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Who Invented the "Modern Greeks", and Why?

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ABSTRACT: This article argues that the distinction, which is today intuitive, between ancient Greeks and modern Greeks has its origin in western medieval polemics that sought to establish the hegemony of the Catholic Church over its Orthodox counterpart. Since the Renaissance, the "ancient" Greeks in this polar distinction were those of classical antiquity, who are usually valourised in western perceptions, but before that, in the original medieval form of the distinction, the ancient Greeks were the Greek fathers of the church who, western polemicists needed to argue, sided with Catholic thought rather than with contemporary Orthodox thinking. Thus, in order to appropriate the Greek fathers for the Catholic side in theological debates, western writers distinguished them – as the original "ancient Greeks" – from the "modern" (that is, contemporary) Greeks who had allegedly deviated from the Catholic faith. The article thereby offers the first historical genealogy of this now familiar distinction.

The Contours of the Question

The distinction between ancient and modern Greeks is today so deeply ingrained and intuitive that it is easily taken for granted. It is reflected in academic practice, for example, in the distinction between classics and modern Greek studies. Greek historians likewise come in two varieties, ancient and modern. The distinction is also firmly embedded in national Greek consciousness as a complementary polarity between the modern nation and its ancient ancestors. It shapes how non-Greeks, from scholars to tourists, perceive the dual foci of Greek history and culture. The distinction, after all, makes intuitive sense. The ancient Greeks lived thousands of years ago, worshipped many gods, held nonmodern social values and inhabited warring city-states and kingdoms. Modern Greeks, by contrast, have a Christian culture, speak a different form of the Greek language and live mostly in two modern nation-states. Ancients and moderns are separated by a period of history – "Byzantium" – that has always proven difficult to classify but that, at any rate, is long enough to avoid overlap, confusion or blurred transitions between antiquity and modernity. There are few historical schemata in the world that present this bifurcated profile between ancient and modern. The interplay between the two – whether cast as a tension or continuity – has been fruitful in the production and theorisation of culture literature, and identity.

But where does the distinction come from? When did people start to believe that there were two kinds of Greeks, ancient and modern? What were the historical and cultural circumstances in which that distinction emerged and what purpose did it originally serve? At this point, one might wonder why the distinction had to be "invented" at all. When a modern, national Greek identity emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – immediately preceding, during, and after the Greek War of Independence – the distinction between ancient and modern Greeks was already intuitively obvious to everyone, both Greeks and others.[1] One of the principle strategies of the leaders of the Greek Revolution was to convince western European states that the modern Greeks deserved military and financial support precisely because they were the descendants of the highly valourised ancient Greeks. In other words, the distinction was already in place, at least in western perceptions. This article will argue that it was already a thousand years old by the time of the revolution, though when it was originally devised it was not at all intuitive and configured "modern" and "ancient" in a significantly different way. I will argue that the distinction originated in the theological debates of the Middle Ages and was fully a product of western European polemic, devised for the purpose of attacking the Church of Constantinople.

The primary purpose of this article will be to excavate the origin of the distinction and explain how it understood "ancient" and "modern" before those terms mutated into their current form. I will not be tracing, in full, the semantic evolution of the distinction during the past millennium. Yet, in order to enable the reader to connect the dots between medieval polemic and modern national identity, I will also present an intermediary phase in its long history, namely the form that the distinction took during the Italian Renaissance. At that time, the distinction shifted its terms of reference and briefly acquired a more positive valence, in contrast to the negative purpose that it served in the medieval period. It held a mostly positive valence again during the war of independence, when the distinction was first taken up and naturalised in Greece itself. This was a new development, as the distinction had hitherto remained a feature of western European thought, a way by which western societies managed their relationship to the different phases of Greek culture. Thus, modern Neohellenism stepped into a category that already had a long history in the West.

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[1] There is a vast scholarship on the emergence of a modern Greek/Hellenic identity among Greek speakers in the diaspora and across the Ottoman empire in this period. I will not be engaging with this problem, as I seek an earlier moment. A standard study that discusses much of the relevant evidence and theory is Paschalis Kitromilides, *Enlightenment and Revolution: The Making of Modern Greece* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); by citing it, I do not thereby endorse all of its theoretical commitments and conclusions.

As we will see, the referents behind the terms "ancient Greeks" and "modern Greeks" have shifted over the centuries. Therefore, in this discussion these terms will not have a fixed meaning, as our purpose is to explore what they meant in each phase of their history. Yet one major thesis of the argument is that the distinction, as a more or less formalised taxonomy (even one with shifting referents), originated in medieval Latin discourse and was only later naturalised among Greek-speaking communities, first in the early modern diaspora in western Europe and later in the emergent nation-state of Greece.

