



GOING EAST OR WEST? FINNISH TRAVELERS IN NINETEENTH CENTURY GREECE

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Abstract

In this article I will discuss two different attitudes of traveling in mid-nineteenth century Greece, at a crucial time for the “western” or “eastern” orientation of the Greek state. To capture this I will demonstrate aspects of the travel writing of two Finnish travelers in nineteenth century Greece. The first recognized in modern Greece the light of classical antiquity and the importance of its conveying to the west, the second focused on contemporary Greece and its connection with the east. The two travelers, with a common starting point and at about the same time, traveled in a very different way in nineteenth century Greece and with their different skills “opened” different ideological horizons in a place that they both “loved” and “hated” for different reasons. How does the binary “east/ west?” relate to the travelers’ expectations and predispositions at a time of the development of modern Greek identities and consciousness?

Keywords: *travel writing, nineteenth century, Greece, Finland, binarisms, Classical Greece, Orientalism*

“My dear, my hated Athens” is the title of the exhibition that took place at the National Library of Finland in December 2007 and in Athens and Corfu later, for the travel experience and snapshots from everyday life in Athens of the Finnish Hellenist Wilhelm Lagus, who lived for a year in the Greek capital (1852-1853).

This contradictory title reflects the traveler’s mixed emotions about nineteenth century Greece and, to an extent, suggests a sense of dislocation. Vassiliki Kolocotroni and Efterpi Mitsi, in their work on British travelers in Greece (1718-1932), claim that travel literature on Greece reflects the ambiguous geographical position of the country between East and West, but also between the ideal of the past and its contemporary image. For most western travelers, Greece represents the paradoxical meeting of place and time: while ancient Greece belonged to the West, modern Greece, at least until the Independence, belonged to the East as part of the Ottoman Empire. In Greek journey, excitement collides with frustration, expectation with tendentiousness (9).

For Kolocotroni and Mitsi, the mixed feelings of nineteenth century European travelers for Greece reflect “the geographical location of the country between East and West,” but can also be associated with the post-War of Independence political dilemma about which path to follow (or which path was meant to be), the one of the east or the one of the west. This “clash” of sentiments regarding the Greek journey is the main theme of this article with special reference to the impressions of two Finnish travelers in nineteenth century Greece, Fredrika Bremer (born 17 August 1801, Turku, Finland – died 31 December 1865, Årsta, near Stockholm) and Wilhelm Lagus (born 5 May 1821, Turku, Finland – died 3 April 1909, Lillojamo, near Lohja, Finland). According to Alexis Politis, the pre-War of Independence dilemma “east or west?” emerges as a serious matter of the independent Greek state (1830), as defined in 1842 by a young scholar Markos Renieris: “as years pass by there is an orientation shift. Greece begins to look to the East as well. Is this an ablatation from mother Europe? A boasting confidence? Or a fake dilemma, covering the most intractable questions with ideological complexion?” (91). Indeed, during the journey of Bremer and Lagus in mid-19th century Greece, a new ideological balance is configured as for many the east is more important than the west. On the other side, Renieris’ view that Greece “is west and not east” is supported by leading intellectuals of the time. In any case, as pointed out by Politis “over the years the distance grew, and worse, many European states showed a more hostile attitude” as “facing the harsh reality, some compensatory theory was needed, a theory which would cover the inherent weaknesses with a semblance of the diversity, the specificity, the supposedly self-constitution of new Hellenism” (93).

At the time of the visit of Bremer and Lagus in Greece serious debates were taking place in Athens caused by various Greek social groups, but also through contact with the foreign, often arrogant element, as expressed by the regency, Bavarian soldiers, foreign diplomats, missionaries, travelers, philhellenes or non-philhellenes observers. People from the above groups often overturned the positive climate that was established during the War of Independence by criticizing the new realities that were being developed in the new state. The commitment to classical culture and history, assisted by the “neo-classicism of the Bavarians” certainly expresses the need of new Hellenism to unify modern with ancient Greece in theory and practice (i.e. texts). At a time the Fallmerayer theory was questioning this coherence, a number of historical works were giving answers to the writings of the latter, the most characteristic of which is entitled (translated from Greek) *The History of the Greek Nation from Ancient Times until Today* by the historian Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos in 1853.

