

THE CULTURE OF ASIA MINOR AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO MODERN GREECE

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Abstract

The immigrants from Asia Minor left behind their land, property and all material belongings but brought with them their art, expertise, habits and way of life along with their experiences and memories. However what stood out saliently was their faith, vigor, diligence and determination for social and financial development, action and cultural contribution. However, the single most significant contribution is the sense of moral order they brought into Greece, the religious dedication to faith and the love for their homeland. Having been subjected to discrimination, persecution and massacre because of their faith and nationality and with an awareness of what it means to be deprived of such ideological and emotional assets and they became living examples for indigenous Greeks who took them for granted.

This boost in the population was not only quantitative but also qualitative. The immigrants from Asia Minor were hard-working, imaginative, intelligent and above all progressive. All these qualities were put in the service of the new homeland and contributed greatly in its development. And these same qualities are the ones that helped the immigrants themselves develop and climb the social strata reaffirming the remarkable qualities of Hellenism.

Key words: *Minor Asia culture, immigrants from Minor Asia*

The Hellenism of Asia Minor

Across the ages and throughout its history, the Hellenism of Asia Minor inspired Greek Culture and often shaped its very foundations.

As early as the sixth century BC, while Metropolitan Greece was still attached to religious beliefs and was able speak only to articulate the language of Myth and proportional reasoning, Asia Minor had already developed Scientific thought which relies on proof and Logic and began to articulate the language of the Logos (Λόγος).

Asia Minor operated as a center, where major philosophers of the era congregated, and where the foundations of philosophy, the crowning achievement of the human spirit, were laid through their teachings. Pherecydes of Syros (Roussos, 2010), the great teacher of Pythagoras, after traveling to Chaldea, Assyria and Egypt, where he experienced first-hand the philosophy of those regions, he passed through Asia Minor and came in contact with this new spiritual centre. When afterward he settled in Syros, the small island in Cyclades opposite Delos, the island where the sun is born, he acted as the necessary link that imported this new school of thought into Metropolitan Greece (Stefanou, 1995) Pythagoras and then Plato, whose mother was a member of the Pythagorean school, and later Aristotle and the other Greek philosophers, Roman intellectuals, Byzantine sages and scholars disseminated Rational Thought to the West. This brought to the fore a more profound understanding of Civilization as the culmination and expression of collective consciousness that develops over time through the individual consciousness of the citizens of every city, of every Place (*Topos*)!

Perhaps then it is no coincidence that after centuries of enslavement and suffering, the ideals, principles and practices of western civilization, would return to the birthplace in Greece once again through Asia Minor.

Indeed if we take a close look at the state of mainland Greece and compare it to the Greek communities outside Greece during the 19th and early 20th century we will observe significant differences between them, especially as far as urban development is concerned. According to C. Aggelomatis (Aggelomatis) Smyrna's population was 350.000, of which 200.000 were Greek, 80.000 Turks and the remaining 70.000 Armenians, Jews, Italians, French, English and Americans (Sfakianoudakis, Papiros Larous Mpritanika) while the population of Athens, the capital of the Greek state, was a mere 168.749. Around the same time Trapezounta at Pontus (Author's team of institution of more major Hellenism, 2011) counted a population of 50.000, with 15.000 Greeks among them, during a period that very few cities in Greece had similar population. In total the Greek population of Asia Minor reached close to 2.000.000 and we can safely say that the approximately 1.200.000 immigrants that fled to Greece after the failure of the Greek military expedition into Asia Minor (Tsakalos, 2011), certainly proved a force that boosted development in the long run.

The immigrants from Asia Minor left behind their land, property and all material belongings but brought with them their art, expertise, habits and way of life along with their experiences and memories. However what stood out saliently was their faith, vigor, diligence and determination for social and financial development, action and cultural contribution (Daskalakis, Big Greek Encyclopaedia Pavlos Drandaki). However, I think that the single most significant contribution is the sense of moral order they brought into Greece, the religious dedication to faith and the love for their homeland. Having been subjected to discrimination, persecution and massacre because of their faith and nationality and with an awareness of what it means to be deprived of such ideological and emotional assets as they became living examples for indigenous Greeks who took them for granted.

