

Representing Byzantium: the Narratives of the Byzantine Past in Greek National Museums

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This paper focuses on the narrative of the Byzantine Middle Ages introduced by the Greek national museums. It aims to shed light on the historical and sociopolitical events that led to the creation of these museums, as well as on the changes that this narrative underwent in certain times in Modern Greek history.

As departments of the Greek Ministry of Culture, Greek archaeological museums are state museums and thus represent the state's cultural policies. During Enlightenment the Byzantine Ages were considered as a period of darkness and decadence. The recognition and presentation of this period as an integral part of the Greek nation's history came only in the 1840's with the development of national historiography. Major historical and sociopolitical events marked the course of this rediscovery of the Byzantine past. In the 1914 Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens, Byzantine monuments and findings were regarded as objects certifying national identity and affirming the nation's historical continuity.

A second time in the history of narrating the Byzantine past was in the 1980s, as Greece became a member of the European Union in 1981. The Byzantine past had to be integrated within the broader European historical context. The establishment of the Museum of Byzantine Culture in Thessaloniki in 1989 has to be examined through this same prism. Informed by new museological theories, the Museum of Byzantine Culture sheds light on discourses neglected in earlier periods, always influenced by the "myth of Europeanism", as analyzed and presented in the following paper. Through the museum displays the Byzantine narrative that is presented becomes part of the common European past.

Introduction: the Myths of Greek National Ideology

As departments of the Greek Ministry of Culture, the Greek archaeological museums are state museums. Being entrusted with the preservation and promotion of the national cultural heritage, they accumulate and activate social authority, by providing interpretative suggestions on their collections, narratives that are employed communicatively in the social framework they function. The interpretive and operational role they adopt confirms their institutional character and ensures their survival.

The discourse expressed within the framework of the national museums determines the management of the cultural heritage, as it constructs representations of a past, promotes selectively certain fields of knowledge and introduces interpretations that allow for social consent, according to the ideology that is each time dominant. Ideology permeates the structure, the methods and the objectives of the museum disciplines. As theorists of the Frankfurt school have argued, any discipline may be transformed into ideology; the level of a discipline's penetration into institutional social fields, namely its own institutionalization, alters the structure and the objectives of the institution itself, by founding its own legitimacies.¹ By introducing, reproducing and simplifying their own models, disciplines, being ideologically charged, orientate institutions implementing their own predetermined choices and beliefs.

In an almost two-century period, Enlightenment, modernity, liberalism, positivism, nationalism, socialism as ideological movements and their idiosyncratic reception in Greece have shaped the discourse developed about the Greek national museums. National museum discourse was developed ensuing and serving the constitution of the Greek nation state, raising nationalism in its multiple versions as the dominant ideology. Being the first Greek national Museum to be established in the mid 19th century, the Athens National Archaeological Museum inaugurated a national narrative that was to be employed in order to handle and present the past, according to the nation's occurring needs.

In this paper we will examine two moments in the history of narrating the Byzantine past within the Greek national museums: the first took place in the few decades that preceded and followed the foundation of the Christian and Byzantine Museum in Athens (1914); the second is linked with the establishment of the Museum of Byzantine Culture in Thessaloniki. Both historical moments are intertwined with the discourse that was each time developed about the definition of Greek nation. Adopting the theoretical scheme introduced by the art historian Eugenios Matthiopoulos,² we attempt to examine the narratives the two museums initiated through three myths that dominated the national ideology: the ideological myths of "rebirth" and of "uninterrupted continuity" of Greek civilization, both dominant from the establishment of the new Greek state until the first decades of 20th century; last, the myth of "Europeanism", that evolved in the tormented years that followed World War II and concluded with Greece joining the European Union.³

At this point it should be acknowledged that utilizing the notion of "myth" may be considered as venturous, mainly due to the numerous uses and the various charges the term

1 Jürgen Habermas, "Technology and Science as 'Ideology,'" trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon, 1970), rpt. in *Jürgen Habermas On Society and Politics: A Reader*, ed. Steven Seidman (Boston: Beacon, 1989).

