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ORACULAR PROPHECY AND THE POLITICS OF TOPPLING OTTOMAN RULE IN SOUTH-EAST EUROPE

Marios Hatzopoulos

ABSTRACT: This article argues that, after the fall of Constantinople, the religious belief system of the Orthodox community legitimized and, at the same time, challenged the Ottoman status quo. The prophetic and apocalyptic beliefs of the subjugated community were largely responsible for the ambivalence. These beliefs entertained subversive ideas on a communal level that counterbalanced the feelings of accommodation with Ottoman rule. In the age of revolution, the prophetic and apocalyptic beliefs under consideration interacted with the ideals of nationalism, producing noticeable political results. The first nationalistic movement to erupt in South-East Europe, the Greek one, took advantage of this old set of collective beliefs in order to increase the social dissemination of its own modern and secular political ends. The article first traces the course of a medieval tradition of prophecy of religio-political character, which existed as part of the general religious framework of Orthodox belief in the Eastern Roman Empire. It then goes on to highlight the social function of the tradition after the fall of Constantinople, as a repertoire of shared mythic beliefs with status reversal properties assuring the faithful that, eventually, the condition of collective subjection would be reversed. Finally, the age of modernity is considered, all the while arguing that the tradition proved advantageous to Greek nationalism insofar as it encapsulated collective beliefs which, thanks to their status reversal meanings and their intrinsic capability for reinterpretation, were useful for making the Orthodox masses more receptive to the nationalist call to arms.

Tradition has it that the first military action against the Byzantines was ordered by the Prophet himself. Recorded sayings of the Prophet, known as *hadiths*, assured the faithful that it was God's will for the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire to fall into their hands. A *hadith* said: "One day Constantinople will definitely be conquered. What a good emir and what a good army is the one that will accomplish this".¹ Roughly 12 Muslim armies, and respective emirs, had given up before a 21-year-old Ottoman sultan, later known as Mehmet the Conqueror, would appear before the city walls in the late spring of 1453. He was meant to become the "good emir". On the morning of 29 May, Mehmet II fulfilled the dream of generations. It was a great day for Islam and a catastrophe for the community of Eastern Christians, a tragedy whose sharpness would not cease to be felt.

¹ H. Inalcik, "Istanbul: An Islamic City", *Journal of Islamic Studies* 1 (1990), p. 1.

The ensuing consolidation of Ottoman power in the Balkan Peninsula left the defeated with limited options.² The Christian higher strata had either to flee to the West or choose between liquidation or integration within the new status quo. The lower strata had either to change their religion, gaining a substantial social upgrading, or retain their faith and lead a life under an arbitrary and culturally alien Muslim rule.³ In this context, historians have

² I should like to avoid the term *Rum millet* (*millet-i Rum*) when referring to the subjugated community of Eastern Christians. The *millet* system was a model of socio-cultural organization, mainly based on religion. Each *millet* corresponded to a religious faith within the Ottoman Empire, being basically self-administered by its highest religious leader – in the case of the *Rum millet*, the Patriarch of Constantinople. Literature might be abundant on the term, yet contemporary research has shown its application to the long span of Ottoman history to be somewhat anachronistic. The *millet* as-we-know-it appears to have existed mainly during the nineteenth century. In earlier centuries the term had different meanings which hardly approximated to the notion of an autonomous, centrally administered religious community. See B. Braude “Foundation Myths of the Millet System”, in B. Braude and B. Lewis (eds), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society*, Vol. 1, New York and London: Holmes & Meier, 1982, pp. 69-88. Cf. also P. Konortas, *Οθωμανικές θεωρήσεις για το Οικουμενικό Πατριαρχείο. Βεράτια για τους προκαθημένους της Μεγάλης Εκκλησίας (17ος - αρχές 20ού αιώνα)* [Ottoman views on the Ecumenical Patriarchate: berats about the prelates of the Great Church (seventeenth – early twentieth century)], Athens: Alexandria, 1998, pp. 295-361. I would rather opt for the term “*Genos* of Romans” where appropriate, to refer to the community of the Ottoman-ruled Orthodox.

³ The picture of Ottoman rule as violent and unjust has been a cornerstone in the nationalist mythologies of the Balkans, obscuring the fact that, at various times, the Muslim Ottomans were more tolerant to Orthodoxy than the fellow Christians of the West. But, on the other hand, it should be kept in mind that tolerance did not mean equality. As Leften Stavrianos has put it: “The Christians had a substantial degree of religious freedom but this did not mean religious equality. Non-Moslems were forbidden to ride horses or to bear arms. They were required to wear a particular costume to distinguish them from the true believers. Their dwellings could not be loftier than those of the Moslems. They could not repair their churches or ring their bells except by special permission, which was rarely granted. They were required to pay a special capitation tax levied on all non-Moslem adult males in place of military service. And until the seventeenth century the Orthodox Christians paid the tribute in children from which the Jews and the Armenians were exempted.”; L. Stavrianos, *The Balkans since 1453*, New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963, p. 105. In the same vein, it can be noted that the Ottoman authorities reserved in their registries a specific term for the demise of a non-Muslim subject. As can be seen in the surviving archival documents of the Heraklion-based *Qādī*'s court in Crete, translated into Greek by Nikolaos Stavrinidis, the term for the death of a non-Muslim subject was that otherwise used for the death of animals [ψόφησε]. This term

suggested that in the centuries after the fall of Constantinople three sets of attitudes towards Ottoman rule were created: a) cooperation with the new rulers within the new status quo; b) cooperation with Western Christians against the new rulers; and c) forbearance, in the belief that a God-decreed deliverance would come at a predestined time.⁴ Interestingly, it has also been suggested that the third set of attitudes could not be distinguished from the rest for, in most cases, it provided the basis for the second and legitimised the first set.⁵

In this article I should like to argue that after the fall of Constantinople the religious belief system of the subjugated Orthodox community legitimized, and at the same time challenged, the Ottoman status quo. Behind this ambivalence were to be found the community's prophetic and apocalyptic beliefs, whose subversive ideas counterbalanced the feelings of accommodation with the Ottomans. In the age of revolution, those beliefs interacted with the ideals of nationalism, producing noticeable political results. The first nationalistic movement to erupt in South-East Europe at the time, that of Greek nationalism, took advantage of this pre-modern set of communal beliefs and perceptions in order to increase the social dissemination of its own, modern and secular, political ends.⁶

I shall first trace the course of a medieval tradition of prophecy of religio-political character, which existed as part of the general religious framework of Orthodox belief in the Eastern Roman Empire. Next, I will highlight the social function of the tradition after the fall of Constantinople, as a repertoire of shared mythic beliefs with status reversal properties assuring the faithful that, eventually, the condition of collective subjection would be reversed. The age of modernity will come into focus last, all the while arguing that the tradition

applied to Christians; see, for example, document no. 2738 in N. Stavrinidis, *Μεταφράσεις τουρκικών ιστορικών εγγράφων αφορώντων την ιστορία της Κρήτης* [Translations of Turkish historical documents concerning the history of Crete], Vol. 5 (1752-1765 / Hegira 1165-1170), Heraklion: Municipality of Heraklion, Crete, 1985, p. 172; similarly to Jews, document no. 2720, see *ibid.* p. 156; both documents come from the same year, 1761.