The contribution of Asia Minor immigrants to Greece

Financial contribution

The ruling class of the Asia Minor Greeks, who had substantial experience in international trade, transportation, shipping, industry and financial exchanges facilitated the connections of the indigenous financial elite with international banking institutions and contributed substantially to the economic development of the country. Yet we should also not lose sight of the fact that the 200,000 Greeks, most of whom immigrated to multicultural Smyrna from mainland Greece and the inland of Asia Minor, overcame their relative inexperience and lack of knowledge compared to the Europeans managed to quickly seize control of transit trade, a key source of wealth for Smyrna, and even to impose the Greek language as the official language of trade relying exclusively on their determination, diligence, zeal, enthusiasm and organizational skills. (Varlas and all, 2011) Also the Greeks of Smyrna working outside the commercial, banking, financial and industrial sector were particularly active in the railway, in public works and shipping. Greek engineer P. Vitalis, who also participated in the construction of the Thessaloniki waterfront was the one responsible for the construction of the harbor and waterfront. The major banks in Smyrna, such as the Bank of the East (Banque de l'Orient) or the Bank of Athens were owned by Greeks. The Greek Bourgeoisie developed similar activities in other places where there was a Greek community such as Samsounta and Trapezounta. Also the Karayiannides, Fosteropoulos and Theofylaktos houses were renowned banking institutions of the time. What's interesting though is that dominance in the financial sector was not an end in itself for the Greek community of Asia Minor. Isolated from the Greek State they had to cater for the education and spiritual growth of

their children and to maintain their own National identity and the cohesion of their community. The multitude of Greek-run associations, clubs, fraternities with cultural, educational or recreational character that operated in Asia Minor is quite telling. All of these cultural organizations, which were also open to the middle class, with the lectures, dances, theatrical performances, literary and musical events they organized, changed the public life of the urban centers and gave a special cultural role to the literate elite of the time (scholars, doctors, lawyers, bankers, merchants, journalists) and also to women, especially in the areas of charity and cultural activity (Varlas and all, 2011).

Education

In addition Asia Minor Greeks gave a similarly significant boost to the relatively underdeveloped educational system of Greece as they were already experienced in creating schools that could be favorably compared to the high educational standards of similar European institutions. A good such example is the Evangelical School of Smyrna, which had been established in 1733 and where major figures of the Greek Enlightenment such as Benjamin of Lesbos and Theophilos Kairis (Sfakianoudakis, Encyclopaedia Papyrus Larous Mpritanika). The school was recognized as a "high school" since 1862 and its graduates could register in the University of Athens without any further examinations. The school had its own museum of antiquities, coin collection, picture gallery and science experiment lab and in 1922 the school's library held 40.000 books. The only other institution of the time that could rival this renowned School was the Literary School, which was founded and operated under the guidance of A. Korais and which constituted a pillar of Greek Enlightenment. Other examples of outstanding educational institutions was the Agia Fotini Central School for Girls, which was run by Sappho Leontias, a fervent supporter of women's rights and the Homeric School for Girls, which was founded by the Educational Society. Similar girl-schools operated in the other cities as well, the Xanthopoulos and Augerinos School for example, with Marika Kariofylli as its first headmistress. Finally we should also mention the establishment of the Greek University, which was housed in the building of the old Turkish School that was refurbished by A. Zachos (1920).

Arts

As far as the arts are concerned we find plenty of specimens of fertile cross-pollination and cultural exchange in every form of art and expression. An interesting example in field of the visual arts is the painter Georgios Prokopiou, who worked as a painter in the court of Melenik, emperor of Ethiopia, and was also the first to document of war on camera. He documented both in painting and film the Greek military expedition in Asia Minor and the Greek resistance and the war against Germany in 1940. (Kolonas, 2005)

Architecture

In the field of architecture, the cosmopolitan air of Smyrna and the other Greek centers of Asia Minor, was instrumental in the creation of several splendid architectural creations of the time and inspired the development of a peculiar architectural style with European influences and which can be seen in the work of several important Greek architects both in Smyrna and metropolitan Greece. Architects like Ignatius Vafiadis, Demosthenes Apostolidis, Rokos and Polycarpos Vitalis, Ioannis Latris, Antonios Pezaras, Emmanuel Petrokokkinos, Demetrios Lignadis, Georgios Kalokairinos showcased their talents and skill in designing and building as they used new ideas and technologies in constructing banks, stock exchanges, clubs, hotels, mansions, holiday villas, factories, administrative buildings and temples. (Tsakalos, 2011)

Literature and poetry

Equally significant is the contribution of poets and writers from Asia Minor in the fields of literature and poetry. These sensitive and patriotic authors expressed vividly the pains of displacement and the nostalgia for their lost homeland and their narratives inspired profound sentiments of compassion, sympathy and admiration in the hearts of the Greek population who came to empathize with their troubles. Who could remain untouched by the stories of Elias Venezis, the writer from Aivali, or get transfixed by Dido Sotiriou's vivid and evocative description of the unique atmosphere of Aidini? Who indeed did not become enthralled with rich cosmopolitan Smyrna and its slums as they are described in the prose of Kosmas Politis?