Many scholars recognise that "the discourses underlying modern Greek identities have been largely imported … They emerged and crystallized as side effects of a universal original myth concocted outside Greece and for reasons totally unrelated with the prospective nation."[2] This article will explore a hitherto neglected aspect of this conceptual import, namely the origin of the structuring distinction between ancient and modern Greeks, and will trace it to an unfamiliar and now-obscure set of polemical discourses. By the time it was absorbed into the makeup of Neohellenism, it had lost some of its polemical edge. In a distant way, however, that distinction still serves some of the functions for which it was first designed. Genealogy may not explain everything, but in this case origins had long-term consequences.

Finally, a note on the valence of "modern" in this inquiry. When medieval writers began to talk about "modern Greeks", they were not anticipating what we understand as the transformative project of modernity. *Modernus* in classical and medieval Latin means "of the present", that is, "contemporary with us". On a purely lexical level, *moderni Graeci* are just those of today as opposed to those of any past time, even the previous year or decade. But, as we will see, western polemicists were postulating a more substantive distinction when they separated the *antiqui* from the *moderni Graeci*, not one that was trivially chronological, even if it was only later aligned with the political and philosophical project of "modernity". In other words, for a long time "modern" simply meant "contemporary". It was, nevertheless, fortuitous for the nation-state of Greece and the Greeks who emerged from the war of independence that their qualifier "modern" happened to align them with the emerging project of European modernity, at just the right time. Not many nations came into being in modern times with the term "modern" affixed to their very name. This was an unintended benefit.

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[2] Constantine Tsoukalas, "The Irony of Symbolic Reciprocities: The Greek Meaning of 'Europe' as a Historical Inversion of the European Meaning of 'Greece'," in *The Meaning of Europe: Variety and Contention within and among Nations*, ed. Mikael af Malmborg and Bo Stråth (New York: Berg, 2002), 27–50.

In Premodern Greek and Latin before ca. AD 850

To clear the ground for the inquiry, it is important to emphasise that this distinction is not indigenous to discussions that ever took place in Greek before the period of the revolution. Granted, Greek scholars active in the Italian Renaissance were certainly made aware of it because of the social context in which they lived, but I have not been able to find any discussions of it by them *in Greek*. Generally speaking, the record of Greek literature and thought before the eighteenth century lacks any awareness of a cardinal distinction between ancient and modern Greeks. Of course, Greek culture was always changing and this led many writers, even in ancient Greece, to comment on generational shifts between Greeks "then" and Greeks "now", usually for the worse but sometimes for the better.[3] But this is not what we are looking for. At no point in Greek premodernity did such comments amount to a formalised cleavage with ontological implications between past and present Greeks, far less to one that was broadly accepted. Nor do we find terms for the "modern Greeks", "new Greeks" or the like.

Nor did such a distinction emerge in the society that we call Byzantium, which was Greek-speaking but Christian and Roman in identity.[4] As they did not think of themselves as Greeks, they therefore lacked the basic precondition for developing a distinction between ancient and modern Greeks. For them, the Hellenes were a people who had lived in ancient times, like the Egyptians and Chaldeans. However, because the chief distinguishing characteristic of the Greeks in Christian Roman eyes was their polytheism, "Hellenes" came by extension to refer to all polytheists, even in the present too. Thus Persian Zoroastrians and Chinese people counted religiously as "Hellenes" in Byzantine eyes, because of their paganism. Therefore, instead of constituting an ancient-modern polarity, the Hellenes functioned rather as a timeless archetype for all pagans, whenever and wherever they lived.[5]

Another aspect of ancient Hellenism that remained productive in Byzantine culture was its literature and philosophy, that is, the system of elite *paideia*. Thus, it was possible for learned scholars (mostly in Constantinople) to see themselves as Hellenes in terms of their education. This functioned largely as a class distinction, marking educated Orthodox Romans off from their

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[3] For example, Aristophanes, *Clouds* 961–1102; Perikles in Thucydides, *History* 2.36.

[4] For east Roman identity, see Anthony Kaldellis, *Romanland: Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).

[5] Glen W. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990); see also the references in the following note.

less educated countrymen. It could also be used to designate thinkers who sympathised with ancient philosophy as opposed to more hardline Orthodox thinkers who rejected it as satanic. I have studied these uses of Hellenic paideia in Byzantium extensively and have found no evidence that they led to a conceptual distinction between ancient and modern Greeks (or Hellenes). Hellenism-as-classical-culture remained a timeless archetype in Byzantine thought, just as did Hellenism-as-paganism.[6]

To be sure, a tiny number of east Roman intellectuals experimented with notions of Greek identity and descent for their own people, especially in the later Byzantine period, but these fleeting and vestigial ventures did not go so far as to posit taxonomical distinctions between ancient and modern Greeks, nor did these ideas gain any social traction.[7]

