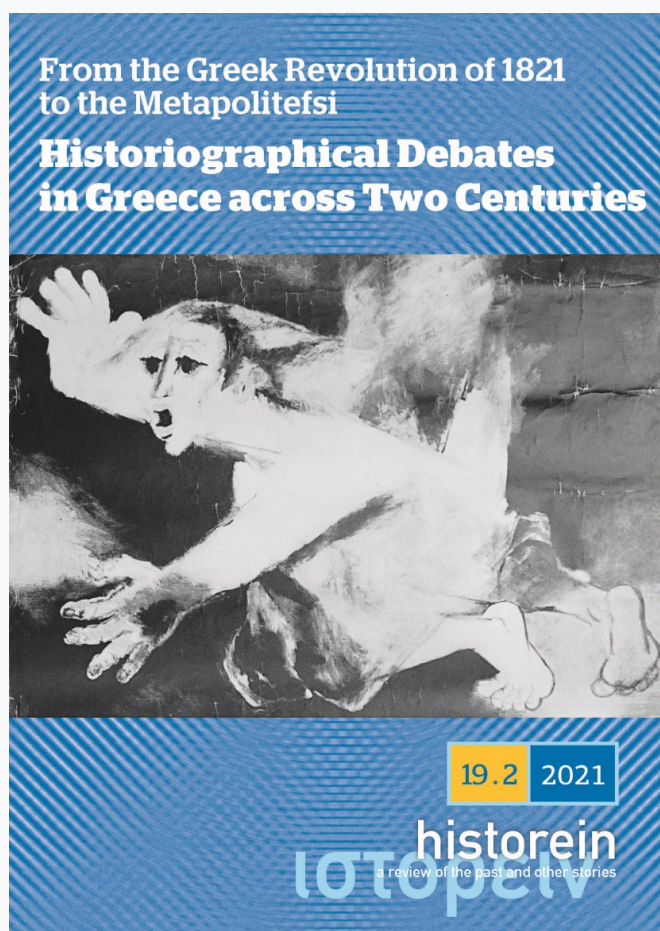


Historein

Vol 19, No 2 (2021)

From the Greek Revolution of 1821 to the Metapolitefsi: Historiographical Debates in Greece across Two Centuries



Anna Matthaïou, Οικογένεια και σεξουαλικότητα: Μεταξύ παράδοσης και νεωτερικότητας (ελληνικές μαρτυρίες, 17ος–αρχές 19ου αι.) [Family and sexuality: Between tradition and modernity (Greek testimonies, 17th–early 19th centuries)]

Androniki Dialeti

doi: [10.12681/historein.24535](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.24535)

