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The Role of the Age of Antiquity in the First Years of the Young Modern Greek State (1830-1850)

From the day of the downfall of Constantinople, it was a firmly-held thought of the Greeks that the fall of the Byzantine Empire was the punishment of God, primarily, for making two alliances with the Western church. This idea is echoed in the following line of today's most famous lament of the era mourning over the fall of the Hagia Sophia: "For it was the will of God that the City should fall on Turkish hands".¹ This idea is the evidence that a cyclical view of time prevailed in that era in which the Golden Age was followed by the age of decline, as a consequence of the sins committed. The idea also held that on the termination of the ages of punishment, it is still possible to return to the previous times of sinless conditions. However, this is possible on the condition only that the people accept the punishment God imposed upon them, since this is the only way to find salvation, that is, to restore the previous conditions.

This is the cause of the Greek passivity of the early modern era, namely, the fact that for 300 years until the Age of Enlightenment, the Greeks suffered under the supposed yoke of God without any major uprising. They did this in the unshakeable belief that when all these come to an end, they will have Constantinople again and the Byzantine Empire will be restored. Although the idea could not arise that the Greeks themselves will liberate Constantinople and expel the Turkish forces from the Byzantine territories, they did not renounce the liberation as such. In the hope of intervening external forces, certain prophecies about the liberation of Constantinople gained more and more emphasis, most notably, the legend of the *Marble King* or that of the *Fair Nation*. Up until the Age of Enlightenment, these prophecies, beliefs and hopes ruled the Greek public opinion.

In the Greek-inhabited area of the Ottoman Empire, the Enlightenment itself occurred with a delay, since the social stratum promoting the ideas of the Enlightenment did not emerge until the end of the 18th century. This was

¹ TRYPANIS, C. A.: *The Penguin Book of Greek Verse*. London et al. 1971, 470.

the stratum of the middle class merchants, who established direct connections with Western Europe during their commercial travels. Getting into contact with the new ideological currents, this stratum became the promoter of these currents in their own state, the Ottoman Empire. Since the Greek language was used in the reception of the Enlightenment, the Greek-speaking middle-class became privileged in the newly-formed social system; thus, the Greek language became the primary channel of culture among all the languages spoken in the Empire. This stratum of middle class merchants did not identify itself with the traditional, Byzantine-Orthodox identity, but it started to seek a new identity conforming to their own ideas.

This was also the time of the occurrence of different nationalist movements, the key figures of these movements belonged to the stratum of the middle-class merchants. The nationalist movements had a dual goal: besides fighting against absolutism, after 300 hundred years of idle waiting, the idea of liberation from the foreign rule was pinned on the banners of the people.

The ideas of the Enlightenment brought a fundamental change to the ruling Greek ideological system. The cyclic view of time was replaced by a linear one and this change implied that mistakes cannot be undone by accepting the imposed punishment and that not acting upon chances can be a waste of time. With the emergence of the linear view of time came the notion of a national view of time. The making of the unbroken continuity of the Greek national view of time, however, proved a long process and it did not end until the middle of the 19th century.

The first stage of this view is the making of the Enlightenment as well: this was the time of the re-acceptance of the previously rejected Ancient Greek past. The Hellenic age of Antiquity meant the shameful pagan past for the Byzantine-Orthodox ideology and instead of calling themselves a “Hellenic” nation, as was the custom of the Ancient Greeks, the name “roman” was used. The restoration of the pagan age of antiquity, however, co-occurred with the underrating of the Christian medieval times and this way, instead of excluding the antiquity from the continuity of the national view of time, the Byzantine medieval ages became rejected. In accordance with the new system of values, the ages of antiquity meant freedom while medieval times came to mean the age of slavery and the gap in the national view of time was not restored until the end of the Enlightenment Era.

The new national identity emerged with the ideas of the Enlightenment and it was not based on religion; thus, the confrontation with the oppressing power

was not based on religion, either. The Orthodox Church, being troubled by the thought of Enlightenment ideas gaining general knowledge, supported the Ottoman government authority and so did the stratum of high-ranked traditional Greek elite, the stratum of Phanariotes. This traditional elite had less and less influence on the promoters of the Enlightenment, the newly-formed strata of Bourgeoisie and it was unable to make them stay loyal to the Ottoman Empire. The merchants displeased with the government authority formed different cabals on freemasonic conventions and these prepared the war of independence for action.