Thus, the taxonomy in question did not originate with thinkers who wrote in Greek. It was, in fact, of western European origin and for centuries it made sense only within a western framework of ethnography and historical imagination. We find its origin in Latin literature, but not yet in the literature of antiquity or the early Middle Ages. To be sure, the Romans of the late republic and empire regarded contemporary Greeks – the ones whom they had conquered – as inferior to the more glorious ancient Greeks of the classical age. Only classical Greeks, mostly those of the fifth century BC, were honoured by the Romans, and not the Hellenistic Greeks in between.[8] Yet this remained a hazy distinction that did not crystalise into an explicit taxonomy of ancient vs. modern. Likewise,

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[6] For both types of Hellenism in Byzantine thought, see Anthony Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium: The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Kaldellis, "Byzantine Philosophy Inside and Out: Orthodoxy and Dissidence in Counterpoint," in *The Many Faces of Byzantine Philosophy*, ed. Katerina Ierodiakonou and Börje Bydén (Athens: Norwegian Institute at Athens, 2012), 129–51.

[7] For example, Kaldellis, *Hellenism*, 299, 312–13, 372–79; Kaldellis, *A New Herodotos: Laonikos Chalkokondyles on the Ottoman Empire, the Fall of Byzantium, and the Emergence of the West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press and Dumbarton Oaks, 2014), 171–236.

[8] See, for example, Sulla in Plutarch, *Life of Sulla* 13; for scholarship, see Antony J.S. Spawforth, *Greece and the Augustan Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Greg Woolf, "Becoming Roman, Staying Greek: Culture, Identity and the Civilizing Process in the Roman East," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 40 (1994): 116–43. I thank Greg Woolf for his helpful comments on this issue. For Roman perceptions of the Greeks in the period of the republic, see, among many other studies, Erich S. Gruen, *Culture and National Identity in Republican Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); in general, see Albert Henrichs, "*Graecia Capta*: Roman Views of Greek Culture," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 97 (1995): 243–61.

Latin writers in the early Middle Ages knew of only one Greek people and did not split them into two "phases", ancient and modern. In Latin eyes down to ca. AD 850, these Greeks had a history with its ups and downs, but it remained the history of "the" Greeks.[9]

This is illustrated by western (Latin) usage from around AD 800, the last period before the emergence of a distinction between ancient and modern Greeks. At that time, two powerful institutions, the Church of Rome and the Frankish (later German) empire ceased to recognise the eastern Romans as Romans and their empire as the legitimate Roman empire. Instead, they began to refer to them, in disparaging ways, as "Greeks", usually as treacherous, faithless, backstabbing and effeminate Greeks. This was done for self-interested political reasons. Rome had finally broken free of Constantinopolitan control and wanted to deny to the eastern capital any authority in the West, and specifically over Rome itself. At the same time, the popes were asserting a claim to the Roman legacy as the leaders of the Republic of St. Peter that was based in the old imperial capital. For their part, the Frankish and later German emperors gradually developed a theory according to which the mantle of the Roman empire had been "transferred" to them after being removed from the "Greeks" in the east. These projects, papal and imperial, both entailed the vilification of the Greeks as degenerate, treacherous, evil, schismatic (possibly heretical) and malicious. With minor exceptions and deviations, this became and remained the dominant image of the Greeks in the western imagination for centuries, throughout the Middle Ages and beyond.[10]

These western ideological projects did not, however, require that ancient Greeks be distinguished from modern Greeks. The latter, in this case, were the

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[9] For early medieval western views of "the Greeks", see Anthony Kaldellis, *Phantom Byzantium: Europe, Empire, and Identity from Late Antiquity to World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming), chap. 2; for views in the time of the Crusades, see Marc Carrier, *L'autre chrétien pendant les croisades: Les Byzantins vus par les chroniqueurs du monde latin (1096–1261)* (Saarbrücken: Éditions universitaires européennes, 2012), among many other studies.

[10] For the change ca. AD 800, see, on the papal side, Clemens Gantner, "The Label 'Greeks' in the Papal Diplomatic Repertoire in the Eighth Century," in *Post-Roman Transitions: Christian and Barbarian Identities in the Early Medieval West*, ed. Walter Pohl and Gerda Heydemann (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 303–49; for the early papal project, see Clemens Gantner, "*Romana urbs*: Levels of Roman and Imperial Identity in the City of Rome," *Early Medieval Europe* 22 (2014): 461–75; and Thomas F.X. Noble, *The Republic of St. Peter: The Birth of the Papal State, 680–825* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984). For the change on the Frankish side, see Laury Sarti, "From *Romanus* to *Graecus*: The Identity and Perceptions of the Byzantines in the Frankish West," *Journal of Medieval History* 44 (2018): 131–50. For western medieval views of the Greeks, see, in summary, Herbert Hunger,

inhabitants of the eastern empire who viewed themselves as Romans but who, western Europeans kept insisting, were really only Greeks. In fact, the denial of their Romanness in the West tended to work better on the assumption of *continuity* between the Greeks of antiquity and their contemporary descendants. That way it was not incumbent on western institutions to explain where these new Greeks had come from or what made them different from their ancient ancestors. Ideologically, it was more convenient to claim that the easterners were Greeks all along, seeing as they spoke Greek and lived in "Greece". According to this western narrative, after the fall of the western empire in the fifth century AD, these Greeks had inherited the mantle of the Roman empire and retained it for a while, but now it had passed to the manlier Franks and subsequently to the Saxons and Germans. This argument was made, among others, by Anastasius the Librarian in the ninth century. He was a native of Rome who, on behalf of both a pope and a Carolingian emperor, ghost-authored angry polemical letters to Constantinople on precisely this matter.[11]

