

Notes from the Guest Editors

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Discussions on Hellenism and Islam are bound to be enterprises in collapsing and expanding categories. The two terms are in our days as multivalent and politically loaded as the diverse spaces in which they operate as markers of identity and as ethnic, religious, and more broadly cultural signifiers. Perhaps most ominously the two categories evoke normative polarities deeply engrained in Western views of world history. In a global post-9/11 context the neoconservative appropriation of ancient Greek history and culture as reflected in the political writings of Victor Davis Hanson and the cinematic adaptation of Frank Miller's pulp version of the 300 went hand in hand with the commensurate steps that cast Islam as a polar opposite to the Western tradition of which Hellenism is an unquestioned central part.¹ A view of Hellenism and Islam as successful cultural products battling it out in a global scene for the allegiances of the world's citizens occludes, however, much history of both conflict and accommodation.²

A small symposium held in the fall of 2008 at Simon Fraser University's Harbour Centre in downtown Vancouver, brought together art historians, historians, archaeologists and comparative literature experts in a conversation covering diverse aspects of the interaction between Hellenism and Islam. In this dialogue the pre-modern fault lines dividing the Roman Empire from Sassanid Persia and the Caliphate, the national histories of East Mediterranean

nations from the western European “mainstream,” but also the very current conversations on the place of Islam in the circumscribed space of national Hellenism put the posited global binary under intense scrutiny by revealing its complex history and current life.

The *Journal of Modern Hellenism* welcomed our effort to publish some of these papers along with a number of accompanying submissions of interest to this debate. With Greece on the crossroads of long avenues of immigration and with Muslims and Islam becoming an increasingly important cipher in the mosaic that is Modern Greek society, a discussion on Hellenism and Islam became more than timely.

Our exploration starts with Late Antiquity and the world of pre-Islamic Syria as we examine the vicissitudes of Hellenism in the rich cultural space of Roman Syria. Nate Andrade’s “Framing the Syrian of Late Antiquity: Engagements with Hellenism” introduces the geography and cultural cleavages present in the Near Eastern world before the rise of Islam, setting out the parameters in which much subsequent discussion about the interaction between the world of Islam and the world of the Greek speaking Byzantines took place. Significantly, Andrade looks into the transformations of Greek, Roman and more generally Syrian identity in a world where linguistic and religious markers, so essential in our modern definitions of identity, failed to provide watertight ethnic categories.³ The changes charted here in the content of Hellenism demonstrate the fluidity of the concept as understood by both participants in Hellenic culture and outsiders. They also act as a warning shot across the bow of national Hellenism by confirming the historical propensity of outsiders to play an essential role in defining the boundaries and content of Hellenism.

“Hellenism and Exoticism in French Medieval Romance” by Megan Moore examines the interaction between Byzantium, Catholic France and Islam through the looking glass of the Medieval Romances produced in French courtly circles during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In her work Moore follows the familiar trope of the Orient’s exoticism but adds a twist by noting the French conflation of Islam and Byzantium under the rubric of a non-Cath-

olic paganism. While the biblical notion of an Oriental land of milk and honey lay at least partially behind the Crusading movement, Moore shows that as the repository of Hellenic technical expertise and a producer of rare mechanical luxuries Byzantium remained at the center of European ideas about the east.

Moore, however, notes that by the thirteenth century the sense of wonder with the Greek past is replaced by a confidence that the “French” had finally come to a point where they could become heirs to a *translatio imperii* that left them in control of both Roman-ness and of a sense of intellectual superiority. At that stage, the conflation of the Byzantines with the Muslims becomes complete, as conversion narratives originally applicable to Islam alone are now relevant to the world of Byzantium.

A reading of things Hellenic steeped in the materiality of traded and frequently looted luxury items takes us further east into the world of northern Mesopotamia and Artuqid art as studied by Marcus Milwright in “*Rum, Sin* and the Idea of the Portrait in Medieval Arabic Literary and Visual Culture.” Milwright offers a space of intellectual exploration that spanned vast expanses of the planet bringing together Greek and Chinese artists in fictional art-competitions that fascinated Muslim audiences. From the opening pages of his work, Milwright engages with the problem of Islamic traditions in the figural arts and draws a genealogy of the phenomenon that eventually takes us to his period of study in the Artuqid twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Like Andrade’s Syria, the world of Upper Mesopotamia in the said period is an area where populations formerly under the authority of the Byzantine emperors interact with new masters to produce fascinating hybrid cultural products.