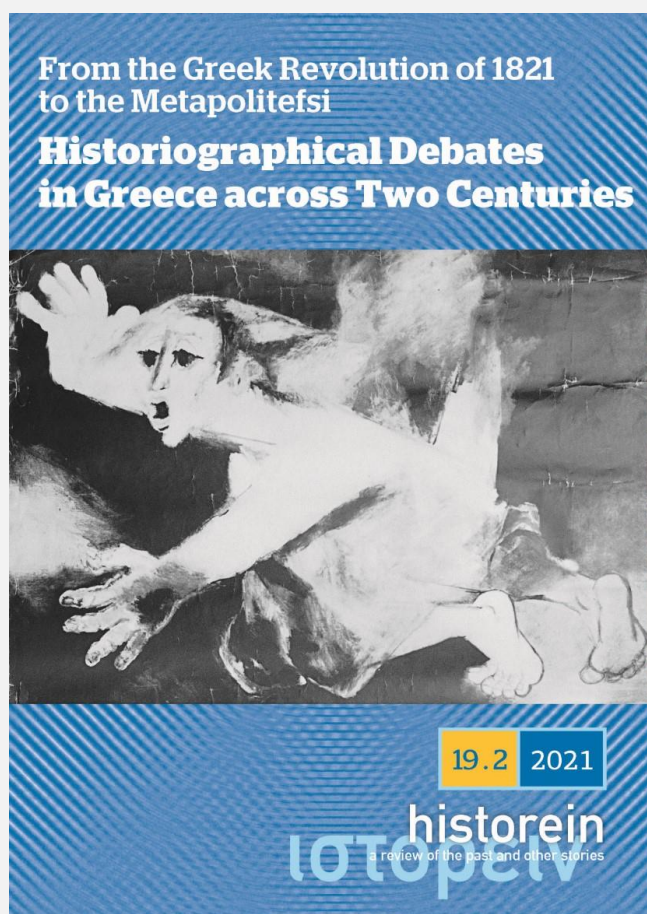
Copyright © 2021, Androniki Dialeti



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Dialeti, A. (2021). Anna Matthaïou, Οικογένεια και σεξουαλικότητα: Μεταξύ παράδοσης και νεωτερικότητας (ελληνικές μαρτυρίες, 17ος–αρχές 19ου αι.) [Family and sexuality: Between tradition and modernity (Greek testimonies, 17th–early 19th centuries)]. *Historein*, 19(2). <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.24535>



Anna Matthaïou
Οικογένεια και
σεξουαλικότητα: Μεταξύ
παράδοσης και
νεωτερικότητας (ελληνικές
μαρτυρίες,
17ος–αρχές 19ου αι.)
[Family and sexuality:
Between tradition and
modernity (Greek testimonies,
17th–early 19th centuries)]

Androniki Dialeti

doi: 10.12681/historein.24535

To cite this article:

Dialeti, Androniki. 2021. “Anna Matthaïou, *Οικογένεια και σεξουαλικότητα: Μεταξύ παράδοσης και νεωτερικότητας (ελληνικές μαρτυρίες, 17ος–αρχές 19ου αι.)* [Family and sexuality: Between tradition and modernity (Greek testimonies, 17th–early 19th centuries)]”. *Historein* 19 (2). <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.24535>.

Anna Matthaïou

Οικογένεια και σεξουαλικότητα: Μεταξύ παράδοσης και νεωτερικότητας (ελληνικές μαρτυρίες, 17ος–αρχές 19ου αι.)

[Family and sexuality: Between tradition and modernity (Greek testimonies, 17th–early 19th centuries)]

Athens: Melissa, 2019. 276 pp.

Androniki Dialeti

University of Thessaly

Anna Matthaïou's new book comes to fill an important bibliographical gap in Greek historiography, by delving into the largely unexplored history of family and sexuality. Examining sources in Greek from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries, the author seeks to detect aspects of the everyday life of the Christian Orthodox population in the Ottoman and Venetian empires. She also discusses the transformations that discourses and practices underwent during the transition from “tradition” to “modernity” from the mid-eighteenth century, when the so-called Greek Enlightenment created the conditions for the gradual construction of a national identity and the foundation of the Greek state (1830). The book is an important contribution to Greek historiography, which still lacks systematic research on the history of family and sexuality.¹

The book examines a wide range of topics about marriage, parenthood and childhood, moral education, pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding, contraceptive methods, sexual deviance, and infanticide. Matthaïou employs methods and perspectives drawn from the Annales School and historical anthropology and critically engages with folklore studies and social anthropology. Her research is based on diverse printed material, such as ecclesiastical texts, pedagogical treatises, prescriptive literature, novels, folk songs, ethnographic narratives, medical and legal texts, and travel literature. The texts under examination are in Greek and were mostly printed and circulated in important eighteenth-century European printing centres, such as Venice, Paris, and Vienna. The author offers a comparative examination of her sources to achieve one of the book's declared aims, which is to go beyond the more easily detectable prescriptive discourses and decipher aspects of everyday practices; in other words, to explore collective behaviour and popular perceptions, or what Lucien Febvre has called “*matière humaine*” and Fernand Braudel “*les structures*”

du quotidien”, as the author notes (29).