From a western medieval perspective, assuming a solid continuity between ancient and contemporary Greeks made it easier to attach to the latter the negative stereotypes (such as those listed above) that western medieval scholars found in ancient Latin literature about the ancient Greeks. To be sure, the ancient Romans also held many positive views of their contemporary Greeks and certainly admired and absorbed a great deal of their culture. But Latin literature also reflected many disdainful attitudes towards the Greeks, whom the Romans, after all, had recently conquered: they were weak, sexually deviant or effeminate, verbose and fallen compared to their more noble ancestors. Western medieval writers repurposed these stereotypes to use against the "Greeks" of the eastern Roman empire, and downplayed the positive associations, such as that the Greeks were philosophically wise, eloquent and devoted to beauty (though such association are not entirely missing from medieval Latin texts).[12]

Graeculus perfidus, Ἰταλὸς ἰταμός: Il senso dell'alterità nei rapporti Greco-Romani ed Italo-Bizantini (Rome: Unione internazionale degli istituti di archeologia, storia e storia dell'arte in Roma, 1987); a more detailed treatment by period in Kaldellis, *Phantom Byzantium,* citing additional bibliography.

[11] For Anastasius' letters in this context, see Kaldellis, *Romanland*, 20–21; for Anastasius and the Greeks, see Réka Forrai, "The Sacred Nectar of the Deceitful Greeks: Perceptions of Greekness in Ninth Century Rome," in *Knotenpunkt Byzanz: Wissensformen und kulturelle Wechselbeziehungen*, ed. Andreas Speer and Philipp Steinkrüger (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 71–84.

[12] For Roman views of the ancient Greeks, see n. 8 above; for western medieval views of the Greeks, see n. 9 above.

Assuming continuity also fit well with the intuitive primordialism of medieval ethnography, the notion that ethnic groups are basically unchanging, typically fixed in a certain place and preserve their innate qualities over time.[13] Thus, these early medieval spokesmen for the papacy and the German empire had little incentive to distinguish categorically between ancient and modern Greeks. Besides, at this time they were not much interested in classical Greek culture and did not put ancient Greeks on a pedestal or treat them as a unique and peerless phase of Greek culture. This might seem counterintuitive to us, but it is important to understand the parameters of medieval thought. Connecting the supposed "Greeks" of ninth-century Constantinople to those of antiquity did not make them seem nobler. Instead, it made them seem inferior *to Romans*, whether the ancient Romans who had conquered them or, in the medieval present, the Church of Rome or the German Roman empire. Continuity, in this context, was not a way to praise the Greeks (as it became later, for example during the war of independence). It was instead a way by which to strip them of their *Roman* credentials. So we find no categorical distinction between ancient and modern Greeks in the early medieval west.

Ancient and Modern Greeks in the Italian Renaissance

The form of the distinction between ancient and modern Greeks with which we are most familiar evolved during the Italian Renaissance. In this form, the "ancients" were the Greeks of antiquity and the "moderns" were the contemporary Greeks of the fifteenth century whose homeland was being overrun by the Ottoman empire. This also happened to be one of the few periods in medieval and modern history when western Europeans developed and disseminated positive views of the modern Greeks, though they were always coupled with negative images that stemmed from the Middle Ages (especially effeminacy and heresy, namely for rejecting the Church of Rome).
Focusing on the Italian Renaissance, Han Lamers has brilliantly analysed the interplay between (a) the Italian humanists' idealisation of the *ancient* Greeks, whom they frequently put on a pedestal as paragons of classical virtue and models to be imitated, and (b) their mixed view of *contemporary* Greek scholars, who could not fully escape the negative associations that had accrued around their

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[13] For primordial vs. political ethnicities in ancient and early medieval thought, see Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); for Frankish ethnography, see Andreas Mohr, *Das Wissen über die Anderen: Zur Darstellung fremder Völker in der fränkischen Quellen der Karolingerzeit* (Münster: Waxmann, 2005).

name during the Middle Ages but who could earn praise through their philology, their willingness to teach Greek to Italians and by converting to Catholicism (as many Greek scholars did who emigrated to Italy in this period). He also considers the native Roman identity of these Greeks, which they often had to leave behind when they emigrated, ceding all claims to the Roman tradition to their Italian hosts.[14]