2 Eugenios Matthiopoulos, "I istoria tis tehnis sta oria tou ethnous" in Eugenios Matthiopoulos and Nikos Hadjinikolaou (eds.), *I Istoría tis Tehnis stin Ellada*, (Irakleio: Panepistimiakes Ekdoseis Kritis, 2003). At this point, we would like to thank Panayiotis Bikas for indicating us Matthiopoulos' text and disposing material from his unpublished doctoral dissertation. Many thanks, also, to Areti Adamopoulou, whose useful advice and texts on Post-War Greek art enriched our view on "Europeanism".

3 Matthiopoulos bases his analysis of the relation between myth and ideology on Plamenatz. See John Plamenatz, *Ideology* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970).

acquired within time. Limiting the interpretations the term “myth” may obtain, we have to clarify that in this specific context it is used to denote how the national narrative is crystallized at certain historical moments investing each time the past with different symbolisms.⁴

Discovering Byzantium

The second and third quarters of the 19th century were for Greece the difficult years of the formation of the new Hellenic nation state. In a climate of uncertainty, fragility, insecurity,⁵ of a Bavarian royal family set in the 1830s by the patron countries to rule the new Hellenic kingdom and with the general feeling of disappointment⁶ due to the geographically restricted borders of the new state, the Greeks had to organize and define themselves, as a newly independent country. Apart from that, they also had to prove their historical and cultural continuity in an effort to counteract the accusations of the Austrian historian Fallmerayer, who questioned the relation between ancient and modern.

The myth of “rebirth”, supported by scholars influenced by Enlightenment, argued that modern Greece was the “rebirth” of Ancient Greece, omitting at the same time the medieval Byzantine period. National continuity, therefore, had to be demonstrated rather than simply assumed or declared; the “missing link” affirming it was the Byzantine period. The myth of “continuity” found its first, belated,⁷ supporters in the early 1850s with the birth of national historiography and the intellectual labors of historian Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos. His aim was the projection of Byzantium, as an integral component of Greek history and identity. Due to the pressed and defensive political atmosphere that demanded the urgent reconstruction of Greek history, his monumental *History of the Greek Nation*⁸ – influenced by European Romanticism – acquired a didactic and epic character.⁹ In order for his work to be captivating and comprehensible by the public, Byzantium in his narrative was presented through familiar

4 In this certain context we employ the concept of myth in its phenomenological dimension, namely not seeking to question whether a myth is genuine or invented, as Eric Hobsbawm does in his 1983 collection of essays. See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Our aim is to examine how and why myths are accepted expressing the public’s sentiments and covering its needs. This approach is based on myth’s functionality as this is used in social anthropology; see Bronislaw Malinowski, *Malinowski Collected Works, Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays*, vol. IX (London and New York: Routledge, 2001); and Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (New York: Schocken, 1995).

5 George Huxley, “Aspects of modern Greek historiography of Byzantium” in David Rick and Paul Magdalino (eds.), *Byzantium and Modern Greek Identity* (London: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 15–23.

6 On the general feeling of disappointment after the Greek revolution, see Elli Skopetea, *To “Protypo” vasileio kai i Megali Idea* (Athens, 1988), pp. 231–247.

7 The belated Greek reaction to Fallmerayer was due to the strong Bavarian classicist feeling and general negative attitudes towards Byzantium that prevailed among latter-day followers of the Enlightenment for almost two decades 1830–1850. See E. Skopetea, *ibid.*, pp. 177–178.

8 The five successive stages of the linear cultural continuity are ancient, Macedonian, Christian, medieval and modern Hellenism. According to Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos: “Medieval Hellenism” is thus the great-grandchild of first Hellenism, (in between there is Macedonian Hellenism and Christian Hellenism) in *Istoria tou ellinikou ethnous*, Introduction, 8th ed, vol. V (Athens, 1930), pp. 8–9.