One of the great virtues of this book is that it systematically provides original citations of the texts under examination, thus captivating readers and giving them the opportunity to hear the voices of the past. The author correctly problematises the use of sources as open windows with an unhampered view of social reality; instead she considers their particularities and difficulties for the historian. Therefore, she explores her sources comparatively, as, for instance, when she reads narratives of birth practices, rituals and symbolisms, first in the captivating travel account by the French nobleman C.-N. Sonnini, *Voyage en Grèce et en Turquie, fait par ordre de Louis XVI et avec l'autorisation de la cour ottomane* (1801) and then in subsequent folklore texts. The author reads with a critical eye nineteenth- and twentieth-century ethnographic and folklore narratives that are often, as she states, imbued with the imaginary of national continuity supposedly originating in Greek antiquity. Thus, the author concludes that these later accounts on birth practices include religious features that were absent from the popular culture of the past.

Matthaïou's approach follows a historiographical trajectory that divides historical time between tradition and modernity. This historiographical division is also evident in the book's title. In the Greek case, the advent of modernity is usually related to the Greek Enlightenment in the mid-eighteenth century. The author borrows the French term “ancien régime” for the premodern period. However, as her approach implies, tradition and modernity are not only diverse temporalities but also diverse worldviews that often coexist in the same period or even in the same text. The eighteenth century particularly is often seen as a transitional period. On the one hand, enlightened intellectuals, primarily those living in Ottoman urban centres or outside the Ottoman Empire, brought fresh ideas from the West with new editions and translations in Greek; on the other hand, the Orthodox church hardened its attitude towards morality and sexuality so as to retain its hegemony as new ideas, practices and institutions emerged. The traditional and modern disciplinary discourses are often intertwined though. For instance, the *Εξομολογητάριον* (Exomologetarion: A Manual of Confession), an eighteenth-century ecclesiastical text that gives advice to the clergy on administering confession, meets medical discourse to argue that prohibited sexual intercourse may be responsible for the birth of babies infected with leprosy. In a similar vein, in the eighteenth-century canonical treatise *Πηδάλιον* (Pidalion [Rudder]) tradition intersects with modernity, in a Foucauldian sense, as masturbation is viewed both as a sinful act and as a malady.

The author discusses influential ecclesiastical texts, particularly those of the eighteenth century such as the *Εξομολογητάριον* and *Πηδάλιον*, to highlight dominant ecclesiastical views on morality, marriage and sexuality. Such texts allow us to detect the Orthodox church's prohibitions, punishments, and disciplinary techniques towards marital and sexual deviance. Prohibitions and regulations concerned practices such as cousin

marriage, polygamy, conjugal intercourse, sodomy, adultery, prostitution, incest, masturbation, bestiality and interreligious sexual relations. Confession, repentance, spiritual and canonical penalties, excommunication (usually imposed on deviant clerics) being the most severe punishment, were basic disciplinary measures imposed on the Christian Orthodox population. However, beyond the spiritual punishments of the church, sentences were also imposed by local authorities, as one can observe in the case of Maria Galaziani, a woman who was expelled from the island of Mykonos in the early nineteenth century because her behaviour offended “the social values that the *proestoi* [local authorities] were in charge of defending” (58). Finally, one can also find cases of public humiliation as a punishment of those who violated established moral codes of the community.

Ecclesiastical prescriptive literature also offers some interesting insights into magical practices among the Christian Orthodox populations. Although researchers of the Venetian inquisitorial archives have shown that many women who practiced magical arts in Venice came from the Greek- and Slavic-speaking populations of the eastern Mediterranean, comprehensive studies on Ottoman areas are still lacking. Matthaiou’s occasional references to magical practices, primarily from the eighteenth century, may stimulate further research. The author notices some general trends that may suggest interesting intersections with western Europe: witchcraft was viewed as a threat to conjugal fertility, popular perceptions of magic and religion often overlapped, and the church sought to eliminate popular perceptions and practices that did not conform to the ecclesiastical worldview.

The last section of the book discusses new norms, attitudes and subjectivities that followed the advent of modernity from the mid-eighteenth century. The author here focuses on secular prescriptive literature and medical treatises. Christian morality and local norms were gradually replaced by the bureaucratic interest in public health, demographic control, and public management of poverty and illness with the foundation of institutions, such as hospitals, orphanages and workhouses, particularly after the establishment of the Greek state. According to the author, women and children emerged as the “new subjects” in the discourse of modernity. Education aimed at the formation of civilised citizens whereas the female body as a site of fertility and maternity came under medical control. Medical treatises gave “rational” advice on pregnancy, birth and baby caring while they rejected women’s traditional practices as superstitious and backward.