In this historical and ideological context, people of different European nationalities, mainly English and French, visited Greece and related their

experiences through diaries, letters, studies, and literary texts. In recent years the interest in Greek travel writing has increased: a detailed bibliographical review since the 1920s with emphasis on the 18th century was recently published by Iliá Chatzipanagioti-Sangmeister (9-30). In 2006, for example, a volume in Finnish by Björn Forsén and Erkki Sironen was published entitled (translated from Finnish) *Lost Greece: Finnish Travel Descriptions before Mass Tourism*, incorporating 17 brief studies that refer to Finnish travelers in 19th and early 20th century Greece: voluntary soldiers (August Myhrberg and John Nylander), researchers (Wilhelm Lagus, O.E. Tudeer and I.K. Inha), pilgrims (Eelis Gulin), writers and cultural figures (Emil Zilliacus, Eino Railo, V.A. Koskenniemi, Arvi Kivimaa, Yrjö Niiniluoto and Göran Schildt), and architects (Jac Ahrenberg and Hilding Ekelund). In the volume's first contribution, Forsén also mentions Finnish women that reported their Greek journeys such as Wilhelm Lagus' wife Kastalia, and Fredrika Bremer, "who undoubtedly became one of the most significant Greek photographers ranks" (9).

Finnish travelers in nineteenth century Greece emphasized different aspects of Greek culture, most commonly archaeology as argued in papers such as Leena Pietilä-Castrén's *The Greaeo-Roman Terracotta Figurines of Finland and their Collectors*. However, nineteenth century Finnish travelers to Greece are not just interested in ancient civilization. The official status of Finland in the 19th century as well as the travelers' education and character encouraged other perspectives also. Bremer links modern Greece to ancient times. Phrases such as "the place has an idyllic beauty" or "when you get down to the shore, you might as well believe that you stand on the edge of a Swiss lake" agree with the romantic, neoclassical ("Bavarian") view of Athens. However, the Finnish Hellenist Lagus appears exclusively interested in contemporary Greece, the one that, according to Kolocotroni and Mitsi, "belonged to the East, was part of the Ottoman Empire" (9) and from this perspective resembles Virginia Woolf who pointed out during her stay there that Athens means much more than the Acropolis and the wisest plan is to separate the living from the dead, the old from the new.

The two travelers have certain similarities and significant differences: both born in Finland they arrived in Greece in 1859 and 1852 respectively, at the time of Finland's union with Russia and during a big nationalism debate in both Finland and Greece. From the late 12th century until 1809, Finland was part of Sweden, a legacy reflected in the prevalence of the Swedish language and its official status. It was then incorporated into the Russian Empire as the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland, until the Russian Revolution of 1917 prompted the Finnish Declaration of Independence. Thus Finland, like Greece, changed its official status in the 19th century and is, like Greece to some extent, between east and west with significant dependence on Russia, which, until the October Revolution, was the link that connected them. In Henrik Meinander's

words: “the union with Russia brought many visible changes in public life, but the question is whether they were regarded at the time as an expression of a Finnish national spirit” (87). The motto “Swedes we are no longer, Russian we cannot be – so let us be Finns” would be attributed to the Åbo historian A.I. Arwidsson, who had to leave for Sweden in the 1820s after taking too radical a standpoint in the nationality debate (87).

Both Bremer and Lagus are connoisseurs of ancient Greek civilization. With studies in literature, philosophy and theology Bremer, a famous writer, devoted her life to literary activities and charities. Lagus, on the other hand, is one of the most important members of the academic intelligentsia of Finland. In the year of their arrival in Greece Bremer was 58 and Lagus 31, but young Lagus traveled less than Bremer in Greece. Bremer secured acquaintances with King Otto, Queen Amalia and their circle, but Lagus politely but firmly refused the invitation of the Greek royal court and made sure to have good relations with the Russian ambassador and the Second Secretary of the embassy, and socialized with the Ragavis and Paparrigopoulos families. Lagus was cautious about Paparrigopoulos’ criticism of the Fallmerayer theory, according to which modern Greeks were descended from the Slavs, who settled in Greece after ancient times. Bremer, on the other side, did not agree with Fallmerayer by saying that if someone lived for some time in Greece, they would understand that modern Greeks are genuine descendants of the ancient Greeks in terms of language, customs and traditions.