Not surprising for an area that was the setting for the epic celebrating the famously hybrid Digenis Akritas (a hero born in Byzantine lands of a Roman mother and a Muslim father converted to Christianity), the phenomenon built on previous Muslim engagement with the world of Greek thinking and went well beyond it, blending ancient Greek writings on physiognomy with contemporary Byzantine artistic trends, thus producing a Muslim response

to figural art that seems to mirror Byzantine responses to the material world of antiquity.

A jump in time, a westwards correction on the map, and a change of focus from the world of ideas to that of Ottoman urbanism takes us to early modern Nafpaktos and Eva Baboulas' "Nafpaktos: A Town to be Envied Even by Sultans? Aspects of the Ottoman Presence in Western Greece." Her discussion of Ottoman efforts to mark the space of Nafpaktos—the Lepanto of the western tradition, site of the Christian victory over the Ottoman fleet in 1571—as a properly Ottoman social, commercial, economic and military space, speak of the body of mainland Greece as a space contested by Islamic and Christian imperial aspirations that operate outside the boundaries of cultural Hellenism.⁴ The Hellenes/Rum of the area are elided from the landscape, as forces larger than them plot on it narratives of Spanish, Venetian, and Ottoman domination. Baboula's article must also be looked at from the perspective of Modern Greek identity formation. Baboula in fact notes the irony of the presence of a statue of Miguel Cervantes (a participant in the sea-battle of Lepanto) at a central point of modern Nafpaktos. Granted the city's less than spectacular ancient and medieval Hellenism, the current heirs to Nafpaktos' history look to imperial Spain in their desire expunge the memory of Evliya Çelebi's "town to be envied even by sultans." The city's Ottoman and Muslim past is therefore subjected to the triple assault, literary, military and Christian embodied in the celebration of *Don Quixote*'s author.

Katherine Fleming's "Early Modern Jewish Histories in Ottoman and Mediterranean Contexts" covers roughly the same chronological scope with Eva Baboulas' paper, also engaging with issues of identity and history in the pre-modern Mediterranean. In Fleming's Mediterranean, Jews and Greeks lament the respective loss of prosperity and statehood and produce histories with which to understand the effects of Christian and Islamic empire on their collective fates. Fleming examines the apocalyptic and millenarian narrative format employed by both groups as they sought to understand the end of periods of freedom and perceived prosperity. She then follows a divergence that develops in subsequent

years as Jews—among them many refugees from the Kingdoms of Castile and Aragon—come to view the Ottoman Empire as a form of transitional Israel, while the Greeks internalize the very same experience of living under Islamic rule as divine punishment and a scourge from which to one day be freed. In this context, the Creation, the Flood and the Fall of Constantinople exist in a temporal vector recognized and evoked by both Greeks and Jews, even as the former also develop more traditionally Hellenist approaches to the demise, reflected in Chalkokondyles' recognition of the fall of Constantinople as the closing bracket to a historical parenthesis that begins with the fall of Troy. Even though the destruction of the Byzantine state by Mehmet II takes centre stage in the writings of Greek Orthodox authors, they concur with their Jewish counterparts in perceiving the Catholic powers of Western Europe and not the Ottomans as the principal threat.

Fleming's paper forces the question of Greek identity in the early-modern era and questions through the fascinating confluence of Greek and Jewish apocalyptic writing the modern assumption regarding the Western nature and position of Greeks and Greece.⁵ Fleming's Greeks, much like her Jews foster a justified fear and suspicion for the West even as they seek ways to free themselves from their Islamic overlords. In this context, the Islamic present of Ottoman rule is a prism through which to examine Greek and Jewish past and their divergent aspirations regarding the future.