⁴ I. Hassiotis and A. Vakalopoulos, "Η στάση των Ελλήνων απέναντι στους ξένους κυρίαρχους" [The Greeks' attitude to foreign rulers], *Ιστορία του Ελληνικού Έθνους*, Vol. 10, Athens: Ekdotiki, 1974, pp. 246-257; A. Argyriou, "Εσχατολογική γραμματεία και σκέψη κατά τους χρόνους της Τουρκοκρατίας" [Eschatological literature and thought during the period of Ottoman rule], *Θεολογία* 59/2 (1988), p. 309.

⁵ Argyriou, "Εσχατολογική γραμματεία", p. 309.

⁶ The argument is fully developed in M. Hatzopoulos, "*Ancient Prophecies, Modern Predictions*": *Myths and Symbols of Greek Nationalism*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 2005.

proved, ultimately, advantageous to Greek nationalism insofar as it encapsulated collective beliefs which, thanks to their status reversal meanings and their intrinsic capability for reinterpretation, were useful for making the Orthodox masses more receptive to the call to arms that the nationalists extended.

In theoretical terms the argument is underpinned by Anthony Smith's view of nationalism as a modern ideological movement that, even if secular and anthropocentric, has to accommodate its message to the horizons and sentiments of the population it has designated on the cultural level. Hence, argues Smith, nationalists often draw on the sacred traditions and religious cults of "the people" in order to facilitate the advance their own political agenda.⁷ The empirical underpinnings of the argument lie in an early essay by Constantinos Dimaras, in which he argued for the continuity of Greek prophetic expectations throughout the period of Ottoman rule, all the while pinpointing the mobilizing properties of oracular literature – an interest central to my concerns.⁸ In a later publication, Dimaras did include oracular literature among the factors that, in his eyes, had paved the way for the Greek War of Independence.⁹ In both essays Dimaras argued for the cross-class dissemination of oracular literature during the centuries of Ottoman rule and highlighted the literature's mobilizing capacities in reference to the Greek-speaking lower strata before and during the uprising of 1821. Oracular literature was the main vehicle for the strain of belief under consideration here. This strain rests on two basic premises: first, that the Byzantine Empire would last to the End of Time; and second, that divine intervention, presumed through the agency of a messianic ruler, or a messianic people, would come and deliver the faithful at a calculable point in time. These two premises developed a distinctive prophetic and apocalyptic imagery, according to which the messianic agent, conceived as a political entity of this earth, was expected to come and crush the, no less this-worldly, foes of the Christian Roman Empire. It is for this reason that we call this set of beliefs messianism and those who upheld it messianists. The pivotal questions messianists put forth were how long God would allow the infidels to rule over Constantinople and who would be the agent destined to carry

⁷ A. D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 28-43.

⁸ C. Th Dimaras, "Οι χρησμοί στη νέα μας ιστορία" [The oracles in our modern history], *Εκλογή* 3/2 (1947), pp. 196-203.

⁹ *Id.*, "Ψυχολογικοί παράγοντες του εικοσιένα. Λόγος πανηγυρικός" [Psychological factors of the uprising of 1821: celebratory lecture], *Σπουδές της Α. Β. Σ. Π.* [offprint] (1957).

out the God-promised mission. In this spirit, their hopes and expectations were focused on the prospects of restoring the lost Christian kingdom and regaining its sacred spaces. Collective memories and shared experiences of the loss of the holy city acquired a mythical status in Greek written and oral literature, giving way to lament and legend.¹⁰ Messianists would often mix legends with biblical prophecy, but the prime quarry from which they would draw their ideological insights was the oracular literature of the Byzantine and Post-Byzantine period.¹¹

I

Byzantine oracular literature was a tradition of extra-canonical prophecies in which various pseudonymous authors expressed speculations about the shape of things to come to an extent that Church Fathers had been reluctant or unwilling to do. In literary terms, the tradition was inaugurated by a piece known as the *Revelation of Methodios* (also known as *Pseudo-Methodios*), a prophetic and apocalyptic work written around the end of the seventh century, as the Byzantine Empire was painfully coming to terms with Muslim

¹⁰ This article focuses on Greek sources, yet Greek was not the only language in which the loss of Constantinople was mourned and the hope of its regaining expressed. Collective memories and expectations were widely distributed all over the Christian world, and especially within the Orthodox community, both within and outside Ottoman borders. The question, however, whether the cultural meanings and political goals of the Byzantine restoration were evenly distributed among the Greek- and the Slav-speaking Orthodox remains to be answered. For a discussion on the South-Slavic legends and traditions on the fall of Constantinople, see T. Stoianovich, “Les structures millénaristes sud-slaves aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles”, in *id.*, *Between East and West: The Balkan and the Mediterranean Worlds*, Vol. IV, New Rochelle, NY: A. D. Caratzas, 1995, pp. 1-13; see also V. Tapkova-Zaimova and A. Miltenova, “The Problem of Prophecies in Byzantine and Bulgarian Literature”, *Balkan Studies* 25/2 (1984), pp. 499-510. For the Russian tradition of Moscow as the third Rome, see M. Poe, “Moscow, the Third Rome: The Origins and Transformations of a ‘Pivotal Moment’”, *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 49/3 (2001), pp. 412-429. For the Christian and Muslim, particularly Turkish, traditions in a comparative perspective, see S. Yerasimos, “De l’arbre à la pomme. La genealogie d’un thème apocalyptique”, in B. Lellouch and S. Yerasimos (eds), *Les traditions apocalyptiques au tourant de la chute de Constantinople*, Paris and Montreal: L’Harmattan, 1999, pp. 153-192; see also the thought-provoking essay of Richard Clogg, to which my perspective owes much, “The Byzantine Legacy in the Modern Greek World: The Megali Idea”, Study IV, in R. Clogg, *Anatolica: Studies in the Greek East in the 18th and 19th Centuries*, Aldershot: Variorum, 1996, pp. 253-281.

¹¹ Argyriou, “Ἐσχατολογικὴ γραμματεία”, pp. 315-316.

expansion. *Methodios* predicted the rise of a messianic ruler, a powerful Christian leader who would cease God's chastisement, crash the Muslim power and save the faithful from tribulation.¹² The late Byzantine centuries witnessed the production of further prophetic material that propagated the restoration of power of the then declining empire. The collection of the *Oracles of Leo the Wise*, produced at a time when the Byzantine State had irreversibly embarked on a course of disintegration, expanded and elaborated on Methodian themes, offering prophetic affirmations that Eastern Roman glory would be restored after a period of defeat and devastation.¹³ The fall of Constantinople in 1453 inspired updates of old prophecies and led to the creation of new ones. In this context, the late fifteenth-century *Prophecy of Patriarch Gennadios* came to dominate the oracular genre, promising the restitution of Constantinople to its "original owners" thanks to the military might of a messianic people of fair hair, who came in time to be identified, among other northerners, with the Russians.¹⁴

The last major written piece of the oracular tradition was composed at a time when the decay of Ottoman power was evident, in the mid-eighteenth century. The *Vision of Agathangelos* deserves more extended consideration since it is the most celebrated oracular composition and at the same time the best-studied piece of this genre of literature to date. The preface informs the reader that the piece was first written in Greek by a monk called Agathangelos in 1279, then appeared in Italian in 1555, and was finally translated into Greek again by the Archimandrite Theokleitos Polyeidis in 1751. Since the late nineteenth century, however, research has shown that *Agathangelos* was actually conceived and composed by his alleged translator, Polyeidis himself, around 1750.¹⁵ A vicar to Greek communities in Habsburg lands and then official envoy of the Ecumenical Patriarch to the German States, Polyeidis was familiar with the complexity of a world far greater than the Ottoman lands. His work attests to this. *Agathangelos* is divided into ten chapters

¹² P. J. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, ed. and intro. Dorothy de F. Abrahamse, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1985, pp. 151-184 [cf. also Abrahamse's "Introduction", pp. 1-9].

