if Christian worship had ceased to be practised in this country, as if its vessels [skevi] belonged to a buried past, objects of curiosity!'³⁹ The very concept of 'Christian archaeology' seemed to Papadiamantis to be an oxymoron.

³⁵ Just as the Ottomans saw themselves as inheriting the empire from the Byzantines, so Greeks could envisage themselves as inheriting it in their turn from the Ottomans.

³⁶ See M. Mazower, *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews 1430-1950* (London: HarperCollins, 2004), pp. 470-1, and C. Stewart, 'Immanent or eminent domain? The contest over Thessaloniki's Rotonda', in R. Layton et al. (ed.), *Destruction and conservation of cultural property* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 182-98. Another instance of the competing claims of Church and State to represent the Greek nation was the crisis in 2000, when the Greek Church organised a massive petition against the government's decision to remove the item 'Religion' from Greek national identity cards. See P. Mackridge, 'Cultural difference as national identity in modern Greece', in Zacharia (ed.), *Hellenisms*, pp. 316-17.

³⁷ D.D. Triantafyllopoulos, in N. D. Triantafyllopoulos (ed.), *Φώτα ολόφωτα: ένα αφιέρωμα στον Παπαδιαμάντη και τον κόσμο του* (Athens: ELIA, 1981), pp. 177-96.

³⁸ Founded by the Greek academic theologian Georgios Lambakis.

³⁹ Papadiamantis, *Άπαντα*, vol. 2, p. 524. This story has been published in English translation by Liadain Sherrard in Papadiamantis, *The boundless*

In cases of conflict, the ancient has tended to take precedence over the Byzantine. Effie Athanassopoulos has talked about the disdain for medieval buildings (which included Byzantine churches) in 19th-century Athens. More than half of the churches that existed in the greater Athens area in 1830 were demolished, either in order to facilitate road-building or because they impeded the view of existing ancient remains or the discovery of additional ones.⁴⁰ Ironically, for all the official nationalist emphasis on the continuity of Greek culture from antiquity to the present, Greek archaeology has succeeded in physically isolating the ancient Greek past from other centuries.⁴¹

Continuity or discontinuity?

Toynbee writes that 'Few [...] of the peoples that possess distinctive identities today have had as long a history as the Greeks, if we interpret history as meaning, not simply chronological duration, but a continuity of identity which has never ceased to be recognised and to be remembered'.⁴² He also takes it for granted that the 'Byzantine Greeks' were the heirs of the ancient Hellenes.⁴³ Many historians today would contest the concept of 'a continuity of identity' with reference to the Greeks. The more realistic among the Greeks – including postmodern writers and artists – recognise the discontinuities of their cultural history and revel in the rich variety of their heritages, with all its tensions and contradictions, rather than subjecting them to a Procrustean homogeneity.

Even Toynbee, in another passage, writes that 'In harking back to their Hellenic past, the Modern Greeks have not been preserving a heritage; they have been raising a ghost'.⁴⁴ He also argues that 'Political liberation has entailed, for the Modern Greeks, a violent break with all their cultural heritages';⁴⁵ that is, the cultural heritages that the Greeks possessed up to the period immediately prior to the War of Independence. There is no precedent in Greek history for a homogeneous Greek state, and it has no roots in Greek life, writes Toynbee,⁴⁶ and the autocephaly of the Greek Church in 1833 was a radical break in Greek tradition.

The denial of foreign influence

Just as Greek nationalism conceives of Greek history and tradition as a seamless unity, it also sees Greek culture as

garden, pp. 263-91 (the passage quoted is on p. 275). Eleana Yalouri mentioned this passage at the conference 'Re-imagining the Past', Birmingham, 27 June 2011; I am grateful to her for bringing it (together with Triantafyllopoulos' article) to my attention. Triantafyllopoulos comments that Papadiamantis sees the Greek Church as being too close to the State and not close enough to the Nation, while Triantafyllopoulos himself attacks the hypocrisy of Greeks who demand the return of the Elgin marbles but are not bothered by the state's confiscation of Orthodox icons (Triantafyllopoulos, *ibid.*, pp. 179-80).

⁴⁰ Conference 'Re-imagining the Past', Birmingham, 27 June 2011. According to Yalouri, a number of these were demolished on the orders of Kyriakos Pittakis, the chief archaeologist employed by the Greek state in Athens from 1833 to 1863.

⁴¹ As Dimitris Damaskos has pointed out (in Plantzos & Damaskos, p. 405).

⁴² Toynbee, *The Greeks and their Heritages*, 268.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

having remained unaffected by foreign influences. For those who hold such a view, it is unthinkable to talk about, for instance, the Venetian or Ottoman heritages of the Greeks, despite the fact that features of these heritages are constantly encountered in the built environment, in the language, and in everyday activities such as the preparation and consumption of food and drink.