The goal of the war of independence was not the same for everyone. Many freedom fighters sought to restore the Byzantine Empire, while others strived to create the Greek nation-state, or simply win their own personal laurels in fighting. These oppositions came to light in a short period of time and the split emerging from these became the characteristic of the whole of the war of independence. After long years of fighting, the final victory was achieved with the intervention of the world powers and the foundation of the next state was in turn led by the world-powers as well.

The newly-formed state became an absolute monarchy – in the time of the restoration following the Napoleonic Wars, no other form of state was in practice in Europe. Since there was no aristocracy present in the Greek society since the fall of Byzantium, the king for the young nation-state was assigned by the world-powers as well. The area of the Modern Greek nation-state, however, covered only a part of the Greek-inhabited territories and it included only the one-third of the Greek territories inside the Ottoman Empire. In consequence, the thought of transiency remained after the founding of the state and the idea of restoring the borders of the Byzantine Empire was present in the public opinion.

The foreign government of the underage king and the regents governing in his name placed the Ancient Greek past in the centre of the new state-ideology in the heat of the positive associations created by the Enlightenment and it tried to legitimise its own power as the guardian of this concept. With the strengthening of the state came the forming of the Greek Archaeological Service and that of the Archaeological Society at Athens and the publishing of the *Archaiologike Ephemeris* (a periodical on archaeology) started. In addition, a huge amount of royal statutes was created to save the ancient Greek monuments, to warrant the excavations and to make neoclassicism the prevailing architectural style. These events, the fact that the previous capital, Nafplio, was replaced by Athens and the worship of the antique era supported and strengthened by

the Bavarians being a characteristic of that age; these all created a spiritual background, in which “the world of antiquity became closely connected to the present of the Kingdom of Greece.”² In conclusion, the Bavarians, motivated by a general interest in the age of antiquity in the German-speaking territories, encouraged the Greeks to turn to their own antique past.

Besides the over-played worship of the antique ages, the regime of King Otto had an ambivalent relationship with the Byzantine medieval ages. To decrease the influence of the Orthodox Church, the regime made it independent from the Patriarchy of Constantinople as it was the most important point of alignment for the Greeks since Byzantine times. After such antecedents, the power rejected the Byzantium and the Byzantine legacy officially, but it gave room to popular beliefs connected to the current government, since these ideas further strengthened its legitimacy. The most notable of these popular beliefs are the legends of the *Marble King*³ and the *Taking of the Red Apple-tree*.⁴ The Bavarians quickly understood that these popular beliefs can not only bestow Greek aspects to kingship, but it can make it look like having popular Greek origins and this way, contributing to its general acceptance. In other words, “the natural Greek inclination to the monarchical form of state” proved particularly useful to the power of that period. This way, a strange, dual system emerged in connection with the Byzantium and the Byzantine history: the official rejection and the unofficial permissiveness co-occurs in this system.

One of the prominent events in the mental sphere of the period was the 1836 establishment of the first university. The Greek political leadership was interested in the thought of establishing an institution of higher education from the beginnings, but since the educational policy of Kapodistrias had other

² ΣΚΟΠΕΤΕΑ, Ε.: Το πρότυπο βασίλειο και η Μεγάλη Ιδέα. Οψεις του εθνικού προβλήματος στην Ελλάδα (1830-1880). Athens 1988, 171, translated from Greek.