¹³ C. Mango, "The Legend of Leo the Wise", Study XVI, in *id.*, *Byzantium and its Image*, London: Variorum, 1984, pp. 59-67.

¹⁴ C. J. G. Turner "An Oracular Prophecy Attributed to Gennadius Scholarius", *Ελληνικά* 21 (1968), pp. 40-47; Cf. also T. E. Sklavenitis, "Χρησμολογικό εικονογραφημένο μονόφυλλο των αρχών του 18ου αιώνα" [An early eighteenth-century oracular illustrated broadsheet], *Μνήμων* 7 (1978), pp. 46-59.

¹⁵ N. G. Politis, "Ἀγαθάγγελος" [Agathangelos], *Ἑστία* 27 (1889), pp. 38-40.

summarizing true or imaginary political affairs in Europe from the late fifteenth century to the mid-eighteenth. As Luther, Pope, Charles V, Peter the Great and a series of others take the stage, the author sets out to discuss political issues in a geographical area delimited by, roughly speaking, the Catholic West, the Protestant North and the Orthodox East. In general, most of Polyeidis' references are deliberately vague and ambiguous, making the work capable of being read from many points of view. What is coherent is the author's Orthodox view and his naïve moralism: the righteous will undergo painful tribulation but eventually they will emerge victorious. In the end, the heretic Catholics will be mortified and the barbarian Ottomans will be vanquished by the Orthodox faith.¹⁶

Agathangelos, no less than other works of the oracular tradition, mirrored the fears and agonies of its time, dispensing dull moralist explanations of historical events as divine retribution for human sin. That said, however, one should not lose sight of a very important aspect: these prophecies, in spite of the conceptual context within which they were conceived, remained firmly attached to the political realities of this world. What they offered was solace and hope through a framework of politicised metaphysics. The central message was that, in time, the sufferings of the faithful would be recognized and their virtue rewarded. The oracles, however, articulated the promise of redemption right here on this earth and not in some other-worldly heaven. What was more, redemption was expected to take place within the confines of human time through a definitely this-worldly, even if unspecified, agent. The chosen agent and time of the God-promised restoration had to be decoded from the hermetic utterances of the prophetic text. Judging by the circumstances, messianists could place their hopes in any monarch capable of posing a potential or actual threat to Ottoman integrity.

II

Prophecy-nurtured expectations did not live unchallenged within the *Genos* of Romans. Prophecies required interpretation in the context of ongoing events, yet the latter were rarely optimistic for the subjected Orthodox. The Ottoman victories and the conflicting interests of European courts hindered the prospects of a crusade eastwards, challenging the reliability of messianic hope. Shortly after 1715, for example, when the Ottomans eventually regained Morea from the Venetians, the Cephallonian playwright Petros

¹⁶ K. Georgiadis, "Ο Αγαθάγγελος και η περίφημη οπτασία του" [Agathangelos and his renowned vision], *Μεγάλη ελληνική εγκυκλοπαίδεια*, Vol. I, Athens 1936, pp. 111-113.

Katsaitis ended his *Κλαυθμός Πελοποννήσου* [Lament for the Peloponnese] by wanting to burn the *Prophecy of Patriarch Gennadios* in the fireplace.¹⁷ It was at this time that the theologian Anastasios Gordios expressed his sharp condemnation on messianic views.¹⁸ Roughly one century earlier, Matthew, the Metropolitan of Myra, had rejected on similar grounds messianic views in his *Ιστορία των κατά τήν Ουγγροβλαχίαν τελεσθέντων* [History of Wallachia]:

Woe is us [...] / we put our courage into Spain / and into the large galleys of Venice, / to come and kill the Turk by sword, / to get [his] kingdom and pass it to us; / we hope for the fair-haired people to deliver us, / to come from Moscow, to deliver us. / We trust in the oracles, in the false prophecies, / and we waste our time in such vanities / we place our hope in the north wind / to take the snare of the Turk from us [...].¹⁹

We still lack a systematic study on the official stance of the Church towards messianism. However, it would not be far from the truth to suggest that churchmen would have had little patience with messianic views.²⁰ The first

¹⁷ P. Katsaitis, *Ιφιγένεια – Θυέστης – Κλαυθμός Πελοποννήσου. Ανέκδοτα έργα, κριτική έκδοση με εισαγωγή, σημειώσεις και γλωσσάριο* [Iphigeneia – Thyestis – Lament for the Peloponnese: unpublished works, critical edition with introduction, annotations and glossary], ed. Emmanuel Kriaras, Athens: Collection de l'Institut Français d'Athènes, 1950, pp. 277-278.

¹⁸ A. Argyriou, “Αναστάσιος ο Γόρδιος και το σύγγραμμά του ‘Περί του Μωάμεθ και εναντίον των Λατίνων’” [Anastasios Gordios and his work “On Muhammad and against the Latins”], *Επετηρίς Εταιρείας Στερεοελλαδικών Μελετών* 2 (1969), pp. 305-324.

¹⁹ É. Legrand, *Bibliothèque grecque vulgaire*, Vol. II, Paris: Maisonneuve, 1881, p. 314. A part of this excerpt is cited in Clogg, “The Byzantine Legacy”, p. 265; where available, I follow his English translation.

²⁰ The ground-breaking study of Asterios Argyriou, which highlighted the political significance of the Post-Byzantine Orthodox commentaries on the Apocalypse, does not explore the stance of the Church on an institutional level but rather the views of certain theologians, “members of the Church or laity who felt the duty to oppose the reckless enthusiasm and careless hopes [of messianism] and warn the subjected about the dangers”; A. Argyriou *Les exégèses grecques de l'Apocalypse à l'époque turque (1453-1821). Esquisse d'une histoire des courants idéologiques au sein du peuple grec asservi*, Thessaloniki 1982, p. 105. For the reasons stated above, one could guess that prelates would not be enchanted by the prospects of messianism and even if they were, they would not express their feelings openly. It is possible, however, that some of them did endorse messianic views in secret. The Ecumenical Patriarch Parthenios III, for example, believed that “the Lords of the Cross and the Bell will soon be, also, Lords of the [Ottoman] Empire”, a view he expressed in his correspondence with the prince of Wallachia; but his letter was intercepted by the Ottoman authorities and Parthenios was hanged after only a year in office, in 1657; see D. Urquhart,

reason one could think of is the fact that the Orthodox Church had become an institution of the Ottoman state apparatus after 1453, while the Ecumenical Patriarch, on his part, had become a formal state official responsible for the behaviour of the Orthodox flock.²¹ On grounds of principle, the views of messianists had little to do with proper Orthodox theology. On grounds of action, experience had shown that insurgencies against the Ottomans usually triggered bitter reprisals. Moreover, the messianic fantasies about God-chosen king-redeemers alluded to unholy alliances with the West, which the Church did not welcome. Besides conservatism, it was no secret that Western intervention was promised with a view to conversion. All these, however, were bound to lose much of their social significance within the brave new world that was rising in eighteenth-century Europe.