It is then with that future that this volume must conclude. In a Modern Greek national space Hellenism has for the past two centuries existed as a geographically and ethnically bound identity.⁶ In this space, Greeks have had to perform intellectual calisthenics as they strove to accommodate a pagan-inflected Hellenism next to a Byzantine experience supposedly defined by the traditions of the Christian Orthodox Church and faith.⁷ Sotiris Roussos' "The Athens Mosque: From Foreign Policy Tool to the Formation of Public Islam in Greece" therefore takes us to the last decades of the twentieth century as he studies the vicissitudes of the various efforts, both state and community driven for the erection of a mosque at the center of the city of Athens. The historical context for Roussos' paper is

one of visible change in the urban, ethnic, and social landscape of Greek cities; a change reflected in a minister's recent description of Athens as Kabul.⁸ Roussos' paper is also set against the backdrop of new initiatives for the clarification of the process whereby citizenship is granted to children of immigrants born in Greece and to any foreigner legally residing in the country. The mosque then becomes a symbol for something that is already present in Greece. It is the material embodiment of a myriad Muslim lives in a country where identity has often been defined in opposition to Islam.

In that sense then Roussos' paper raises a number of important issues that pertain to the construction of Modern Greek identity. When the military junta of 1967–74 first discussed the possibility of building a Mosque in Athens, Islamic governments were seen as potentially effective counterweights to the pressures applied on the military regime by western adherents to the arguably Hellenic ideal of democracy. Members of the Greek governing elites had not envisaged a community that would be using the mosque; they could not have done so as there was no Muslim community in Athens at the time. As for the persistent Saudi requests for a mosque in Athens, they were also similarly detached from any idea of community.

Roussos explains how with the gradual creation of a Muslim community in Athens the discussion of the Athens Mosque was infused with new meaning, as much more than diplomacy was now at stake. At this stage, Roussos presents for his readers the peculiar concerns that Greek-Orthodox leaders have expressed over the years about the symbolic import of a mosque in the center of Athens. Paired with ideas of an arc that unites Muslim minorities across the Balkans to their assumed patrons in Turkey, the proposed mosque evokes fears of a fifth column in a Greek nation living at the edge of Europe under perceived Islamic siege.

At the same time, the idea of a mosque next to pristine Greek antiquities awakened a peculiar Greek sensitivity about those monuments.⁹ In such a context, the mosque as a symbol of the Islamic faith would violate "sacred space" that Greeks imagined they had over the centuries defended from foreign "impiety." Ironically, their

Byzantine ancestors were unconcerned by the presence of a mosque at the foot of the Acropolis.¹⁰ Less concerned with symbols and "aesthetics" and more focused on the immediate political implications of the issue under consideration, Roussos brings the conversation to a close with a discussion of the potential for Muslim political mobilization in Greece. In doing so he raises the crucial issue of ethno-religious pluralism in the context of the Greco-Orthodox national narrative of the host country.¹¹ Greece then, finds herself at a crossroads. Islam is an inevitable part of her future, much as Hellenism became a venerated component of Islamic thought in the Middle Ages. In effect, to use Anderson's definition of a nation, the Greeks are in need of recalibrating their national imaginary, as they generate a new imagined community that normalizes the process of dialogue and communication with Hellenism's new Muslim citizens.¹² If successful, the project will create a Hellenic Islam and a vibrant multiethnic and multi-denominational Greek nation. Such a success, which is by no means warranted by the current Greek debate on this issue, would have regional but also ultimately global implications given the habitual – if not truly accurate – alignment of Hellenism and Islam with the two sides of the East-West divide.

Notes

¹Victor Davis Hanson, *War, Ancient and Modern: What the Conflicts of the Past Teach Us about the Fighting of Today* (Lectures on National Security Affairs) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

²Michael McCormick in *The Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce A.D. 300–900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 193–4 on Methodios tense relationship with and imprisonment by the Christian Frankish authorities in the monastery of Reichenau on Lake Constance, as opposed to 188–9 on the Byzantine ambassadors' reasoned debate with Muslims and Jews at the Khazar capital.

³Nate Andrade's definitions of the Syria go well beyond the Herodotan definition of the Greek nation with its emphasis on blood, language, common rites and customs (Herodotos, *Histories* 8.144.1–3).