³ The myth of the *Marble King* (Ο μαρμαρωμένος βασιλιάς) is one of the Byzantine, or in a broader sense, European eschatological ideas. According to this, the last Byzantine emperor, Constantine XI (Palaiologos) was not slain when Constantinople was captured, but he, turned to marble stone at the depths of a cavern, is waiting for the right moment lead his nation again to make its total liberation come true. See ALEXANDER, P. J.: The Medieval Legend of the Last Roman Emperor and its Messianic Origin. *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 41 (1978) 1-15; VEIS, N. A.: Περί του ιστορημένου χρησιμολογίου της Βιβλιοθήκης του Βερολίνου (Codex Graecus fol. 62-297) και του θρύλου του «Μαρμαρωμένου Βασιλιά». *Byzantinisch-Neugriechische Jahrbücher* 13 (1937) 203-244.; BRANDES, W. – SCHMIEDER, F.: *Endzeiten: Eschatologie in den monotheistischen Weltreligionen*. Berlin–New York 2008.

⁴ The *Red Apple-tree* is the mythical early homeland of the Turks, where the revived *Marble King* will expel the conquerors usurping Constantinople; in other versions, he will not only do this, but conquer this territory as well. See ΡΟΜΑΙΟΣ, Κ.: Η Κόκκινη Μηλιά. Athens 1979.

priorities, the plan could not come true. The foundation of the state, however, induced fundamental changes in the walk of educational policy: the establishment of a university became an urgent national interest, since the new state was in an immediate need of officials who could cope with the demands of working in the polity. The most obvious way of creating such human workforce was, beyond doubt, to have the state itself deal with their education.

Not only these causes encouraged the state of King Otto to establish a university, however, moreover, it is possible to say that these were not the most important among the reasons. Those establishing the university wanted to follow through a more important one.

Ludwig von Maurer, who was responsible for the educational policy during the era of the regency, said the following words in one of his speech urging the establishment of a university:

For it is the mission of Greece, to transmit the light of the European culture into Asia one day, and even further; and in doing so, she is assisted by her exceptional geographical location and the spiritual insight of her people. And since she was once the cradle of the European culture that derives the knowledge from She now, so must She derive the millennia-old knowledge from Asia, Egypt and from other countries in the East, in accordance with the conventions of bartering.⁵

Indeed, the words of Maurer above, connected to the function and goals of the future university, are significant. The words “mission” and “transmission” in the speech were central elements in the discourses of the Bavarian regency. In terms of this ideology, the place of Greece in the South-Eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula is not unintentional: she is located there to cope with her “mission”, that is, to transmit the European culture to the East.

Some years later, these ideas of Maurer were improved by Konstantinos Schinas, the first president of the university. In his speech in the inauguration of the university, Schinas mentions that the lack of political unity was the greatest weakness of the ancient Greek world, then, continuing his train of thought, he emphasises that the greatest accomplishment of the Modern Greeks, on the other hand, is their ability to create a unitary, strong and centralised state. Henceforth, he speaks of seeing the establishment of the university as the second great accomplishment of the Modern Greeks:

⁵ MAURER, L.: Ο ελληνικός λαός [“The Greek Nation”]. Athens 1835, 421 (translated from Greek).

Since our university is situated halfway between the East and the West, it is the mission of this institution to be a fertile soil for the seeds of wisdom and after germinating the sprouts of prolific knowledge from them, it should transmit this to our Eastern neighbours in a tender, fruitful form.⁶

In conclusion, Maurer highlights two important aspects of the establishment of the university: the “transmission” of the European culture to the East and the “mission” of the Greeks to become the leading power of this region. Schinas repeats these thoughts adding the prominent notion of unity to them. It is obvious that he does not express his own ideas in his ceremonial speech, but it is easy to see that his words echo the official policy of the regency not only in connection with the issue of the university, but in terms of state preferences as well. The reason behind the Greek nation establishing the university is not exclusively the fact that she wants to raise able and loyal officials for her bureaucracy, but it has more to do with creating the starting point of a long-term practise of influencing the whole Middle-Eastern region both politically and culturally. Maurer’s and Schinas’s carefully-formulated triad of “transmission – unity – mission” breaks through the borders of university life soon and starts to prevail in a much broader sense.