The course of the eighteenth century witnessed the surge of the Enlightenment, a movement of cultural change which was gradually transferred to South-East Europe. It was due to the Enlightenment that such modern ideas as political classicism and revolutionary nationalism took hold within the traditional cosmos of the Post-Byzantine Orthodox *ecumene*. There also emerged at this time a prosperous Greek-speaking mercantile stratum whose activities were based outside as well as within the Ottoman Empire. Living in dispersed communities stretching from Western Europe to Southern Russia, these “conquering Orthodox merchants” came inevitably in contact with Western economic and intellectual achievements. Then the philosophy of the Enlightenment came to open their minds to the possibility of life without kings and priests. As most of them combined entrepreneurship with an appetite for learning, they were keen on endowing schools and libraries back in their hometowns. These activities culminated in the Neohellenic Enlightenment, the movement of intellectual revival which brought modernity into the community of Eastern Christians. An extended network of merchant-funded Greek schools undertook the dissemination of the new ideals of national identity, national autonomy and national territory, enthusing various sections of the *Genos* of Romans.²²

The Spirit of the East: Illustrated in a Journal of Travels through Rumeli during an Eventful Period, Vol. I, London: Colburn, 1838, p. 357, note marked with an asterisk. Urquhart identified the “Lords of the Bell” with the monks of Mount Athos (*ibid.*). On the possible connection of another Ecumenical Patriarch, Callinicos III, to oracular literature, see note 24 below.

²¹ Konortas, *Οθωμανικές θεωρήσεις*, pp. 364-369.

²² C. Th. Dimaras, *Νεοελληνικός Διαφωτισμός* [Neohellenic Enlightenment], Athens: Ermis, 1993, pp. 6-14, 93-96; cf. P. M. Kitromilides, *Νεοελληνικός Διαφωτισμός. Οι*

The ideas of the Enlightenment were hostile to the world of tradition whence messianism sprang. By proclaiming the emancipation of individuals and societies from ignorance and arbitrariness, the Enlightenment dismissed the traditional view of history as God's pedagogy oscillating between chastisement and deliverance. Oracular literature, therefore, which could hitherto be challenged on a theological basis, would be now discarded on the sole ground of reason. It was in these terms that the Enlightenment teacher and writer Iosipos Moisiodax suggested that divination creates nothing but fear and passivity in hearts and minds, whereas another pioneering figure of the Neohellenic Enlightenment, Eugenios Voulgaris, conceded, around 1771, that the tales about the fair-haired people and the like resonated only with the simple-minded.²³ Yet, at least up to the 1770s, this was hardly the case. Merchants like Ioannis Pringos or intellectuals like Nikolaos Tzertzoulis (Cercel) show that messianism did have a presence amongst those who constituted the most aspirant and dynamic ranks of the *Genos*.²⁴

Messianism proved a source of political inspiration for the first generation of those who manned the Neohellenic Enlightenment. Nikiphoros Theotokis, Nikolaos Tzertzoulis and Eugenios Voulgaris were all strongly influenced by

πολιτικές και κοινωνικές ιδέες [Neohellenic Enlightenment: political and social ideas], Athens: MIET, 1996, pp. 271-276.

²³ Kitromilides, *Νεοελληνικός Διαφωτισμός*, pp. 183, 238-239.

²⁴ For the philosopher and teacher Nikolaos Tzertzoulis (Cercel), see Ch. Tzogas, "Νικόλαος Ζαρζούλης ο εκ Μετσόβου" [Nikolaos Zarzoulis from Metsovo], in I. E. Anastasiou and A. G. Geromichalos (eds), *Μνήμη 1821. Αφιέρωμα εις την ελληνικήν παλιγγενεσίαν επι τη 150η επετείω* [Memory of 1821: a tribute to the 150th anniversary of Greek regeneration], Thessaloniki: Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 1971, pp. 129-142. Cf. also R. Clogg, "The Greek Mercantile Bourgeoisie: 'Progressive' or 'Reactionary'?", in R. Clogg (ed.), *Balkan Society in the Age of Greek Independence*, London: Macmillan, 1981, pp. 89-90. For the Amsterdam-based merchant Ioannis Pringos, see V. Skouvaras, *Ιωάννης Πρίγκος (1725; - 1789). Η ελληνική παροιμία του Άμστερνταμ. Η σχολή και η βιβλιοθήκη της Ζαγοράς* [Ioannis Pringos (1725? - 1789): Amsterdam's Greek community: the school and library at Zagora], Athens: Historical and Folklore Society of Thessalians, 1964. According to Skouvaras, Pringos did not subscribe to prophetic beliefs; see p. 199, note 1. Pringos, nevertheless, had resorted to oracular interpretation during the 1768-1774 Russo-Turkish War; on this, see N. Andriotis, "Το χρονικό του Άμστερνταμ" [The Amsterdam chronicle], *Νέα Εστία* 10 (1931), p. 914. Notably, the list of books Pringos, and his collaborator the Ecumenical Patriarch Callinicos III, donated to the Greek school of Zagora on Mount Pelion includes a complete manuscript of *Agathangelos*; see Skouvaras, *Ιωάννης Πρίγκος*, p. 163, note 1; cf. p. 314. It is likely, however, that the manuscript belonged originally to Callinicos III (1713-1791/2). On the stance of Church prelates to oracular literature, see note 20 above.

what Paschalis Kitromilides has dubbed “the Russian expectation”: Russia-oriented messianism in fully fledged political dimensions.²⁵ Having delved into oracular literature at an early stage of his life,²⁶ Voulgaris turned the traditional Russia-oriented expectations into a rational politicised form. Within the catalytic atmosphere of the Russo-Turkish Wars of the latter half of the eighteenth century (1768-1774 and 1787-1792), Voulgaris combined messianic expectations with the theory of enlightened absolutism, working out various plans with a view to taking advantage of the designs of Tsarina Catherine II against the Ottomans. His plans ranged from the possibility of a resurrected empire of the Second Rome in the form of a Greco-Russian condominium over the Balkans, to the perspective of an independent Greek principality, under an enlightened monarch, carved out of the European part of a partitioned Ottoman Empire.²⁷

III

The disillusionment that followed the end of the Russo-Turkish Wars near the close of the eighteenth century seems to have marked the end of the affair with traditional messianism. The wars had made explicit a suspected but never-admitted truth: Russia was not really concerned with the fate of the subjugated Orthodox in the Balkans. It had interest only in creating discomfort in the underbelly of the Ottoman Empire. This came to be realized rather traumatically during the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-1774. The presence of a Russian fleet in the Aegean and much Russian propaganda spurred revolts in the Peloponnese and Crete – although the Russians then withdrew, leaving the local populations at the mercy of the enraged Ottomans. In the years that followed the Treaty of Jassy, which concluded the Russo-Turkish War of 1787-1792, Voulgaris was knocked off his pedestal as the leading figure of the Neohellenic Enlightenment. Along with him much of traditional sentiment towards Russia was dumped. The French Revolution invited the aspirant strata of the *Genos* to radicalism. From the 1790s to the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence, nationalists tried to obliterate the traditional ideology of the Russian expectation. What they yearned for their country was a free homeland ruled by the “Greek people”, conceived as a distinctive community of common culture. What they wanted was a self-organized national liberation movement, not messianic deliverance through

²⁵ Kitromilides, *Νεοελληνικός Διαφωτισμός*, p. 76; see also pp. 169-197.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 175; see also note 25, pp. 551-552.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 182-184.