9 Paschalis M. Kitromilides, “Paparrigopoulos and Byzantium”, in David Rick and Paul Magdalino, (eds.), *Byzantium and Modern Greek Identity* (London: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 25–33.

terms, examples and comparisons.¹⁰ His work was also the theoretical prerequisite of the Great Idea, which desired the unification of the Greek state to the Greek *ethnos*.¹¹

The emergence of Greek historiography and the formation of the New Greek state coincide with the general nationalist feeling and nation building that occurred in 19th century Europe. In discovering, correcting, elaborating, inventing and celebrating their histories, nations struggled to validate their goals by appealing to continuity with, or inheritance from their ancestors. Therefore, such efforts were not seen only on the scientific level of historiography, but were an integral part of any nation's earnest search for a heritage that would secure their autonomy and identity.¹² Nationalism gradually became politically important in many European countries and began to play a more prominent role into shaping scientific archaeological research.¹³ The primary function of this newly emerged *Nationalist Archaeology*¹⁴ was to “bolster the pride and morale of nations or ethnic groups”, who felt politically threatened, insecure or deprived of their collective rights. In general, nationalist archaeology, according to Bruce Trigger, has a tendency to glorify the creativeness and “primitive vigour” of the assumed national ancestors.¹⁵ As nationalism constantly gained political importance, it became evident not only in the fields of archaeology or history, but also in different cultural events and exhibitions in Europe towards the close of the 19th century.¹⁶

The aesthetics ruling in Europe saw ancient Greek art as an unsurpassed model. Neoclassicism, dominant in all arts, provided aesthetic, anthropological, ethical and political models in the national fantasies not only of the Bavarian kings and but also of other patron countries.¹⁷ Such ideas, which fostered Neoclassicism, and were supported by scholars of the time, led to the destruction of dozens of Byzantine type churches.¹⁸

Contrary to this general interest in neoclassicism, having studied Theology and Christian Archaeology, Georgios Lampakis, viewed historical and national continuity as synonymous to the uninterrupted life of the Church.¹⁹ He was among the founders of the Christian Archaeological Society in Athens in 1884, which envisaged the creation of a Christian Museum.²⁰ This period, from 1884 until 1914, founding year of the museum in Athens, may

10 Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos makes a comparison between the Parthenon in Athens and the temple of Saint Sophia in Constantinople, suggesting a relation between the two on the level of “half brothers” as the latter is one of the best examples of Christian architecture. See *Istoria tou ellinikou ethnous*, Introduction 8th ed., Vol. IV (Athens, 1930), p.17.

11 On the Great Idea see: Elli Skopetea, *To “Prototypos” vasileio kai i Megali Idea* (Athens, 1988), pp. 273–286; Paschalis Kitromilides, “Paparrigopoulos and Byzantium”, in David Rick and Paul Magdalino (eds.), *Byzantium and Modern Greek Identity* (London: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 26–27.

12 David Lowenthal, conclusion in P.Gathercole and D.Lowenthal (eds.) *The Politics of the Past* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990).

13 Bruce G. Trigger, “Romanticism, nationalism, and archaeology”, in Philip Kohl and Clare Fawcett (eds.), *Nationalism, politics and the Practice of Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 263–279.

14 Term introduced by Bruce Trigger in “Alternative Archaeologies: nationalist, colonialist, imperialist”, *Man* 19, pp. 355–370.

15 Bruce G. Trigger., *ibid.*, pp. 355–370.

16 Francis Haskell, *The Ephemeral Museum. Old Master Paintings and the Rise of the Art Exhibition* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 98–106.

17 Eugenios Matthiopoulos, “I istoria tis tehnis sta oria tou ethnous” in Eugenios Matthiopoulos and Nikos Hadjinikolaou (eds.), *I Istoria tis Tehnis stin Ellada* (Irakleio: Panepistimiakes Ekdoseis Kritis, 2003), p. 432.