What we find is that the polarity of ancient vs. modern Greeks with which we are familiar today, including those terms themselves (*antiqui* vs. *moderni*), was already in place during the Renaissance. The ancient Greeks formed a category that privileged classical writers and classical culture generally, whereas the modern Greeks were a contemporary Christian people who had just lost their homeland to the Turkish conquest. The most prominent modern Greeks in this scenario were the Hellenist scholars who moved to Italy. They were universally regarded as the descendants of the ancient Greeks, both by the Italians and the modern Greeks themselves, and were frequently compared to them in positive ways. Humanist rhetoric, after all, loved to discuss contemporary people and issues in ancient garb, so comparisons between ancient and modern abounded. The Italians recognised the Greeks of their day as "the principal carriers of the ancient Greek heritage", in fact as the direct descendants of the ancient Greeks.[15] For example, the Florentine Donato Acciaiuoli called the Greek scholar Ioannes Argyropoulos "wise, venerable, and worthy of the ancient Greeks".[16]

Even this praise, however, points to the fact that the modern Greeks of the time of the Renaissance were generally not regarded as the equals of their glorious ancestors. It was rare for one of the moderns to match the quality of the ancients. After all, the moderns had just lost the war with the Turks and their reputation was still stained by centuries of medieval polemic, which cast them as treacherous and effeminate. Many of them had to convert to Catholicism to be accepted as the peers of the Italian humanists, though that did not always wash away the many prejudices held against them. Renaissance idealisation placed the ancient Greeks in a sublime category that the moderns could not hope to rival, unless they were Italian humanists who perfected the ancient eloquence and the virtues with which it was associated. No one was striving to emulate the modern Greeks, and so a categorical distinction was inevitable.

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[14] Han Lamers, *Greece Reinvented: Transformations of Byzantine Hellenism in Renaissance Italy* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

[15] Ibid., 72, for example, 72–73 for Chalkondyles, and 77–78 for him and others.

[16] Translated and discussed in Nancy Bisaha, *Creating East and West: Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 124.

We find, then, that the distinction between ancient and modern Greeks was firmly in place by the fifteenth century. Moreover, it was already producing moral assessments and dilemmas that would recur at the time of the war of independence and the foundation of the modern Greek state. Specifically, modern Greeks were inevitably compared to their glorious ancestors and found wanting in western eyes. On the other hand, ethnic continuity between the ancients and the moderns was presupposed, and this gave an attractive pedigree and a set of marketable linguistic skills to the modern Greeks, the *novi Graeci* or *neoterici Graeci*, as they were also called.[17] Moreover, in another anticipation of modern cultural dynamics, some of these new Greeks believed that their ancient traditions were better than those of the Latins and that the ancient Romans had learned "everything" from the ancient Greeks, just as the modern Italians were doing again now. Some Greek teachers even harped on the "cultural debt" that was owed by the Latins to the Greeks, using this argument to claim teaching positions in the West and advocate for the liberation of Greece from the Turks.[18] Many Italians, in turn, found these attitudes arrogant and irritating. They were equally annoyed when the Greeks did not shave their beards to fit in with the western Latin aesthetic.

The Renaissance distinction between the two different kinds of Greeks has been amply studied and its contours are relatively familiar. It is this distinction that the leaders of the Greek Revolution tried to tap into in the early nineteenth century by reversing its polarity: in seeking to free themselves from the Turks, the modern Greeks were living up to the glorious standards of their ancestors, not falling short of them. This was matched in the West by a burst of philhellenism that boosted the war in the 1820s. That round of philhellenism was marked by an acute awareness of the distinction between ancient and modern Greek, which is why so much of it revolved around forging celebratory connections between the two. This story has also been told many times.[19]

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[17] Han Lamers, "Hellenism and Cultural Unease in Italian Humanism: The Case of Francesco Filelfo," in *Francesco Filelfo, Man of Letters*, ed. Jeroen De Keyser (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 22–42, here 37.

[18] For the debt, see Lamers, *Greece Reinvented*, 78–79, 86, 89–90, 107, 118–22, 276, and chap. 5 on Ianos Laskaris. For the later history of this idea in modern contexts, see Johanna Hanink, *The Classical Debt: Greek Antiquity in an Era of Austerity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

[19] Mark Mazower, *The Greek Revolution: 1821 and the Making of Modern Europe* (New York: Penguin, 2021); Hanink, *The Classical Debt*, chap. 4.