What topics do we find in Bremer’s and Lagus’ writings from their stay in Greece? Is Bremer an example of an enthusiastic classicist who associates the ancient Greek past with a modern Greek present and what are the ideological origins of this conception of the Greek world? Is Lagus an example of Finnish orientalism and if so, in what ways does this develop and what is its ultimate outcome, if it was achieved? Vassilis Kardassis states that “the academic career of Lagus led his steps to Greece” (63), but what was the ideological direction of this academic search?

Fredrika Bremer and the View of the “Fallen Monarch”

Everything is bathed in light. High front of us lies the Acropolis on its stone foundations. The ancient citadel of the gods looks like a fallen monarch; fallen, but a monarch, such as Oedipus or King Lear. Its view brings back nostalgic, yet melancholic moods. On her feet, under its broad shadow, modern Athens is growing, with cheerful white houses and green gardens, and is spread beyond the Acropolis and the conical rock of Lycabettus, surrounded by the eternally green olive grove, this mother-city with the damaged temples and holy places (I, 30).

Bremer’s description from her first visit at the Acropolis is, I think, significant of the way she perceives Athens and Greece in general. The

parallelism of the Acropolis, which, as she says elsewhere, is “the last classic blossom [...] which [...] is worth more than all the marble temples and monuments” (II, 314), with the “fallen monarch” and specifically with the “fallen monarchs” Oedipus and Lear reflects the greatness of the intellectual power that characterizes both tragic heroes. Its location, as in the case of the two tragic heroes, can be associated with the very process of self-knowledge through which someone can understand the truth. Indeed, the idyllic description of modern Athens, in the above extract, depicts the wisdom of eternal symbols such as the “green olive grove” and the spirituality of temples and shrines. The above extract can be considered typical of the way in which the past is connected to the present in Bremer’s travel writings, since the modern face of Greece is usually approached through the majesty of the ancient Greek past.

Bremer’s knowledge of ancient Greece is impressive and the journey in modern Greece becomes a ritual of identification of routes with which she seems to be completely familiar, as if she followed the instructions of a very good guide on a difficult path. The first things she visits in Athens are, apart from the Acropolis, the Temple of Olympian Zeus, the Odeon of Herodes Atticus, the Pnyx, Hadrian’s Arch, and even before she is told that she may extend her stay in Greece, she has already visited Plato’s Academy, where she pays tribute to the philosophers Socrates and Plato, and referred to Demosthenes. She visits the site of Eleusis with the son of the French archeologist Lenormant’s widow, also an archeologist, where she identifies the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, again showing a sample of the wealth of knowledge of the ancient Greek world and mythology. On the occasion of her visit to Delos she refers to the myth of the birth of Apollo and Artemis, and the history of the island at the time of its commercial sovereignty. In Thebes she recalls the *Seven against Thebes*, while during the last visit at the Acropolis, she refers to the story of Pericles, with particular emphasis on his private life and his relationship with Aspasia.

For Bremer the Greek present becomes an object of admiration or concern in relation to or comparison with the magnificent ancient Greek past, rarely independently from it. For example, a comprehensive view of the War of Independence is associated with the ideals of ancient Greece, the ancient pioneer of free institutions. She is impressed especially by modern folklore and religious matters whose origin can sometimes be found in antiquity. She gets excited with Greek dances and the appearance and behavior as well as the clothes of the peasants, which she observes at the feast of the Assumption or Clean Monday, where much of her narration is dedicated to folklore, sartorial or dance observations with comments about the joy that she observed in the religious events of the Greeks. The unfortunate incident of a sudden death becomes the occasion to participate in an evening of Mani laments that attracts her attention with their originality and poetic expression, and she expresses enthusiasm for the Annunciation of the island of Tinos, where she even attends the ritual cleansing

of the icon of the Virgin. However, she is discouraged by the conditions of detention of prisoners in Palamidi: “Woe modern Greece! In this respect, you are still a slave of Turkey and barbarism” (II, 19). “Turkey and barbarism,” according to the above reference, appear as inhibiting factors in the pre-Ottoman “western” orientation of Greece.