The Greeks' heritages from non-Greeks, that is, from Franks and Ottomans, have been constantly marginalised. In 1859 the poet Aristotelis Valaoritis presented modern Greek history in Manichaean terms: 'the foundation of modern Greek poetry must be the faithful narration of the sufferings and martyrdoms of the Nation, the constant struggle of Hellenism against foreignism (ξενισμός)'.⁴⁷ In several parts of Greece, Venetian and Ottoman buildings are used as Orthodox churches, museums, venues for artistic events, military installations, or administrative offices. Yet, as the architectural historian Olga Gratziou has pointed out, until the middle of the 20th century the surviving Roman, Frankish, Venetian and Ottoman buildings in Greece were not considered to be monuments; instead they were generally regarded with indifference or hostility.⁴⁸ Little Greek interest was shown in the Venetian monuments of Crete until 1953, when the Historical Museum of Crete was founded in Heraklion. It was about this time that the term 'Cretan Renaissance' began to be used by historians of literature and art⁴⁹ to refer to the rich high culture of Venetian Crete in the 16th and 17th centuries, which displayed a remarkable fusion of Greek and Venetian features in literature, architecture and other aspects of culture. Because of the low priority accorded to supposedly non-Greek monuments in the hierarchy of heritages, a number of buildings constructed by the Venetians in Crete had already been demolished when Greece began to try to assert its European orientation after the end of the Colonels' dictatorship.⁵⁰ About the city of Heraklion Gratziou notes, in a remarkable understatement: 'The almost complete disappearance of the centre of a European town of the early modern period is an interesting historical phenomenon in itself.'⁵¹ It is characteristic that Cretan churches and icons of the Venetian and Ottoman periods are commonly referred to (and officially signed) as 'Byzantine' and 'post-Byzantine'. According to Dionysis Mourelatos, the category 'post-Byzantine' is presented as the missing link in the chain between Byzantium and modern Greece.⁵²

The co-existence of continuity and discontinuity

In a sense there is little direct continuity between modern Greece and Hellenic antiquity, but rather a process of reaching back from the present into the distant past and hauling features of ancient culture into the present for consumption by modern Greeks. Take the example of performances of Ancient Greek drama in modern Greece.

Since the 1930s directors such as Karolos Koun have been mounting innovative productions of Ancient Greek drama. Yet it took a long time for this to happen. While performances in the original Ancient Greek had been put on by university students in the 19th century, the first Greek professional productions of Ancient Greek dramas that attracted public attention dated from about 1900, and, despite being performed in Modern Greek translation, these were often condemned by Greek critics for attempting to revive a dead genre that had no relevance to contemporary Greek culture. Only modern adaptations, with significant cuts to the text, met with public and critical approval at that time. The novelist, dramatist and critic Grigorios Xenopoulos suggested in 1903 that, since the modern Greeks were Christians, they were unable to relate to what was essentially a pagan religious ritual; besides, they didn't need to, since the Easter liturgy in the Orthodox Church already provided them with the equivalent religious, emotional and aesthetic experience. It was not until the 1930s that Ancient Greek drama began to be performed in a textually faithful but otherwise innovative way, and not until the 1950s that it became a fully accepted part of the contemporary Greek repertoire and began to appeal to a wide audience that recognised its timeless – and therefore contemporary – relevance.

Thus it is not 'natural' that Greeks, more than anyone else, should perform and attend performances of ancient drama; but whereas it is not natural, it is nevertheless appropriate. Even today, a performance of an ancient drama in front of a Greek audience is different from a performance of the same drama anywhere else, because it is always in part a ritual confirmation of national and ethnic identity and tradition on the part of performers and audience alike; but it is also a way of making the ancient texts topical.⁵³

In the realm of literature (and especially poetry), the continuity of Greek tradition since antiquity has been argued in histories of Greek literature from Homer to Seferis or Ritsos written by Greek scholars, as well as in a recent American anthology of Greek poetry from ancient to modern times.⁵⁴ So perhaps the truth is that continuities and discontinuities co-exist; it depends on what we are looking at, and the angle we are looking from.

Still, I firmly believe that the only authentic Greece that we can approach and experience is the Greece of today (which in my case, at least, includes the Greece of recent times). I'm not saying that the study of modern Greece is more important than – or even as important as – the study of Greek antiquity; but I am saying that it is valid in its own right and on its own terms. In my teaching and writing I have been determined to see and present the modern Greeks in themselves without constantly referring to ancient Greece and Byzantium. I find it more helpful to conceive of the modern Greeks as embodying certain aspects of ancient and Byzantine culture than to view them within the context of

⁴⁷ Prolegomena to *I kyra Frosyni* (1859).