18 Eugenios Matthiopoulos, *ibid.*, p. 435.

19 Olga Gratzou, “Apo tin istoria tou Byzantinou Mouseiou. Ta prota hronia”, *Mnimon* 11 (Athens, 1987), pp. 55–56.

20 *Deltion Christianikis Archaeologikis Etaireias*, period A' 1892–1911, vol. A (Athens, 1892), article 3, p.6.

be seen as the preliminary period in the long history of the establishment of the first Byzantine Museum. The need for the preservation of the medieval –mainly religious– monuments was connected to the restitution of Byzantium and the formation of a common national consciousness, bridging the distance from antiquity to the Greek Revolution years. Therefore, Lampakis collected and enriched the Christian Archaeological Society’s collection. It is important to mention that he did not gather objects based on their artistic, but on their religious value.²¹ His final goal was the prestige and empowerment of the Church.²² In his annual reports, as Director of the Christian Museum, one can trace his romanticism, eagerness, enthusiasm in his assigned task, but also his disappointment with the fact that all the funds were given to classical excavations.²³

From solely religious objects, Byzantine artifacts were gradually regarded as objects of scientific research. The first deviation from the rigid hellenocentric neoclassicist orientation of archaeologists came from historians and scholars, who were familiar with the newest scientific trends in the field of European historiography and informed on the gradual scientific autonomy of art history. In 1911 Adamantios Adamantiou was the first to teach the subject of “Byzantine Art and Archaeology” within the curriculum of the University of Athens.²⁴ He was, also, from 1914 to 1923, the Director of the Byzantine and Christian Museum. However, as an archaeologist, he could not yet escape from regarding Byzantine art through the prism of antiquity, as an artistic survival of ancient Greek art.²⁵ In 1914, after the liberation and annexation of the Northern Greek provinces to Greece, he suggested the establishment of the Museum in the recently liberated city of Thessaloniki,²⁶ as it was the second most important city of the Byzantine Empire after Constantinople; he tried to scientifically support his request to the broader public.²⁷ The museum was finally founded as a national museum in Athens in 1914²⁸ and was destined to:

... assemble the works of Byzantine, Christian and medieval art, from the first years of Christianity to the constitution of the Hellenic State.²⁹

A new museum is born

The most decisive phase in the history of the Byzantine and Christian Museum is linked to its next Director, Georgios Sotiriou. The accumulated Byzantine objects –including the rich collection of the Christian Archaeological Society– were kept in the National Archaeological

21 Demetris Triantaphyllopoulos in his article “Byzantine Museum of Athens: from Pietism to Aesthetism”, *Domus Byzantina*, vol. I (Athens, 1987), pp. 119–128 suggests that Lampakis treated the objects of cult from a pietistic point of view. However, Olga Gratziou counteracts the connection to “pietismus”. See Olga Gratziou, “Apo tin istoria tou Byzantinou Mouseiou. Ta prota hronia”, *Mnimon* 11 (Athens, 1987), note 24, p. 64.

22 Olga Gratziou, *ibid.*, pp. 59–61.

23 Georgios Lampakis, “Istoria tis idryseos, katastaseos kai ton spoudaioteron antikeimenon tou Christianikou Mouseiou apo tou 1884–90”, *Deltion Christianikis Archeologikis Etaireias*, period A’ 1892–1911, vol. A (Athens: Press Nikolaos G. Igglesis, 1892), pp. 56–71.

24 Eugenios Matthiopoulos, *ibid.*, p. 443.

25 Adamantios Adamantiou, “I Byzantini Tehni os prodromos tis Europaikis”, *Deltion Christianikis Archeologikis Etaireias*, period B’ 1924–1927, vol. Γ (Athens, 1926), pp. 79–82.

26 See in Olga Gratziou, “Apo tin istoria tou Byzantinou Mouseiou. Ta prota hronia”, note 25, p. 64.

27 Adamantios Adamantiou, *I Byzantini Thessaloniki (istoria – koinonikos vios – tehni)* (Athens, 1914).

28 Daphne Boudouri, *Kratos kai Mouseia: to thesmiko plaisio ton archeologikon mouseion* (Athens-Thessaloniki: Editions Sakkoula, 2003), note 43, p. 73.

29 Georgios Sotiriou, “Préface de la première édition”, *Guide du Musée Byzantin d’Athènes (avec avant-propos sur la sculpture et sur la peinture byzantines en Grèce)*, French edition (Athènes: Hestia, 1932), p.6.