⁴In that sense, though not dealing with theoretical questions regarding colonialism, Baboulas' piece offers, perhaps unwittingly, a most interesting critique of Yannis Hamilakis' statement regarding Greece's colonial past, according to which "Greece has not been formally colonized as such, but the process of its production as a modern nation-state amounts to that of colonization." With this statement Hamilakis indirectly treats the years of Ottoman rule of Greece's Christian populations as non-colonial. For this quote see Yannis Hamilakis, *The Nation and its Ruins: Antiquity, Archaeology and National Imagination in Greece* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 20.

⁵For recent engagement with the problem of pre-modern Greek identity see Katerina Zacharia, *Hellenisms: Culture, identity, and Ethnicity from Antiquity to Modernity* (Alredshot: Ashgate-Variorum, 2008).

⁶Charles Stewart, "Temporality, Historicization, and the Unconscious," in Zacharia, *Hellenisms*, 279 notes that "as a country, Greece is unusual in having a past that is almost as highly valued internationally as it is nationally." Here Stewart quotes two very different texts. First Roger Just, "Cultural Certainties and Private Doubts," in Wendy James (ed.), *The Pursuit of Certainty: Religious and Cultural Formulations* (London: Routledge, 1995), 285–308, then comes Victor Davis Hanson, "Olympic Corruption? It's All Greek to Me," *Wall Street Journal*, September 26 2000, A26.

⁷A process that began with the great synthetic work of Konstantinos Paparigopoulos, *Ιστορία του Ελληνικού Έθνους* [History of the Hellenic Nation] (Athens, 1853). More modern iterations of the continuity thesis to be found in Georgios D. Metallinos, *Παγανιστικός Ελληνισμός ή Ελληνορθοδοξία* [Pagan Hellenism or Greek Orthodoxy] (Athens: Armos Publishers, 2003). A most interesting counterpoint to the idea of continuity would issue out of Byzantium and the work of Georgios Gemistos Plethon, who at the end of days for the Byzantine Empire felt the need to propose an alternative to the Byzantine Roman identity of the dying empire and went for a Platonic National Hellenism that was deemed alien by his Orthodox contemporaries. For Plethon and the Greek nation see N. Patrick Peritore, "The Political Thought of Gemistos Plethon: A Renaissance Byzantine Reformer," *Polity* 10.2 (Winter, 1977), 168–191. That is not to say that Byzantium was not a home and a welcome one at that for the classical tradition. In that sense one cannot espouse Cyril A. Mango's "Discontinuity with the Classical Past in Byzantium," in Margaret Mullet and Roger Scott (eds) *Byzantium and the Classical Tradition* (Birmingham, 1981). Anthony Kaldellis, "Classical Scholarship in Twelfth-Century Byzantium," in Charles Barber and David Jenkins (eds) *Medieval Greek Commentaries on the Nikomachean Ethics* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 1–43 is a more sensitive way to approach the Byzantine's relationship with the classical past. Kaldellis steers clear of the Greco-Orthodox blend posited by Metallinos.

⁸For Athens as Kabul see Nikos Mpakounakis, «Τι Αθήνα, τι Καμπούλ,» *Το Βήμα*, April 2, 2010.

⁹Yannis Hamilakis, *The Nation and its Ruins: Antiquity, Archaeology and National Imagination in Greece* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8, also 26 for the role of Greek Orthodoxy in the sacralization of the pagan ruins; 61 on the incompatibility of the Agora with the muezzin (quoting Kambouroglou); 86–98 on a beautiful reading of the 19th century idea of purification of the side from the remains of barbarism; 121 on the sacralization of antiquities and the Orthodox influence.

¹⁰*Ibid.* 6 on the idea of "sacrilege" and the ruins of the Parthenon; George C. Miles, "The Arab Mosque in Athens," *Hesperia* 25.4 (Oct.–Dec., 1956): 329–344 for a Byzantine correction to modern ideas about the history of the relationship of Athens' classical urban space and the mosque.

¹¹For the very gradual emergence of the modern Greco-Orthodox national narrative as a formal component of a Greek ideology see Livanios, "Religion, Nationalism."

¹²Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Hamilakis, *The Nation and its Ruins*, 16 for a useful short summation of Anderson's concept of the "imagined community."