⁴⁸ Gratziou, in Plantzos & Damaskos, p. 209.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

⁵² Mourelatos, in Plantzos & Damaskos, p. 197.

⁵³ Much of what I say in this paragraph about the period from the 1900s to

the 1930s is based on the paper given by Eleni Papazoglou at the conference 'Re-imagining the Past', Birmingham, 28 June 2011.

⁵⁴ C. A. Trypanis, *Greek poetry: from Homer to Seferis* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981); St. Alexiou, *Ελληνική λογοτεχνία από τον Όμηρο στον 20ο αιώνα* (Athens: Stigma, 2010); Peter Bien, Peter Constantine, Edmund Keeley, Karen Van Dyck, *A century of Greek poetry: 1900-2000* (River Vale, NJ: Cosmos Publishing, 2004).

ancient Hellas and Byzantium. In my work I have placed modern Greece at the centre of my interest, and the earlier periods on the periphery, rather than vice versa.

The modern Greeks' legacy to the world

I could have given a whole lecture on the legacies that the modern Greeks have bequeathed to the world, pointing to the large number of individual Greeks who have made international contributions to the arts and sciences, and the Greek individuals and foundations that have made generous benefactions to museums and educational institutions, especially in the United Kingdom. I could also have mentioned the many British writers and artists who have been inspired by modern Greece, and the British academics (including Arnold Toynbee) who have felt impelled to study the modern Greeks and learn from them, especially in the fields of literature, language, history, anthropology and theology.⁵⁵ Many of these scholars (again including Toynbee) have been members of the British School at Athens, which has provided them with an indispensable physical, academic and social base in which and from which to carry out their research. But the most important and enduring example that the modern Greeks as a nation have set to the world is their determination to be free and their lesson that true liberty requires continuous struggle. The Greeks were the first European nation in the modern era to establish a state organisation by applying the principle of national self-determination.⁵⁶ And between October 1940 and April 1941, the Greeks alone managed against all the odds to repel an invasion by Axis forces. Such achievements have demanded a high degree of recklessness.

In the 20th century the Greeks suffered a number of disasters, some of which were partly of their own making. Yet they have been remarkably successful at bouncing back. First, the Asia Minor Catastrophe of 1922 necessitated the establishment of more than a million Greek refugees from Turkey; in this way one of the greatest disasters in Greece's history was immediately followed by one of its greatest successes. Secondly, having been devastated by foreign

occupation and civil war in the 1940s, the Greeks achieved an economic miracle after 1950, bringing a huge rise in their standard of living. Thirdly, the Colonels' regime of 1967 to 1974 was the only dictatorship to be newly established in Europe since the 1940s; yet the end of the Colonels' dictatorship resulted in the healing of the rift between left and right and the establishment of the first truly democratic regime in Greece's history.

In 2008 Greece was classified as one of the 25 most developed countries in the world,⁵⁷ and until the present crisis Greece was often seen as a source of regional political and financial stability.

In order to weather this latest storm, the Greeks will need to use all of their considerable resourcefulness, but they will also need all the help and encouragement they can get from their fellow Europeans.

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This was one of three lectures given at the British Academy on 18-20 October 2011 to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the British School at Athens. The other two lectures were: 'Philosophy with a Public Voice: A Forgotten Legacy of Ancient Greece', by Professor Alexander Nehamas; and 'Byzantium Today', by Professor Dame Averil Cameron FBA. Audio recordings of all three lectures can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/events/2011/

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⁵⁵ For what Toynbee claimed to have learned from the modern Greeks, see his monumental work *A study of history*, vol. 12 (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 582-3.

⁵⁶ Harald Haarmann, 'Language and ethnicity in a European context', to be published in a forthcoming volume.

⁵⁷ Loukas Tsoukalis, at conference 'Whose crisis? Greece's politics, economics and society in an era of uncertainty', St Antony's College, Oxford, 28 May 2011.

Modern Greek (ἡ σύγχρονη ἑλληνική or ἡ κοινή ἑλληνική) refers collectively to the dialects of the Greek language spoken in the modern era, and includes Standard Modern Greek. The end of the Medieval Greek period and the beginning of Modern Greek is often symbolically assigned to the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453, even though that date marks no clear linguistic boundary and many characteristic modern features of the language arose centuries earlier, between the fourth and the fifteenth centuries AD. Peter Mackridge is Professor Emeritus of Modern Greek at the University of Oxford and a visiting professor at King's College London. This was one of three lectures given at the British Academy on 18-20 October 2011 to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the British School at Athens. © Peter Mackridge. The whole article can be downloaded as a PDF file. Published in British Academy Review, No. 19 (January 2012). © Peter Mackridge. facebook. twitter.