God-sent vessels of Providence, which were, regrettably, of foreign stock. It was in this spirit that the 1806 nationalist polemic with the title *Ελληνική Νομαρχία, ήτοι Λόγος περί ελευθερίας* [Hellenic Nomarchy, or a Discourse concerning freedom] contended that the oracles appeal only to the naïve because they manifest nothing but cowardice.²⁸

Polemicians, however, find weapons where they can. No matter how superstitious or archaic it might have looked, oracular literature proved politically useful once the revolutionary nationalists had to communicate their message to the masses. In this vein, Rhigas Velestinlis affords an instructive example. He conceived the idea of a Balkan-wide revolt against the Ottomans influenced by the Revolution in France, along with a large-scale editorial programme targeting the superstition and obscurantism of the common folk. However, in the 1790s he became, reportedly, the publisher of the first-ever printed edition of the *Vision of Agathangelos*.²⁹ Judging from the rest of

²⁸ The Anonymous Hellene, *Ελληνική Νομαρχία, ήτοι Λόγος περί ελευθερίας* [Hellenic Nomarchy, or a Discourse concerning freedom], ed. Giorgos Valetas, Athens: Aposperitis, 1982, p. 203.

²⁹ The only surviving copy of this rare edition was discovered and reproduced by Alexis Politis. The copy, however, states no date or publisher; see A. Politis, “Η προσγραφόμενη στον Ρήγα πρώτη έκδοση του Αγαθάγγελου. Το μόνο γνωστό αντίτυπο” [The first edition of Agathangelos that is ascribed to Rhigas: the only known copy], *Ερασιστής* 42 (1969), pp. 173-192. Politis has proposed 1790/1791 as the date of publication, a time when Rhigas undertook the first phase of his Vienna-based enterprise of publishing patriotic material (p. 174). On the other hand, Philippos Iliou has proposed 1795/1796, a time when Rhigas had inaugurated the second, rather polemical, phase of his publishing enterprise after the French Revolution; see Ph. Iliou, *Προσθήκες στην ελληνική βιβλιογραφία* [Additions to the Greek bibliography], Vol. I, Athens: Diogenes, 1973, p. 311. A sense of reservation as to whether Rhigas was actually involved in the 1790s edition of *Agathangelos* arises from the fact that the only source of this information is a later publisher of *Agathangelos* (in the 1830s) under the pseudonym “Ζηλοπροφήτης” [Ziloprophetis, i.e. the zealous prophet]; cf. Ziloprophetis, *Εύσεβοῦς τινὸς συντάκτου...Ζηλοπροφήτου...σύνταγμα πνευματικῶν διχῆ διηρημένον εἰς θεωρητικόν τε, καὶ πρακτικόν...* [Spiritual constitution divided into two parts, theoretical and practical...written by a pious author...named Ziloprophetis], Ermoupolis: G. Melistagos, 1838, p. XXII. Characteristically, the work was not included in the recent publication of Rhigas’ collected works; see Rhigas Velestinlis, *Άπαντα τα σωζόμενα* [Surviving works], ed. P. M. Kitromilides, 5 vols, Athens: Hellenic Parliament, 2000-2002. It is true that Rhigas’ biographers kept silence on the issue but, as Alexis Politis has observed, it is also true that Ziloprophetis’ allegation on the personal involvement of Rhigas was never contested at a time when most comrades of the latter were still alive – making therefore the allegation rather credible; see Politis, “Η προσγραφόμενη στον Ρήγα”, p. 174. It is worth noting in the same respect that Constantinos Dimaras had

Rhigas' work and action, it looks unlikely that the man was something like a messianist. The most probable is that he saw the prophecy as tool for popular mobilization.³⁰

Whatever the case might be, in the 1790s, when the Greek patriots started clinging to the idea of a self-organized armed movement against Ottoman

little doubts about Rhigas' involvement in the project; see C. Th. Dimaras, *Ιστορία της νεοελληνικής λογοτεχνίας. Από τις πρώτες ρίζες ως την εποχή μας* [History of modern Greek literature: from its very roots to the present], Athens: Gnosi, 2000, p. 162; cf. p. 716. Another early source (mid-nineteenth century) alluding to Rhigas' own involvement with oracular literature is Georgios Gazis; see G. Gazis, *Λεξικόν της επαναστάσεως και άλλα έργα* [Dictionary of revolution and other works], ed. N. Patselis and L. Branousis, Ioannina: Society for Epirote Studies, 1971, p. 128.

³⁰ Politis, "Η προσγραφόμενη στον Ρήγα", p. 174; cf. also Kitromilides, *Νεοελληνικός Διαφωτισμός*, pp. 288-335. In fact, *Agathangelos* was not the only instance where Rhigas would appeal to the Byzantine past. What this dedicated revolutionary really had in mind was washed away, along with his strangled body, in the waters of the Danube, preventing us from reaching concrete conclusions as to his actual plans. Yet a surviving manifesto of 1797 called *Νέα πολιτική διοικήσις τῶν κατοίκων τῆς Ρούμελης, τῆς Μ. Ἀσίας, τῶν μεσογείων νήσων καὶ τῆς Βλαχομυδοβανίας* [New political constitution for the inhabitants of Rumeli, Asia Minor, the Mediterranean islands and Wallachia-Moldavia] could give us an idea. It appears that Rhigas yearned for a pan-Balkan uprising against the Ottomans in the model of the French Revolution, which would ultimately lead to the establishment of a political entity he called the "Hellenic Republic". In his manifesto, Rhigas proclaimed that the descendants of the ancient Hellenes, the modern Greeks, driven to the extreme of despair by an inhumane and tyrannical yoke, would rise in the name of Law and Homeland, inviting along all the [Balkan] Christians, Jews and Turks [Muslims] who yearned for freedom. However, as is clearly seen on the map of his Republic, published in 1797, which he called *Chart of Greece*, the modern state Rhigas was dreaming of was, in territorial terms, something of a new Byzantine Empire: it included not only the area south of the Danube but also Dalmatia, the Aegean Islands and the western part of Asia Minor. In this light, the testimony of another prominent member of the Greek enlightened intelligentsia, Grigorios Konstantas, who conceded that Rhigas was the first patriot to think of the revival of the nation in clearly political terms and visualize an independent Greek State, confuses rather than clarifies things; see on this Kitromilides, *Νεοελληνικός Διαφωτισμός*, p. 312. The *Chart of Greece*, moreover, incorporated some other symbols of the Byzantine past, namely a ground plan and a panoramic contemporary view of Constantinople included in the very first folio, with an accompanying epigram lamenting the bitter fate of the City of the Seven Hills, "the queen of the world". Next was to be found a reproduction of Constantinos Palaiologos' seal accompanied with the meaningful comment: "And we were enslaved". In 1796, one year before the publication of his *Chart*, Rhigas had published another two maps – merely translations from German prototypes. For Rhigas' cartographic work see G. Laios, "Οι χάρτες του Ρήγα" [The maps of Rhigas],

rule, *The Vision of Agathangelos* enjoyed remarkable resonance. It was the beginning of an illustrious career. The Greek War of Independence and its aftermath saw the popularity of *Agathangelos* soaring. In autonomous Greece it was widely cherished, particularly among the low strata, which, throughout the nineteenth century, nourished the belief that the prophecy somehow summed up the political shape of the future of the entire Greek nation. The celebrated career of *Agathangelos* invites inevitably the question of how an obscure text, full of dull references to European political developments from the late fifteenth century to the mid-eighteenth, could be taken as relevant to an anti-Ottoman revolt which came to be launched in the early nineteenth century. What attracted the Greek fighters of the revolt, and then the citizens of the newly emerged Greek Kingdom, to the hermetic utterances of this prophetic text in particular?