The Origin of the Distinction in Medieval Polemic

It turns out that the Italian humanists were only repurposing, not inventing, an existing taxonomical distinction between ancient and modern Greeks, one that was robust enough to allow for complex cultural negotiations. A prior version of it already existed in the medieval West, similar enough to count as its genealogical antecedent but different in its priorities and configurations. It comes from a time when western interest in classical (that is, pagan) antiquity was minimal and cultural debates were conducted, unlike the Renaissance, on theological grounds. I will introduce it by quoting the wish expressed in the mid-twelfth century by the Latin theologian Anselm of Havelberg (ca. 1100–1158). "Would that the modern Greeks [*moderni Graeci*] were as humble and obedient to the Roman Church as the ancient Greeks [*antiqui Graeci*] had been!"[20] Now, one can translate this passage in a way that softens the *moderni–antiqui* distinction and treats it in a trivial temporal sense, rather than postulating an ontological taxonomy: "Would that the Greeks of our times might be as humble and obedient to the Roman Church as they heretofore were!"[21] But this, I argue, misses the fact that such a taxonomy did exist in western theology at the time, and was deployed in these debates precisely because a lot depended on it.

Anselm was reporting on a debate that he had had with a Greek Orthodox bishop over the contentious theological issue of the Procession of the Holy Spirit. The substance of that debate need not concern us here.[22] What matters to us is who these "Greeks" were in Anselm's view within the overall framework of the debate.[23] For convenience, I will distinguish here between the two churches as Orthodox and Catholic, though those two terms did not become conventional shorthand markers until later (at the time, they were more likely to be called Greek and Latin or eastern and western). The problem facing Anselm and other Catholic theologians was that the issue of the Procession of the Holy Spirit could not be resolved without study of, and appeal to, the fathers of the church who

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[20] Anselm of Havelberg, *Dialogi* 3.16, ed. J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 188:1233A–D.

[21] Ambrose Criste and Carol Neel, *Anselm of Havelberg: Anticimenon, On the Unity of Faith and the Controversies with the Greeks* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2010), at 3.16.

[22] Those interested may consult Bernd Oberdorfer, *Filioque: Geschichte und Theologie eines ökumenischen Problems* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001); and A.E. Siecienski, *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[23] For Anselm's immediate context in the evolving relationship between the two churches, see A. Edward Siecienski, *The Papacy and the Orthodox: Sources and History of a Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 268–71; for some of the issues at stake, see Brett E. Whalen, *Dominion of God: Christendom and Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 86–89.

had laid out the fundamentals of Christian doctrine between the fourth and the seventh centuries AD. The official Nicene Creed (AD 325) that both churches accepted did not stipulate that the Holy Spirit proceeded from *both* the Father and the Son but *only* from the Father (within the Trinity). However, for reasons that we need not discuss here, much later the Latin term *filioque*, that is, "also from the Son", had crept into the Catholic (Latin) version of the Creed. This put Latin theologians in a quandary: they had to argue that the addition was legitimate and theologically correct even though it was unauthorised and late. To do so, they had to argue that the ancient church fathers supported their position. However, the vast majority of those fathers had written in Greek. Orthodox thinkers at the time were confident that the Greek fathers supported the position of the Church of Constantinople, which was that the *filioque* was illegitimate and likely theologically wrong too. The Catholics disagreed, which meant that they had to appropriate the (ancient) Greek fathers for the (modern) Catholic side, while casting contemporary Greeks – that is, the "modern Greeks" – as wrong on the point in question. This meant that the modern Greeks had split not only from the Church of Rome, which Catholics at this time believed exercised a monarchical authority over all churches, but also from the "ancient Greeks", that is, the Greek church fathers. The Catholic view at this time, then, was that the "ancient Greeks" were the Greek-speaking Christians of the Patristic age and that they had been "obedient" to the Church of Rome. The "modern" Greeks, however, had later split off from the one true faith of St. Peter because of their perfidy, arrogance and rebelliousness, and had to be restored "back" to subordination to the pope. That is what Anselm is getting at in his wish, quoted above.

In other words, in this prior iteration the distinction between the ancient and the modern Greeks represented a medieval Catholic effort to split the Greek theological tradition in half in order to claim the ancient (patristic) half for the Church of Rome and stigmatise the present Greeks, or "modern Greeks", as rebels against the truth and the apostolic authority of St. Peter. This distinction mattered greatly to Catholic theologians as it lay at the heart of their claim to theological correctness and ecclesiastical supremacy; it was not a casual or trivial observation that Greeks now are different from Greeks then. Thus, in this original iteration of the distinction, the "ancient Greeks" were the church fathers, not the classical writers of antiquity (as in the Renaissance and later), and the "modern Greeks" were their (relatively) unworthy descendants. This is isomorphic with the ancient-modern distinction that was to operate during the Renaissance, only the terms are primarily theological rather than literary and linguistic and the identity of the "ancient Greeks" is different.

Anselm was no innovator in this matter. He was using language that we find in many medieval Latin texts that discussed the problem with "Greeks today".

I will give some more examples here, but it is first important to stress that these texts do not elaborate overtly on the distinction, or offer long passages that we can quote to nuance and flesh out their ancient and modern Greeks. These brief snippets appear in long disquisitions on the theology of the Procession or the grounds of papal supremacy and the like. There would be no point to quote all that here. It is in the midst of such discussions that these medieval authors drop their references to the two types of Greeks, leaving us to infer who they mean and the valence of the distinction itself.