Museum until 1923.³⁰ According to the preface of the first edition of the Byzantine Museum's Catalogue in 1924:

If art is the highest expression of a country's civilisation, then in those terms, we are presenting the civilisation of our fathers, as the Archaeological Museum presents the civilisation of our ancestors.³¹

As the "ancestors" art had already gained international admiration and character, the "fathers" art had one more advantage apart from its direct proximity to ancient art; these objects had an ongoing religious value and were vehicles of ideas, beliefs and traditions, popular among the public.³² At the same time, this fact could be considered as a "barrier" that Sotiriou had to overcome, as he had to explain the reasons for which these objects were extracted from their natural surrounding. Although he recognized that only within the Church could these objects be fully appreciated, he also pointed out that only within the Museum their comparative study and detailed understanding could be possible. Sotiriou ended the preface to the first catalogue of the Museum in 1924 with the aspiration that the Greek State would offer a new permanent building to house the collection of the Byzantine Museum; thus, a museum of such national importance and with such a rich collection, would become a "model museum in the Near East".³³ Obviously, he was still influenced by the ideas expressed during the previous century and Paparrigopoulos's romantic views.

When the second museum catalogue was issued in 1931, the Museum had finally found a permanent building to house its collection. Through the presentation of all the considerably large collection, Sotiriou's ultimate goal was for the Museum to become a "centre for Byzantine studies and art",³⁴ omitting his earlier statement on the Museum becoming the model museum in the Near East.

For the purposes of the exhibition organized by Sotiriou at the Villa Ilissia in 1930, all the exhibits, especially the sculptures, were arranged in such a way as to allude to the interior of the buildings in which they originally stood. Thus, three basic types of church were reconstructed on the ground floor: a three-nave basilica typical of the early Christian era; a mid-Byzantine inscribed cruciform church; and a single-chambered post-Byzantine chapel.³⁵ The finest sculptures of each period – early Christian, Byzantine and post-Byzantine- were also displayed within the museum's ground floor, in the vestibule of each reconstructed church of the relevant period. The first floor was given over to artifacts arranged chronologically and typologically into collections. Specifically, the exhibition comprised four rooms; the first two presented paintings – mainly portable icons – and the other two rooms minor art – mainly garments of the clergy from the Byzantine and post-Byzantine period. Manuscripts, triptychs and small icons were also displayed in glass cases in those two latter rooms.³⁶

30 Daphne Boudouri, *Kratos kai Mouseia: to thesmiko plaisio ton archeologikon mouseion* (Athens-Thessaloniki: Editions Sakkoula, 2003), p. 74.

31 Georgios Sotiriou, "Préface de la première édition", *Guide du Musée Byzantin d'Athènes* (Athènes: Hestia, 1932), p. 6.

32 Georgios Sotiriou, *ibid.*, p. 5.

33 Georgios Sotiriou, *ibid.*, pp. 4–6.

34 Georgios Sotiriou, *ibid.*, p. 8.

35 Georgios Sotiriou, *ibid.*, p. 7.

36 Georgios Sotiriou, *ibid.*, pp. 15–144.

The Christian and Byzantine Museum: Narrating the Byzantine Middle Ages

At this point, having presented the sociopolitical background that led to the establishment of the first Byzantine Museum in Athens and having analyzed its basic display structure, an attempt will be made to reconstruct some key aspects of this first exhibition's narrative, based on restricted sources, such as the museum's first catalogue as well as recent editions of the Byzantine Museum in Athens.

Sotiriou's ultimate goal was the exhibition's didactic character. Based on this fact, he commissioned the architect Aristotle Zachos to transform the building's interior and organize the displays accordingly.³⁷ Starting from the first floor of the exhibition, icons were considered as items of adoration and respect, enclosing within them a sense of power.³⁸ Therefore, these were probably the most difficult objects to be displayed. Until then, the Christian Orthodox public was educated in viewing religious objects solely as objects of worship. As a result, an instructive effort was made so that people could start viewing icons also as artistic achievements. The icons were displayed in two rooms and the decision for their categorization is extremely interesting. The icons displayed in the first room were unsigned, while in the second room were those bearing the artist's name or signature.³⁹ Sotiriou's attempt to legitimize these works as art is, undoubtedly, part of the museum's aim to propose a new way of viewing and thinking about icons; as works of art with or without their master's signature. For this reason, Sotiriou, also analyses in the catalogue the different schools that influenced Byzantine iconography and continues with the typological classification. Objects in the third and fourth room were displayed typologically respectively. The artifacts (such as small icons, works of art from different material and clergy clothing) were orderly arranged and lined on the shelves of glass cases.⁴⁰