I would like to propose that the answer comes from a discussion in two paragraphs in the first chapter of the work. The narrative of *Agathangelos* starts from the fall of the Byzantine Empire. Yet, what this prophetic work actually refers to is not the rise and fall of Byzantium but, in reverse, its fall and rise. The work begins with a *Revelation*-like vision: a lion with a human voice hands to the monk Agathangelos, the alleged author of the work, a book from God in which he is going to read the fate of the Byzantine Empire. The first paragraph starts citing an old prophetic adage, according to which one Constantine founded the Byzantine Empire and another Constantine would lose it. Next, Agathangelos “foretells” that Constantinople will fall to the “hands of the Saracens” in 1453 and goes on to describe the desecration of churches, the destruction of properties and the persecution of the faithful. God has decided to chastise the Orthodox for the sins they have committed for a certain period of time. Then His people will be welcomed again.³¹ After this *ex eventu* part comes the genuine prophetic part, in which Agathangelos foretells the reversal of status for the subjugated Orthodox at a calculable point of human time: “And like the Israelites under Nebuchadnezzar, so this People will stay subjugated to the impious Hagarenes until the divinely ordained hour: it [the People] will remain under the yoke for roughly 400 years.”³²

Δελτίον της Ιστορικής και Εθνολογικής Εταιρείας της Ελλάδος 14 (1960), pp. 231-312. Cf. also, the observations of George Toliás on Rhigas’ *Chart* in *id.*, “Totius Graecia: Nicolaos Sophianos’s Map of Greece and the Transformations of Hellenism”, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 19 (2001), pp. 8-12.

³¹ Politis, “Η προσγραφομένη στον Ρήγα”, p. 180; see pp. 6-7 in the original text.

³² *Ibid.*; see p. 7 in the original text.

Having seen the future, Agathangelos breaks down in tears mourning the God-decreed fall of Constantinople. The text, however, makes clear that the counting for the promised liberation starts right from the city's fall. A certain stylistic technique employed in Rhigas' edition deserves additional consideration: selected words throughout the text appear in red so as to get impressed on the reader's eye. In the two paragraphs described above, for example, the words "People", "Constantine" [begun], "Constantine" [lost], "Byzantine Kingdom of the East", "first Constantine", "twelfth" [Constantine], "kingdom" [in the hands of the Saracens], "houses" [destroyed], "temples" [desecrated], "faithful" [persecuted], "destruction of Byzantium" and, of course, the numerals denoting the start and the end of the Ottoman subjection are all printed in red.³³ The technique creates a certain visual effect. As the reader's eye moves from one red-typed word to another, the intrinsic vagueness of the text is considerably reduced, making the message clear: Providence will terminate Ottoman rule "roughly 400 years" after its commencement. Roughly 400 years after the establishment of Ottoman rule was a period coinciding with the most crucial years of Greek nationalism: the years when a massive armed insurrection against Ottoman rule was planned, when an eight-year war was sustained and fought and, finally, when a modern nation-state emerged on the political scene of Europe.

IV

Nationalists, suggests Anthony Smith, only rarely attempt to destroy entirely an older, religious identity, as they realize that, if their message is to be communicated widely and effectively, it needs to be couched in the language and imagery of those they wish to mobilize and liberate. Therefore, they tend to appropriate elements of the old cults for their own, secular and political ends.³⁴ There is evidence that Greek nationalists did turn their eyes to messianic

³³ Remarkably, another work of Rhigas, the Greek translation of Abbé Barthélemy's *Voyage du jeune Anacharsis en Grèce* (1797), employed a similar technique. During the 1790s, the Poullos Brothers, Vienna's Greek publishing house, sponsored the translation of Barthélemy's *Anacharsis* with a view to offering a basic work of European classicism to the Greek readership. The fourth volume of *Anacharsis*, which Rhigas partly translated and wholly edited, used bold type whenever the text touched on issues of nationalistic interest, such as the classical zeal for liberty, the dedication to the homeland and the like; see Kitromilides, *Νεοελληνικός Διαφωτισμός*, p. 303. The Poullos Brothers would have been the most probable publishers for Rhigas' *Agathangelos*; see Politis, "Η προσγραφή στον Πήγα", p. 420.

³⁴ A. D. Smith, "The 'Sacred' Dimension of Nationalism", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29/3 (2000), pp. 800-803. Cf. also *id.*, *Chosen Peoples*, pp. 19-43.

myths, all the more so when the participant organizational structures of the planned uprising were faced with increasing membership demands.

It is well-known that Nikolaos Skoufas, Athanasios Tsakalof and Emmanuel Xanthos, the founders of the Philiki Etaireia, the secret society that spearheaded the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence, had deliberately created the impression that their struggle had the unconditional backing of Russia. It has been suggested, thereon, that the Christian élites of the Peloponnese were attracted to the Etaireia believing that they had found a strong foreign ally.³⁵ The attraction, however, was not the product of sheer political calculation. Referring to the unsuccessful offer of the Etaireia's leadership to Count Ioannis Kapodistrias, at the time the tsar's minister for foreign affairs, Xanthos wrote in his memoirs briefly that the chief hetaerists aimed at capitalising on the "[...] age-old superstition of the enslaved Greeks that coreligionist Russia would liberate them from Turkish tyranny".³⁶ In 1829 Alexandros Soutsos, the would-be famous Greek poet, published one of the earliest histories of the Greek War of Independence, in which he went into more detail as to what the old superstition implied and the way the Philiki Etaireia took advantage of it:

Tsakalof increased the members of the Etaireia with admirable rapidity, presenting himself as an emissary of the Tsar. Emotions were placed at the disposal of insurrection: according to a tradition, widespread all over Greece, the Ottoman Empire would be annihilated by a blonde race coming from the North. Another belief was preserved from father to son, that the city of Constantinople, established by Constantine, and lost by another Constantine, would be reconquered by a prince of the same name.³⁷ This last, it was believed, could be none other than the grand duke, heir presumptive of the crown of Russia. The Revelations of St John, interpreted by an Athonite monk, came to support this view. *Agathangelos*, a prophetic book written in the pompous style of Isaiah, appointed the beginning of the nineteenth century as the era of destruction of the Mohammedans. All these ideas facilitated in an efficient way

³⁵ D. Dakin, *The Greek Struggle for Independence*, London: Batsford, 1973, p. 46.

³⁶ E. Xanthos, *Απομνημονεύματα περί τῆς Φιλικῆς Ἐταιρείας* [Memoirs on the Philiki Etaireia], Athens: Garpolas, 1845, p. 12.

³⁷ The allusion here regards mainly the *Vision of Agathangelos*. Cf. the beginning of the first chapter: "A Constantine established (ἤρξατο) and a Constantine will lose the Byzantine Kingdom of the East." The published text, however, says nothing about the alleged re-conqueror, the third Constantine, quite possibly a product of interpolation. P. D. Stephanitzis (ed.), *Συλλογή διαφόρων προρρήσεων...* [Collection of various predictions...], Athens: A. Angelidis, 1838, p. 149.

the plans of Tsakalof, who managed in a short time to attract to the Etaireia the majority of *klefts*, mariners and primates of Greece.³⁸

More evidence comes from the memoirs of another hetaerist, Photakos Chrysanthopoulos (1798-1878), who suggested that oracular literature was a long-term factor that conditioned decisively the popular reception of the call for insurrection. What proved most useful from the nationalists' point of view was that oracular literature had moulded a firm popular belief in the eventual reversal of the status of subjection:

But then again, they [the Greeks] would not miss the chance to make comments on *Χρονογράφος* [Chronographer]³⁹ about the fall of Constantinople, as well as on *Agathangelos*, and find much nourishment and consolation therein. In the monasteries there was much talk about [the latter] and this was where it was rather fervently expounded; this fervour had taken over the souls of Greeks, and the majority expected that their fantasy would take shape from day to day. All these smoothed the progress of the Philiki Etaireia, for it found the peoples' spirits willing and ready for freedom.⁴⁰

The role of oracular literature in creating popular beliefs with status reversal properties that, in turn, advanced the popular resonance of

³⁸ A. Soutsos, *Histoire de la révolution grecque*, Paris: Firmin Didot, 1829, p. 19.