To give another example, the German theologian Gerhoh of Reichersberg (1093–1169) also castigated the "modern Greeks" for their depraved faith, which resulted from their abandonment of the "ancient Orthodox Greek fathers" such as Athanasios of Alexandria.[24] In 1233, the Dominican monk Peter of Sézanne "travelled to Constantinople" – in his words – "with some other brothers, sent by our lord the pope, in order to settle, if at all possible, the controversy caused by the modern Greeks [*moderni Graeci*]".[25] A *Treatise Against the Errors of the Greeks*, written by Dominican missionaries in Latin-occupied Constantinople in 1252, distinguishes between the ancient church fathers, "both Greek and Latin" (the *patres antiqui, tam Graeci tam Latini*), who were good and so pro-papal, and the *moderni Graeci*, who have strayed from the truth.[26] Thus, the entire medieval genre of texts that were entitled *Contra errores Graecorum* (*Against the Errors of the Greeks*) was directed, explicitly or implicitly, against "modern Greeks" only.

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[24] Gerhoh of Reichersberg, *Tractatus contra Graecorum errorem negantium Spiritum s. a. Filio procedere* 15, ed. Friedrich Scheibelberger, *Gerhohi Reichersbergensis praepositi opera hactenus inedita*, vol. 1 (Linz: Quirein, 1875), 354: *Et haec quidem nobis disputationis pugna contra Graecos modernos fidemque ipsorum depravatam extiterit ; nam antiqui et orthodoxi patres graeci Didymus atque Athanasius insuper et sancta Ephesina synodus non contra nos, sed contra eos pro nobis est*; see Whalen, *Dominion*, 85–86.

[25] Gerard de Frachet, *Vitae Fratrum Ordinis Praedicatorum necnon Cronica Ordinis* 24.13, ed. Benedikt Maria Reichert (Brussels: Charpentier & Schoonjans, 1896), 218: *veneram Constantinopolim cum fratribus aliis a domino papa missis pro sedanda, si fieri posset, modernorum contradiccione Grecorum*. For a full translation of the text, which I have not used here, see Fr. Placid Conway, *Lives of the Brethren of the Order of Preachers* (London, 1955), 198; for the context, see Jeff Brubaker, "The Diplomacy of Theological Debate: The Friars' Report of the *Disputatio* of 1234," in *Contra Latinos et Adversus Graecos: The Separation between Rome and Constantinople from the Ninth to the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Alessandra Bucossi and Anna Calia (Leuven: Petters, 2020), 311–42, here 322.

[26] *Tractatus contra errores Graecorum*, ed. J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 140:483–574, here 526A; the text juxtaposes ancient and modern Greeks again at 557A; for the moderni Graeci as schismatics, see 488A–B; for the context, see Nickiphoros I. Tsougarakis, *The Latin Religious Orders in Medieval Greece, 1204–1500* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 207–9.

I am not currently aware of Latin texts before the twelfth century in which this distinction appears in a robust taxonomical sense, though it is possible that some will eventually come to light. It is notoriously hard to conduct word searches in medieval Latin (unlike Greek, whose corpora are mostly available through the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae). However, the *filioque* debate had begun in the ninth century, with texts being written "Against the Errors of the Greeks" at that time too, so the basic dynamics were in place earlier.[27] I am therefore treating the ancient-modern distinction as a structural feature of medieval Catholic debate and not an innovation made by one particular thinker.

Therefore, there were two preconditions for the emergence of a substantive distinction between ancient and modern Greeks: (a) the western view that the east Romans were not, as they themselves believed, Romans but rather Greeks, an ideological move that allowed western European institutions and thinkers to claim the Roman legacy exclusively for themselves, an appropriation that is by and large still honoured in western scholarship to the detriment of eastern Romanness; and (b) an attempt by medieval Latin theologians to appropriate the Greek fathers of the early church for the Catholic side and thereby separate them, for the purpose of ecclesiastical polemic, from the "modern" Greeks. In short, the distinction exists because it instrumentally facilitates the hostile appropriation of two aspects of east Roman Christian culture that were deemed prestigious, even vital, in medieval western Europe. When the distinction appears in medieval sources, it is, as far as I can tell, *always* complicit in such a manoeuvre.