The same period witnessed an increase in conduct books (*χρηστοθήσεις*), that often draw on European Enlightenment or even Renaissance authors, such as Desiderius Erasmus and Giovanni della Casa. The female body comes again into focus as a site of modernity in discourses on fashion, adornment and behaviour which compare the old-fashioned “Asian customs” to the newly emerged habits of the “enlightened nations”. This transformation in “consciences and identities” was most remarkable among the middle and upper classes of the urban centres. On the other hand, as the writer argues, in traditional environments women that adopted new lifestyles were often viewed as a threat, were

marginalised and punished for not conforming to the established norms.

The last chapter, entitled “A changing world”, discusses the transformations that family and sexuality underwent due to the Greek Revolution. Everyday life during the revolution has only recently begun to attract research interest. The ramifications of the war gave way to social disturbance and disorder that the national assemblies attempted to control. The author presents the criminal code that was issued by the Second National Assembly in Astros, Kynouria (1823), under the influence of the well-known criminologist Cesare Beccaria, whose work had been translated into Greek by Adamantios Korais in 1802. To prevent “moral decay”, the code offered a detailed account of penances for sexual offences such as rape, abduction, adultery, bigamy, homosexuality and pederasty. The chapter enriches our understanding of sexual notions and practices from a different perspective, that of legal discourse.

Systematic research on the history of family and sexuality in premodern eastern Europe and the Balkans is still lacking. Furthermore, essays written in English remain few, discouraging comparative conclusions among different parts of the early modern world. Research has mainly focused on early modern Russia whereas the history of sexuality in the Ottoman Empire remains to a large part unexplored, particularly as far as the Christian Orthodox population is concerned. In Christian Orthodox culture confession was a site of discipline. However, one could assume that in comparison to the Catholic and Protestant preoccupations, confession in the Christian Orthodox world mostly aimed at correcting sexual conduct rather than reforming subjective motives and feelings. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, in the reign of Tsar Alexis (1645–1676) and Peter the Great (1682–1725), important reforms took place in Russia aiming at strengthening the role of the clergy in parish life, reforming popular culture, and putting family life and sexuality under central control in a process of “modernisation” and “westernisation” of Russia.² In the Ottoman Empire, the Orthodox church, lacking the active support of the Muslim state, was not able to enforce extensive and top-down programmes of social disciplining on the Orthodox flock, such as those in western Europe in the Reformation and confessionalisation period, or even in Russia. However, Matthaïou’s captivating book shows that at a local level ecclesiastical authorities and Christian elites were eager to establish moral control and social order.

This is an important contribution to Greek historiography, encapsulating Matthaïou’s systematic research over the years. The history of family and especially sexuality certainly requires more attention in Greek scholarship so that a more comprehensive and comparative understanding of disciplinary discourses and practices in diverse localities of the past can emerge. In this regard, Matthaïou’s book can be an excellent point of departure.

¹ Recently there has been a growing interest in the history of family and sexuality in Greek scholarship, with a conference on the history of sexuality organised by the Greek Committee of the International Federation for Research in Women's History (IFRWH) and new publications, such as Dimitra Vassiliadou's *Στον τροπικό της γραφής: Οικογενειακοί δεσμοί και συναισθήματα στην αστική Ελλάδα, 1850-1930* [The tropic of writing: Family ties and emotions in modern Greece, 1850–1930] (Athens: Gutenberg, 2018) and Glafki Gotsi and Dimitra Vassiliadou, eds., *Ιστορίες για τη σεξουαλικότητα* [Histories of sexuality] (Athens: Themelio, 2020).

² For a brief overview of ecclesiastical regulations of marriage and sexuality in eastern Europe, see Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World: Regulating Desire, Reforming Practice* (London: Routledge, 1999), 128–32.