³⁹ The author here means the *Historical Book* by Pseudo-Dorotheos of Monemvasia, first published in 1631, a chronicle that enjoyed tremendous popularity and successive editions until the early nineteenth century (last edition, 1818). Historians usually treat chronicles as typical expressions of the conservative, traditional, pre-nationalistic worldview that held Ottoman rule as God-given and regarded the sultans as the natural successors of the Christian emperors. Little attention has been paid, however, to the fact that the *Historical Book* of Pseudo-Dorotheos actually concluded with the *Prophecy of Patriarch Gennadios*. The same applies in the case of another famous seventeenth-century chronicle, the so-called *New Synopsis of Various Stories* published in 1637 by Matthaios Kigalas. When Ioannis Stanos, following the legacy of Pseudo-Dorotheos and Kigalas roughly a century later, published a reduction in demotic Greek, his *Byzantis*, a compendium of Byzantine historical texts, he did include the oracles of Leo the Wise in annotated form. On these see Sklavenitis, "Χρησμολογικό εικονογραφημένο μονόφυλλο", p. 49 and note 4; N. Svoronos, "Ιωάννης Στάνος" [Ioannis Stanos], *Αθηνά* 49 (1939), pp. 233-242; A. Kominis, "Παρατηρήσεις εις τους χρησμούς του Λέοντα του Σοφού" [Observations on the oracles of Leo the Wise], *Επιστημονική Επετηρίς Εταιρείας Βυζαντινών Σπουδών* 30 (1960), p. 403.

⁴⁰ Photakos [Photios Chrysanthopoulos], *Απομνημονεύματα περί της Ελληνικής Επανάστασως* [Memoirs on the Greek Revolution], Vol. I, ed. S. Andropoulos, Athens: Greca, 1971, p. 35.

revolutionary nationalism is confirmed by the first historical account of the Philiki Etaireia, the essay of Ioannis Philimon. Therein Philimon recounts that while “the intelligent part of the nation” delved into patriotic poetry and songs “the mass was usefully steered [χειραγωγείτο ωφελίμως] by the *Visions of Agathangelos* believing dogmatically in the future reversal of its fate”.⁴¹ Behind the inchoate popular sense of collective redemption, there was to be found not only *Agathangelos* but the scriptural body of the oracular and apocalyptic tradition as a whole.

V

Messianism was a late and Post-Byzantine set of beliefs, largely based on oracular literature, seeking to counter-balance the hardships of Christian defeat and subjection through an agenda of politicised metaphysics. In the long term, oracular literature had formed a tradition of texts and interpreters.⁴² As such, it could have hardly been something else than élite literature. It managed, nonetheless, to resonate deeply with the populace. Why were the Orthodox masses imbued with this élite-originated tradition? How could the peasants, busy as they were in the annual cycle of sowing and harvesting, feel attached to some mythical élite narratives of the distant past which referred to a bygone Christian empire, invoked a murky prospect of deliverance and invited trouble with the Ottoman authorities?

I would like to propose an answer resting on three factors. The first is that oracular tradition employed multiple forms. Prophetic language was a play on language itself that transcended the need for written text. This could be done through the regular use of rhyme, which enabled a mnemonic way of reproducing the prophecy, as well as through the systematic use of visual material in manuscript or edited oracular texts.⁴³ It is very likely, for instance, that *Agathangelos* originally had accompanying pictures or, at least, such was the intention of its author.⁴⁴ The same applies to later, nineteenth-century,

⁴¹ I. Philimon, *Δοκίμιον ιστορικόν περι τῆς Φιλικῆς Ἐταιρείας* [Historical treatise on the Philiki Etaireia], Nauplio: Kondaxis & Loulakis, 1834, p. 217. Philimon reiterates more or less the same statement on pp. 67-68. He also notes that *Agathangelos* was reprinted by the besieged Greeks in Mesolonghi in 1824 in order to boost morale. The reprint was arranged “by some clever men” [ἐπιτήδειοί τινες], as Philimon writes characteristically (p. 68, note 1). The Messolonghi edition, of which no copy survived the siege and the eventual destruction of the city, is also mentioned by Ziloprophitis, *Εὐσεβοῦς τινός συντάκτου*, p. XXIII.

⁴² Cf. Hatzopoulos, “*Ancient Prophecies*”, pp. 25-39, 72-77 and 85-97.

⁴³ B. Taithe and T. Thornton (eds), *Prophecy: The Power of Inspired Language in History*, Phoenix Mill: Sutton, 1997, p. 4.

⁴⁴ E. Kourilas, “Ο Θεόκλητος Πολυείδης και το λεύκωμα αυτού εν Γερμανία (εξ

editors of the work.⁴⁵ The perception of various apparitions and visionary experiences as signal acts of the Divine was also a visual form of oracular tradition. The signal nature of celestial phenomena, for instance cross- or sword-like comet apparitions subject to military and political interpretations, had long been a shared belief in the élite and popular culture of pre- and early modern Europe.⁴⁶ If one adds to this the standard preoccupation of the populace with all sorts of divination,⁴⁷ it is not hard to see that oracular tradition was virtually available to everyone regardless of education.

Oracular literature consisted of malleable texts whose meanings evolved through suitable interpretations and interpolations. Yet ultimately it constituted and reflected a myth. Stemming essentially from shared memories and collective experiences, the myth invoked a common past with a view to serving present purposes and future goals.⁴⁸ It held that the Ottomans would meet a total military defeat right here in this world and that the Byzantine Empire would be restored or, in more precise terms, “resurrected”. From this point of view, the religious model of rise and fall was religiously reversed. What was at stake for the oracular tradition was not the empire’s rise and fall but exactly the opposite: its fall and rise. This reversal was theologically legitimate: the Bible talked extensively about the pedagogy of a chosen people and its exile and return and, at the same time, taught that after passion comes resurrection. The myth of resurrection of the Eastern Roman Empire became hence a socially shared cultural feature capable of creating a bond for the defeated and subjected Orthodox community.⁴⁹ Photakos highlighted this

ανεκδότου κώδικος). Ο φιλελληνισμός των Γερμανών” [Theokleitos Polyeidis and his album in Germany (from an unpublished manuscript): the philhellenism of the Germans], *Θρακικά* 5 (1934), p. 104, note 4.

⁴⁵ It is worth noting that the editor of the *Vision of Agathangelos* in 1838 intended to add pictures to the text; see Ziloprophetis, *Εὔσεβοῦς τινὸς συντάκτου*, pp. XIV-XV. Cf. also the depiction of the “Sleeping Emperor” in the oracular collection of Stephanitzis (*Συλλογὴ διαφόρων προρρήσεων*) on the unnumbered page next to p. 142.

⁴⁶ S. Schechner-Genuth, *Comets, Popular Culture and the Birth of Modern Cosmology*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997, pp. 3-13 and 66-68.

⁴⁷ Philimon, *Δοκίμιον ἱστορικόν*, p. 218, note 1.

⁴⁸ Cf. Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 49; cf. also p. 170.