New attitudes and mentalities

The influence of Smyrna and the other Greek regions of Asia Minor is perhaps most evident in the new attitudes and mentalities that the newly arrived immigrants, both from upper, urban and lower, provincial social classes, introduced into the not yet urbanized Greece. The abrupt and disorderly influx of one 1.200.000 people inevitably caused several difficulties and it took some time for both immigrants and indigenous Greeks to adjust. However despite the initial shock for some Greeks when they realized that some of the refugees, particularly those from inland Asia Minor, spoke Turkish exclusively and had no knowledge of the Greek language, gradual assimilation and cultural cross-pollination was achieved with remarkable results. Similarly, the already emancipated women of Asia Minor, that initially struck fear in the conservative Greek society, facilitated the emancipation of indigenous women greatly. The ideas of Sappho Leontiadou from Smyrna and Marigo Karyofylli from Trapezounta on the necessity of educating young girls challenged the established idea of the time that education is the exclusive privilege of men and significantly empowered the Greek Women's Movement. (Tsakalos, 2011)

Music, dances, entertainment

At the same time, the music, dances and other forms of entertainment that were part of the Asia Minor folk tradition enriched Greek culture and inspired many artists who rediscovered and appropriated elements from this tradition to produce new folk idioms that proved to be very popular. In Greek folk music in particular a veritable revival took place after the arrival of refugees from Asia Minor. The entertainment culture in Greece changed entirely. The "games", small local bands, found a permanent place at weddings, christenings and family feasts. Nightclubs showcasing "bouzouki music" dominated popular entertainment for lower classes, and still remain the main form of entertainment for all social strands of Greek society to this day. Chasapiko, zeibekiko and tsifteteli dances, all of Asia Minor origin, soon became synonymous with Greek culture. Also the Asia Minor culinary culture had a huge influence on Greek cuisine.

In addition, classical and art music as well as theater were extremely advanced among the Greeks of communities in Asia Minor; The work of composers such as Manolis Kalomiris and Kostas Giannidis is a testament to that. In the "Euterpe" musical theater of Smyrna, French and Italian theater companies were putting on opera or operetta productions all the time while M. Kotopouli and Kyveli, the two great Greek divas of the early 20th century gave frequent performances in the local theaters.

Religious sentiment

However, the most prevalent and significant contribution of the immigrant population was the invigoration and strengthening of the religious sentiment of Greeks. The vivid temperament and eastern mystical inclinations of Asia Minor Greeks, their devout dedication to the national and religious traditions created the necessary conditions for the flourishing of a strong religious faith and the promotion of the ideals found in the teachings of the Great Fathers of the Orthodox

Church, such as Gregorios Nyssis and Gregorios Nanzianzinos the Theologist and the martyrdom of saints and holy-men like Georgios, Polycarpus, Mamas, Ioannis Rossos etc. It is no coincidence that the largest pilgrimages in modern Greece, with the exception of the Virgin Mary of Tinos (a church that was built by Efstratios Kalonaris, an architect from Smyrna) are in honor of religious relics from Asia Minor. The Virgin Mary of Soumela, St. Ioannis the Russian in Prokopi Evias, St. Gregory the Theologian in New Karvali Kavala! The spiritual power of that surrounds these icons and holy relics is directly connected to the faith, dedication and strength of the displaced Greeks of Asia Minor who chose to carry with them religious icons, holy remains, church-bells, religious paraphernalia and other holy relics instead of any other material possessions they had as they were being persecuted.

Agricultural techniques

Finally, we should not overlook the introduction of new agricultural techniques, that helped update and modernize certain obsolete and old-fashioned methods of cultivation, and also the renewal of the working classes with the influx of manpower, at a time when the Greek population had been ravaged by wars. And this boost in the population was not only quantitative but also qualitative.

The immigrants from Asia Minor were hard-working, imaginative, intelligent and above all progressive. All these qualities were put in the service of the new homeland and contributed greatly in its development. And these same qualities are the ones that helped the immigrants themselves develop and climb the social strata reaffirming the remarkable qualities of Hellenism. These are the qualities we should believe in and capitalize in the difficult times we live in.

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