The thought of a Greece that transmits the light of knowledge to the undeveloped East had a strange, appealing effect on the figures of both the scientific and the political life. Some years later in 1842, staying at this idea, another significant figure of the Greek intelligentsia, Georgios Pentadis Darvaris, likens Greece to Prometheus, who “reaches for Asia-Minor with her one hand, while she does so for Thrace and Macedonia with her other one”.⁷ Two years later, Ioannis Kolettis, one of the most notable politicians of his age, said the following words in his famous speech: “It is the mission of Greece to irradiate the East with her revival”,⁸ in 1846, Panagiotis Soutsos emphasises that “Greece is a torch with shining light between the East and the West that God sets light to shine on Europe in one case, than on Asia in the other”.⁹

According to the official state ideology, the Modern Greeks are descendant of blood to the glorious ancients of the antique ages and this honourable title is the result of their heroic courage shown in the war of independence. As the mental sphere encircling the establishment of the university markedly pointed

⁶ DIMARAS, K.: *Ελληνικός Ρωμαντισμός*. Athens 1985, 350 (translated from Greek).

⁷ DIMARAS (n. 6) 351 (translated from Greek).

⁸ DIMARAS (n. 6) 405 f. (translated from Greek).

⁹ DIMARAS (n. 6) 352 (translated from Greek).

it out, Greece is just half-way between Europe and Asia and it is her God-given duty, to transmit the Western culture to the East, as it were, in gratitude to the fact that East did the same for West in the antique ages. The keywords of this ideology are, in short, the following: *transmission, unity* and *mission*.

With the establishment of the absolutism, different question arose in the life of the Greek society that the official state ideology could not answer. Since the middle of the 1830s, a significant religious boom of popular origin was present, a one that the power could not restrict. This shed a new light on the prophecies of re-taking Constantinople and this met with the aspirations of a Greek economic elite, living outside of the borders of the new nation, to extend the borders of it to include every Greek-inhabited territory. The precedent of the Western (mainly German and Italian) movements in re-unificating themselves gave further boosts to these ideas. Eventually, after the Western superpowers started to patronise Turkey in the Crimean War, one part of the Greek intelligentsia became disillusioned with Western culture interpreting the event as a treachery and did not want to transmit it to the East any more. The state ideology of the Otto regime, therefore, was in an urgent need of a revision.

The solution was the newly-forming national ideology called the Great Idea, connected to popular representative Ioannis Kolettis. In the 1844 national assembly, he seized power to protest against a bill of a group of representatives assigning different legal standing to the citizens originating in-and outside of the borders. If this bill had ever become a law, it would have placed the latter group into a disadvantageous position. He tried to point it out in his speech that the goal of the war of independence was to create a strong and unitary nation state, but this cannot happen if such distinctions are made between the citizens, since it undercuts the sense of national unity. It is interesting that Kolettis revived two issues that were mentioned by the president of the university as well. In the other parts of his speech, he re-emphasised the idea that the greatest weakness of the ancient Greeks was the lack of unity¹⁰ and he

¹⁰ It is an interesting parallel that Paparrigopoulos, in the beginning of his career as a historian, in his book *The last year of the Greek independence*, also mentions this idea and he emphasises the establishment of political unity: "Unity is the condition of independence, but this would not be achieved so long as the unity of the nation of Hellas was disorganised by some many forces. Our servitude was inevitable under such conditions. [...] Polytheism, however, was replaced by the unitary nature of Christianity, so were the many dialects of language by linguistic unity and so were tribal differences by national unity; the nation of Greeks, in turn, strives to achieve national unity with a crust of this triple weapon." (ΠΑΡΡΙΓΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ, Κ.: Το τελευταίον έτος της ελληνικής ελευθερίας. Athens 1844, 3 f.; ΔΙΜΙΤΡΑΚΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ, ΡΗ.: Βυζάντιο και Νεοελληνική Διανόηση στα μέσα του δέκατου ένατου αιώνας. Athens 1996, 172).

draw the attention to the cultural role that Greece has to fulfil in the mental sphere of the East. The part of the speech mentioning the Great Idea for the first time is the following:

I remark the day of our pledge with thrill in which we promised to do every possible thing, even sacrificing our lives for the freedom of Greece. Many of those are yet among the living. We lie under the weight of that pledge now, when we gather together to write a new constitution, this gospel of our political lives, so that we will have two gospels henceforth, one for religion and one for politics. Deriving from our geographical location, Greece is the centre of Europe: with East at his right hand and West at his left one, it is her mission to irradiate West with her decline and East with her revival. The former was achieved by our ancestors, the latter is our duty. In the spirit of this pledge and this Great Idea, I have always thought that the representatives are not only deciding on the fate of Greece, but on that of the whole Greek nation.¹¹

The most important condition of the birth of the Great Idea was the restoration of the Byzantine history and placing it into the unity of the national view of time. Upon this coming true, the new ideology was able to unite the popular religious beliefs of Byzantine origins, the intelligentsia disillusioned with the Western culture and the ruling classes preparing for a territorial expansion. For the sake of the ideological firmament, it was essential to prove the continuity of the permanent Greek presence on the desired territories; thus, this became the most important duty of historical science in the second half of the 19th century. With the restoration of Byzantium, the continuity of the national view of time, overarching the period between the antique era and our present day, became a whole including both the pagan antiquity and the Christian medieval ages. One of the first formulations of this is Spyridon Zampelios's three theories of the era, upon which Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos based his victorious ideology of three phase-theory. With his 1853 words in the periodical *Pandora*:

There is a nation in the East that laid down the foundations of the mental and political sphere (...) in the medieval times, it became the apostle and most important advocate of the Word of God. (...) A nation that has not lost the hope so far despite all the sorrows it has to suffer, (...) but its people were fighting (...) making it a wonderful naval power, becoming rich from commerce and boldly fighting in the sudden war of independence to become politically independent. A nation living in the unshakeable belief that after accomplishing a great historical mission in the antique era, the

¹¹ DIMARAS (n. 6) 405 f. (translated from Greek).

Divine Providence kept it under the Roman rule as well to accomplish its second great mission in the medieval ages, then after this, God kept it under the Turkish rule as well so that this nation could accomplish its third mission not less significant than the previous ones; this would be to become the leading figure in the revival of the East.¹²

This new national ideology proved amazingly efficient; it is possible to say that it has become the new “national orthodoxy.” Paparrigopoulos’s new ideology, based on the trichotomy of the Greek history, swept away the last traces of the old ideology on which the intellectual revival of the previous era was based, the very same ideology that became the foundation of the war of independence. Thus, the new ideology of national unity replaced the previous system of ideas from the Greek Enlightenment.

It is also easy to see that the Paparrigopoulos’s theory of three phases is not only present in the minds of the Greek society, but it prevailed and from that time, it became a defining element in historical theory. Since this ideological formation became undistinguishable from the Greek ideology of state, it soon sank into oblivion that this theory and all other elements generated by it (e.g. “Greco-Christian ideas”) are relatively new and this has several negative consequences. The immensely popular new ideology became an undistinguishable part of the political rhetoric and this often led to different missuses and manipulations of power.

The original meaning of the theory of three phases was often misused to achieve different goals in current politics; among them, the most flagrant one is connected to the foundations of the Metaxas-regime. Metaxas’s new system of 4th August, 1936 was based on the theory of the “third Greek culture”, since misusing the theory of the three phases provided proper rhetorical and ideological background even for dictatorial claims. Many blame Zampelios and Paparrigopoulos for the later manipulation of their principle, but this paper claims that they are not responsible for that. The sad series of misusing Paparrigopoulos’s theory did not end with the Metaxas-regime, unfortunately; the period after the 1946-1949 civil war saw the emergence of an official ideology based on the “Greco-Christian patriotism” and the historiography of the era is also heavily depending on the range of Paparrigopoulos’s ideas. Although this cycle of thoughts is often misused even today, this does not underrate the important role that the Great Idea has in the ideological foundations of the Modern Greek state.

¹² *Pandora* V/79 (1. July 1853) 173 and cited by: DIMARAS, K.: Κωνσταντίνος Παπαρρηγόπουλος. Η εποχή του, η ζωή του, το έργο του. Athens 1986, 183 and ΣΚΟΡΕΤΕΑ (n. 2) 181.