⁴⁹ For the concept of “resurrection” within the messianic frame of reference and its permutations with nationalism during the Greek War of Independence, see M. Hatzopoulos, “From Resurrection to Insurrection: ‘Sacred’ Myths, Motifs, and Symbols in the Greek War of Independence”, in R. Beaton and D. Ricks (eds), *The Making of Modern Greece: Nationalism, Romanticism, and the Uses of the Past (1797-1896)*, London: Ashgate, 2009, pp. 81-93.

when he described how the pre-revolutionary Greek-speaking Orthodox communities were engaged in combined readings of narratives of the past – of chronicles about the fall of Constantinople and oracular literature about the rise – finding “much nourishment and consolation”.⁵⁰

The third factor that ascertained popular allegiance to messianism was that oracular literature had gradually assumed canonical status in the popular mind. Oracular works boasted that they were the œuvre of holy or wise men of the distant past, but in fact this was just a trick for gaining prestige and winning the credence of their audience. Orthodox theologians and laymen might have denounced oracular literature as unhallowed and dangerous,⁵¹ yet for its supporters it remained the revered labour of saints and prophets. Crucially, in the years before independence, if not much earlier, the Orthodox populace came to treat oracular prophecy as sacred. In terms of scriptural authority, *Methodios* was often thought as equal to John, and *Agathangelos* to Daniel and Ezekiel. This is why Philimon, referring to the pre-independence years, recounted that the *Vision of Agathangelos* “was kept by many [people] in manuscripts like a holy scripture”.⁵² Byron’s companion, John Cam Hobhouse, had noticed that the *Prophecy of Patriarch Gennadios* “was handed about by the Greeks with [...] an air of complete faith”.⁵³ The Greek commander-in-chief during the war, Theodoros Kolokotronis, mentioned in his memoirs “the prophecies” along with other church books that comprised his childhood readings (*psaltirion*, *octoêchos*, *minaion*), as if the former were a standard component of religious literature.⁵⁴ For the archimandrite

⁵⁰ Photakos, *Απομνημονεύματα*, p. 35.

⁵¹ Argyriou *Les exégèses grecques de l'Apocalypse*, pp. 105-106.

⁵² Philimon, *Δοκίμιον ιστορικόν*, p. 68, note 1.

⁵³ J. C. Hobhouse, *A Journey through Albania and Other Provinces of Turkey in Europe and Asia to Constantinople during the Years 1809 and 1810*, Vol. II, Philadelphia: Carey, 1817, p. 353.

⁵⁴ G. Tertsetis, *Ο Γεώργιος Τερτσέτης και τα ευρισκόμενα έργα του* [Georgios Tertsetis and his extant works], ed. Dinos Konomos, Athens: Hellenic Parliament, 1984, p. 708. See also the translation of the book in English, *Kolokotronis: The Kleft and the Warrior: Sixty Years of Peril and Daring: An Autobiography*, transl. [Elisabeth M.] Edmonds, London 1892. Compared to the Greek original, the English translation of this line is not accurate (p. 127). In the paragraph, Kolokotronis relates the (lack of) education he received to the poor literacy of Greeks before independence, citing as examples the primates and the prelates. In the English edition the line reads as if those who studied “the psalter, the Octoêchos, the book of the months and the prophecies” (*ibid.*) were the prelates (termed as “archbishops”). However, in the Greek text the verb’s subject is clearly Kolokotronis himself.

and historian of the War of Independence, oracular literature was the work of “old wise and holy men” as much so as proper biblical prophecy.⁵⁵ This popular assumption was used by Neophytos Vamvas,⁵⁶ the liberal cleric and disciple of Korais, in order to embolden the insurgent Hydriots on the outbreak of the war: “Yes, brothers, the liberation of the *Genos* has been prophesied by many holy men and is divinely decreed that it will take place in our days; be sure that you will win the fight.”⁵⁷ The multiple forms of the oracular tradition (textual, oral and visual), its myth-making properties and its perceived holiness had rendered messianism a socially shared cultural feature within the Ottoman-ruled *Genos*.

Messianism was a traditional and fatalistic set of beliefs longing for outside intervention both of the divine and human sort – and as such it had very little

⁵⁵ A. Phrantzis, *Ἐπιτομή τῆς ἱστορίας τῆς ἀναγεννηθείσης Ἑλλάδος ἀρχομένη ἀπὸ τοῦ ἔτους 1715 καὶ λήγουσα τὸ 1835* [Summary of the history of regenerated Greece commencing from the year 1715 and ending in 1835], Vol. I, Athens: K. Kastorhis, 1839, p. XXIII.

⁵⁶ This would not be the last instance during the War of Independence that Neophytos Vamvas used oracular literature in an attempt to mobilize the populace. According to the testimony of the former hetaerist Georgios Gazis, then secretary to Captain Karaiskakis, Vamvas interpreted Leo’s oracle X (“Woe to thee, City of the Seven Hills when the twentieth letter is acclaimed along thy walls...”) in favour of Alexandros Ypsilantis – the twentieth letter of the Greek alphabet, Ypsilon, was taken to mean Ypsilantis – arousing popular enthusiasm; see Gazis, *Λεξικόν της επαναστάσεως*, pp. 23-24. In the same vein, it is useful to keep in mind that another dedicated nationalist, Christodoulos Konomatis, writing under the *nom de plume* “Νέος Ιατρός” [Young doctor], placed side by side Ezekiel, Daniel, St John the Evangelist, Agathangelos and Leo the Wise in defence of the revolutionary cause; see I. Oikonomou Larissaios, *Ἐπιστολαὶ διαφόρων Ἑλλήνων λογίων, ἀνωτάτων κληρικῶν, Τούρκων διοικητῶν, ἐμπόρων καὶ εσαφίων, 1759-1824* [Correspondence of various Greek men of letters, prelates, Turkish governors, merchants and guilds, 1759-1824], ed. G. Antoniadis, Athens: Giannis Antoniadis, 1964, p. 476.

⁵⁷ Excerpt taken from the proclamation with which the Commander Antonios Oikonomou declared the island of Hydra in revolt. The proclamation is undated and bears the signatures “The inhabitants of the island of Hydra” and further below “G. Trippos / Chancellor”; see A. Lignos (ed.), *Ἀρχεῖον της Κοινότητος Ὑδρας, 1778-1832* [Archive of the community of Hydra, 1778-1832], Vol. VII [1821], Piraeus: Zanneion, 1926, p. 18; cf. also A. B. Daskalakis, *Κείμενα. Πηγὰὶ της ἱστορίας της Ἑλληνικῆς Ἐπαναστάσεως* [Texts: sources of the history of the Greek revolution], Vol. I, Athens: n.p., 1966, pp. 152-155. Lignos identified Vamvas’ own writing style in the manuscript; *ibid.* p. 17. It is very likely that the proclamation was issued right after the night of 27 March 1821, when Oikonomou, a member of the Philiki Etaireia, assumed control of the island, winning over the hesitant local primates; see Daskalakis, *Κείμενα*, p. 152.

in common, if anything, with an ideology that proclaimed liberation from ignorance and arbitrariness. Greek nationalists, on their part, had no desire to restore the Byzantine Empire themselves, let alone to see it restored by somebody else. What they found in the old messianic traditions, however, was a platform of ideas with socially shared resonance promising the reversal of status for the subjugated community at a more or less certain, relatively close and calculable, point of historical time. From this perspective messianism was useful insofar as it formulated a particular notion of collective salvation. This notion was at once divine and mundane, other-worldly and terrestrial, non-temporal and ever-impending. It was quasi-religious and quasi-political. It could be endowed with new layers of meaning and fit modern circumstances. In these terms, it was summoned in the service of Greek independence and used as a charter of validation for actions that would have otherwise looked unacceptably revolutionary.

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