The Renaissance reformulation of this distinction in the fifteenth century did not function altogether differently, despite the praise that was bestowed on contemporary Greek philologists. Categorically splitting the modern Greeks off from their putative ancestors – in this case the pagan Hellenes of antiquity rather than the church fathers – opened the ancient Hellenes to western appropriation too. This is exactly what happened as soon as the supply of native-Greek teachers dried up, after ca. 1500, and Hellenic philology began to be cultivated in western Europe by western scholars. At that point, we immediately begin to get claims to the effect that the true spirit of ancient Hellas lives on now in Germany (or France or Britain) while Greece itself has sunk into barbarism and the "modern Greeks" have lost all touch with the glory of their ancestors. This allows Europe

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[27] For the general background, see Siecienski, *The Filioque*, 87–109. For the Orthodox side, see Tia Kolbaba, *Inventing Latin Heretics: Byzantines and the Filioque in the Ninth Century* (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 2008).

to emerge as the true heir of antiquity.[28] This is a big topic, involving also the development of an alternative system for pronouncing ancient Greek that was as different from spoken Greek as European classicists could make it.[29] By that point, both classical Greek and the church fathers "belonged" to the West, leaving the "modern Greeks" with only their "vulgar" and "barbarous" vernacular language.

These two acts of appropriation were fused, for example, in the famous report about Muscovy (early Russia) written by the papal nuncio, Antonio Possevino, in 1586. He says that its ruler knows only his own language, though there are some Greeks at his court who "teach the corrupt jargon [*corrupta*] the Greeks speak nowadays instead of ancient Greek [*prisca*] or the language in which the early fathers wrote their books and the Synods were published".[30] Possevino distinguishes here between the modern Greeks on the one hand and the ancient and Patristic Greeks on the other, fusing the two western European claims to the latter. Backward Orthodox countries are identified with "corrupt" (that is, modern) Greek, whereas properly educated Europeans value classical and Patristic Greek.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has identified the origin in European thought of the distinction between ancient and modern Greeks. Those origins lay in the sphere of ecclesiastical polemic. Hopefully, the article has also allowed the reader to glimpse something of the subsequent evolution of that idea in the Renaissance and down to the war of independence. The shape of this history is less one of gradual evolution and more of quantum leaps, from a medieval to a Renaissance paradigm, and then a modern one. At each stage of this story, the distinction was repurposed to meet changing ideological challenges and western aspirations. Future research may identify, with greater granularity, the missing links between these paradigms, but the goal of this article is satisfied with a schematic picture. We observe, for example, that with each step the gap between the ancients and the moderns grew. At first, the two were fairly close together: the ancient Greeks were the church fathers and the moderns were the spokesmen of the Orthodox Church of the eastern empire after

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[28] For claims to this effect by Lutheran scholars in sixteenth-century Germany, see Asaph Ben-Tov, *Lutheran Humanists and Greek Antiquity: Melanchthonian Scholarship between Universal History and Pedagogy* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

[29] I explore these issues and the sources for them more fully in Kaldellis, *Phantom Byzantium.*

[30] Antonio Possevino, *The Moscovia,* trans. Hugh F. Graham (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1977) 55; the Latin text is in *Antonii Possevini Societatis Iesu Moscovia* (Antwerp, 1587), 103. I thank Andreas Kyropoulos for this reference.

whatever point Catholics deemed them schismatics, that is, as "disobedient" to the Church of Rome. In the Renaissance the gap widened: antiquity was now pushed back to the classical pagan writers of antiquity and the moderns were the Greeks recently conquered by the Ottomans, but especially the teachers of Hellenic philology who emigrated to Italy. These teachers were honoured for their contributions to the project of humanism, but starting in the sixteenth century the dominant notion in western Europe was that contemporary or modern Greeks were unworthy of their ancient legacy, whose true heirs were the nations of western Europe.

Thus, even though it always seemed as if the modern Greeks were being compared to the ancient Greeks, in reality this polarity was only a vehicle for the real comparison, which was to western Europe at any given time, or rather to whichever of its institutions was asserting the distinction. Ancient Greece thus functions as a proxy for western Europe. In the Middle Ages, the modern Greeks were not really being measured up to the church fathers but rather to the contemporary priorities of the Church of Rome. Likewise, after the Renaissance Byzantine scholarship on ancient texts was being compared to modern European classical scholarship (and still is).

The "ancient" part of the equation remained fixed after the Renaissance, but the "modern" one was a moving target. During the revolution, the modern Greeks were praised for striving to emulate their ancestors' love of freedom. In this iteration of the cycle, the designation "modern" also implicitly aligned them with the Enlightenment project of European modernity such that, increasingly during the history of the modern Greek state, the axis of comparison was not antiquity but modernity itself. In other words, the modernity of the modern Greeks was not seen in comparison with antiquity, which is what the ancient-modern polarity implies, but rather with western European modernity. These broader reflections offer room for much further discussion. The primary goal of this article, however, was to present the primary sources and the specific context for the medieval origin of the ancient-modern distinction. Understandably, these sources appear to be entirely unknown to scholars of diachronic and comparative Hellenism, whether ancient or modern. But they open broader vistas for exploration of what the idea of the "modern Greeks" has meant for the emergence and evolution of modern Europe, however little the Greeks themselves have consented to these ideological manoeuvres.

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