Bremer’s “dear” Greece is Greece of classical antiquity: she strongly believes that contemporary Greece should rediscover the glamour of the past, in order to expel the “hateful” situations in which it has fallen. Here are her farewell words for Greece’s position in the world and her perception of the Greek future:

Goodbye now, beautiful Greece! With your garland of islands—as I can see still them – with the lovers of liberty, the hardworking, hospitable, seekers of knowledge of your people, you are the noble and fining link between East and West. Ancient thou, you broadcast in Europe the things that you received from Asia, after you elaborated them in your own way. Now it is the ripe fruit of Europe that will go to Asia through you. Now you conquer again for yourself the classic civilization, beauty and multifaceted culture, which you once gave to the world as the greatest gift to serve as a means of conquest of a higher, universal, more humane purpose! (II, 365).

Freedom, work, hospitality and knowledge are for Bremer Greek values taught from Asia and broadcast in Europe “in the Greek way”. Modern Greeks are expected to regain the classic ideals, beauty and multifaceted culture (thereby implying that have been lost over time). Bremer expects the continuation of the ecumenical life of Greece through a fresh approach to classical Greece that supersedes any other cultural intervention.

Wilhelm Lagus and the Fall of Columns

One of the very few but very characteristic Lagus references to monuments of Greek antiquity during his stay in Greece is to fall of a column of the Temple of Olympian Zeus after a storm in October 1852: “The middle of the three columns in the west fell so beautifully, as if someone has placed its vertebrae in a row one after the other” (22). Only such an unsettling (and catastrophic) event would sensitize Lagus to the monuments of antiquity! The reference to the fall of the columns by Lagus is somehow symbolic, as if he is looking for a new vision of the ancient Greek world through the new “positioning” of the columns.

It is impressive, but Lagus, though a classicist, does not foreground Classical Athens during his stay in Greece, but concentrates instead on the modern Greek language and its people: “I intend to study the language and people and this always requires hard work in the beginning” (30). Indeed, Lagus is rather interested in modern Greece, therefore separating the living from the dead, the old from the new. Perhaps as a distraction from the “neo-classicism of

the Bavarians” Lagus does not hide his disinterest in and negligence for the remains of ancient Greek civilization. Unlike restless Bremer, Lagus did not see anything in the entire country except for a few short visits to Syros, Aegina and Corinth. From the archeological places he highlights the wonderful location and the view rather than the antiquities and on Aegina he mistakenly called the Temple of Aphaea (Minerva) as the Temple of Zeus, which suggests his shallowness and perhaps laziness with regards to Greek archeology.

Lagus, with studies in classical literature, Arabic and Hebrew in his luggage, plus a working knowledge of Russian archeology and the medieval world of the East, traveled to southern Russia and Greece in mid-19th century and stayed in Odessa for two years and more than a year in Athens. He came to Greece with his wife Kastalia and their small daughter Maria, who unfortunately died in Athens from high fever. He logs everyday stories that highlight comparisons with ancient Greece as unnecessary. He reports many incidents and frauds (“Only in Athens people say so many lies, nowhere else in the world”), he describes with horror streets that are full of beggars, and employees of shops who approach customers to steal something. For him everyday life also includes beautiful impressions such as the humorous story with the flirty maid, and an enthusiasm for the abundance of fruit, the cheap wine, the unprecedented delicacies (e.g. tomatoes, sheep’s milk), the “game” of children with heaps of garbage, and the couple’s evening walks. In my opinion the most idyllic description that could perhaps have been written by Byron or another romantic poet or traveler is Lagus’ impression from the first night in Athens:

And now goodnight to you all, dear ones, there in the far North. The night is resting calm, cypresses and towering oleanders peep in my room in the moonlight and the nightingales in the gardens respond to one another (13).

This first impression agrees with the classic and romantic style that prevailed in the Bavarian court of Otto, but similar impressions as time passes by become less frequent, most probably because of Lagus’ conscious focus on the less known “modern” (Oriental) image of Greece.