Although objects in the first floor were typologically classified, in the ground floor a different kind of display was selected. The same pattern was repeated for all three reconstructed churches. Each reconstructed church had a vestibule, which, by presenting the finest objects of sculpture, functioned possibly as an introductory phase to the art of the relevant period. Artifacts were displayed as close as possible to the original place they occupied within a Christian Orthodox church,⁴¹ and thus close to their primary religious and ecclesiastical role. For example, the early Christian sculpture⁴² and other objects were placed in the vestibule before the reconstructed basilica. Within the basilica, sculptures relevant to the sanctuary or to the general ornamentation of the church, early Christian symbols and inscriptions were placed accordingly in the temple.⁴³

Sotiriou, throughout the exhibition's catalogue, refers several times to the educational character of the new Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens, which he envisages as a model museum and a centre of scholarly research.⁴⁴ As presented explicitly through Sotiriou's educational effort, the public entering the museum was not accustomed to the

37 Dimitrios Konstantios, introduction "The Byzantine and Christian Museum: from the 19th to the 21st century", *The World of the Byzantine Museum* (Athens: Archaeological Receipts Fund, 2004).

38 "Power of objects" as one of Stocking's seven dimensions of the aesthetic analysis of objects. Apart from the three known dimensions, the others are historical dimension, beauty/aesthetics and ownership. G. Stocking, *Objects and Others: Essays on museums and material culture* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1986).

39 As Sotiriou mentions, these icons were mainly from the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. See Sotiriou, *Guide du Musée Byzantin d'Athènes* (Athens, 1932), pp. 101–117.

40 Georgios Sotiriou, *ibid.*, pp. 117–144.

41 Georgios Sotiriou, *ibid.*, p. 70.

42 Specifically sculpture of the 4th–7th century AD. See G. Sotiriou, *ibid.*, p. 25.

43 Georgios Sotiriou, *ibid.*, pp. 31–39.

44 Georgios Sotiriou, *ibid.*

notion of a Byzantine artifacts' exhibition. For him, the most feasible way to achieve his didactic aim was to organise and display objects, considered as "artistic achievements", in the familiar environment of the church.⁴⁵ Consequently, through a "direct comparison"⁴⁶, he gradually introduced the visitors to the notion of evolution of Byzantine art and architecture. For the Christian Orthodox visitors such objects, especially icons, have always maintained a spiritual character and have been items of worship, contemplation and prayer. Ideas and beliefs that have become an integral part of people's culture and with which they filter almost all external information and stimulants, cannot be altered easily. Even nowadays in Byzantine art exhibitions the public is differentiated according to its cultural and religious background.⁴⁷

Bearing in mind all the above-mentioned facts, Sotiriou's attempt and mission were undoubtedly complicated, as he had to overcome the public's cultural and religious barriers. Consequently, in his effort to present the artistic and scientific aspect of the objects, he used the churches' original architectural representations and displayed objects in their primary place as a medium to instruct the public, overcome existing barriers and bridge all the different aspects of thinking about objects.

As known from museum history, throughout the years the museum had gradually substituted the religious/ritual sentiment of the Church. Like in a ritual space, the museum space is reserved for contemplation and learning; it requires a specific way of behavior, and involves an element of performance by the visitors who follow a set route and finally leave with a sense of having been spiritually nourished or restored.⁴⁸ Sotiriou's narrative not only conveys this ritual sentiment in the museum, this transition from a religious space to the museum; he also goes on with a "tautology" and structures the museum in imitation of an Orthodox church.