Lagus’ “eastern” focus should be related to the political sympathy of the Greeks for Russia, the displeasure for the royal couple and the Bavarian courtyard, dissatisfaction with King Otto and the Constitution Day movement of 3 September 1843. The Bavarians felt threatened, as implied by Lagus’ ironic references to the “enthusiastic” celebration (“Three houses that were right next to the arch had a few lights in the windows”) or the preference of peasants of Aegina for a Russian king in the place of Otto. Lagus is conscious of his western identity (when explaining, for example, the boundaries of the area covered in the aforementioned study he states “westward” when referring to the Danube), but is basically orientalist, because both the findings of his comprehensive study of the Greeks in South Russia and other factors highlight his pro-Russian policy in

relation to Greece. The traveler from the “Autonomous Grand Duchy under Russia” considers that apart from his own country Greece as well can be found “under the umbrella” of Russia at a time when the leader of the Russian political party Andreas Metaxas had been recently defeated (1844).

I believe that Lagus’ Greek journey is affected by the fact that he comes to Athens after a two-year stay in Odessa: after 1794 Odessa was transformed into a port city which was to be the bridgehead for all subsequent Russian attempts at further expansion towards the Bosphorus and the Mediterranean. During his stay in Athens Lagus learned Greek, in fact published in that language a study of the history of the Greeks of South Russia (Crimean Peninsula) from antiquity to the present. He is indeed an Orientalist of the time, if we consider the definition of Edward Said that “Orientalism is a Western way of domination, reconstruction and the exercise of power on the East” (13-14). At a time when Athens was committed to classical culture and history for the reasons mentioned above, Lagus entered the newly founded castle as an “auditor,” and focused on the modern face of Greece rather than the “neoclassicism of the Bavarians” being interested in the contemporary form of Greek language and religion.

Lagus’ study focuses on the coexistence of Greeks and Russians: South Russia is largely populated by Greeks from ancient times until Lagus’ time and in very important in social, educational, financial, and military terms. The Greek bond with the Russians is reported with expected fervor. Russia is paralleled to an eagle that flies safely and constantly higher, and Lagus observes with pity and indignation the depression of people of similar religions (39). There are many references to the asylum and reception of migrants from various “Greek countries” that reinforce Lagus’ affirmation that “being a Greek would be enough to find a second homeland in Russia” (40). Lagus refers in detail to the Greek army in Balaclava and the surrounding area, which excelled during the turmoil of the years 1787-1791, and the Turkish war of the years 1806 and 1812. Lagus is very enthusiastic about the various examples that confirm Catherine the Great’s generosity to all Greeks (reaching Minorca). He believes that the abolition of privileges of the Greeks in 1797 (including their military body) is due to the relatively small number of Greeks (less than 1000). However, privileges were assigned later by Emperor Alexander who contributed to the increase of the population and wealth. Indeed, apart from the fact that the *Filiki Eteria* (Society of Friends), whose purpose was to overthrow the Ottoman rule of Greece and establish an independent Greek state, Lagus proudly reports that when in 1812 Russia was flooded with the army of Napoleon, the Greek inhabitants of Odessa contributed 100,000 silver rubles.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in this brief study I tried to demonstrate aspects of the travel writing of two Finnish travelers in 19th century Greece. The first trend, which is predominant among European 19th century travelers in Greece, is the mentality of Fredrika Bremer, who identified in modern Greece the light of classical antiquity and the importance of conveying it to the west, while she felt the nostalgia and melancholy in the sight of “the fallen monarch” (Acropolis). The second trend, with a strong political agenda, is the tendency of the orientalist Wilhelm Lagus who initially heard “nightingales in the gardens [to] respond to one another,” but subsequently saw the “vertebrae in a row” and therefore “loved” and “hated” everything about modern Greece. Bremer seems to “hate” the eastern deviation from the cultural wonder of the classical past, while Lagus appears to resent the forced imposition of the western “Bavarian” class on a culture with a strong eastern element. The divergence in the travelers’ expectations and predispositions at a time of the formation of modern Greek identity and consciousness forms questions rather than gives answers to fake dilemmas such as the distinction between east and west. Bremer and Lagus followed different routes on their way back home, but both continued to think of and study Greece from the North.

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