The Myth of Europeanism

Contrary to the ideological myths of "rebirth" and that of "continuity" that referred to an attitude towards the past, the myth of "Europeanism" for several decades functioned to shape directly a perspective for the future. The gradual development of this argument started within the framework of the pro-western and modernizing Greek policy adopted during the post-war era. This policy was intensified by the negotiations regarding Greece's integration into the European Economic Community (EEC), which started in 1959. Europeanism became the dominant ideology in 1960s Greece. The ideological, cultural and educational apparatuses in Greek society were reoriented, supplying the dominant nationalist ideology with a convincing pro-European perspective. In order to present this solution as the only effective, a propaganda against the socialist and internationalist ideological and political tendencies took place. Since national identity was now defined through Europeanism, the nation's real or imagined accesses to the culture and the history of Europe had to be upgraded.

45 Dimitrios Konstantios, introduction "The Byzantine and Christian Museum: from the 19th to the 21st century", *The World of the Byzantine Museum* (Athens: Archaeological Receipts Fund, 2004), p 13.

46 Georgios Sotiriou, *ibid.*, see reference 25. Artistic comparison was one of the museum's proclaimed goals.

47 Antonis Liakos, "The Glory of the Museum", *To Vima*, 30/3/1997, p. B03. In his article Liakos refers to the exhibition "Glory of Byzantium" organised at the Metropolitan Museum of New York in 1997. In this exhibition, the Orthodox public regarded Byzantium as part of an entire cultural tradition, rather than a detached and complete artistic period. On the contrary, American visitors, differently educated, could easily view Byzantine icons as works of art, in direct comparison to the Tiepolo exhibition displayed in the next room or comment stylistically on the differences and similarities between the Byzantine and Renaissance Art.

48 Carol Duncan, "The Art Museum as Ritual", *Civilizing Rituals inside public art museums* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 7–20.

The new pro-western or pro-European trend that appeared in the cultural field can be best traced in texts by Angelos Procopiou. Influential art historian and critic of the time, Procopiou had been teaching at the Athens Polytechnical School since 1960. He had shaped his own “platonic”, Greek-centered theory, according to which pre-historic art was united in a continuous dialectical course, with Classic, Byzantine, Renaissance and contemporary American or European abstract art. He attempted to incorporate the established aesthetics of Greekness into the cultural and artistic production of the western world. Characteristically enough, commenting on Greco’s iconography, he argued:

The unification of the two middle fingers implied the union between Greece and the West. Greco brought to the West, by this symbolic gesture, the message of Greece’s integration into the European Intellectual Community.⁴⁹

Within the framework of Europeanism, a reinterpretation of the Byzantine history and culture was needed – a revision that had to be accepted by the international academic community. Byzantium’s relation with and contribution to Europe ought to be emphasized.

Dionysios Zakythinos, a prominent scholar of Byzantium, provided a new basis for historiography, investigating in his studies the relations between Byzantium and Europe.⁵⁰ Another element signaling historiography’s attempt to support Europeanism was Panayotis Kanellopoulos’ change of opinion. Member of the Athens’ Academy and politician of the Right, he published in 1941 a voluminous work entitled “*History of European Spirit*”, in which he examined European art from 14th to late 19th century. In his work he altogether excluded Byzantium from European culture. To justify this exclusion he argued that

...[Byzantium] ignored exclusively Greece in art, and remained devoted to Asia” and that “Byzantium did not influence Italian Art, transmitting to it only Asiatic artistic elements.⁵¹

In 1966, however, 25 years after the first edition, he rewrote his work adding 260 pages on Byzantine art and culture. Attempting to denounce his earlier rejective position regarding the continuity of Greek spirit within the Byzantine culture, he admitted that “*Europe is today our fate too*”.⁵²

Nevertheless, the most important event for the promotion of Byzantine studies was the 9th exhibition of the Council of Europe, organized by the Greek Government in 1964 Athens under the title “Byzantine Art, a European art”. The display’s intentions can easily be discerned in the catalogue’s introduction, written by Manolis Chatzidakis, distinguished Byzantine scholar and commissioner of the exhibition:

A total of about 650 objects has been collected and visitors will thus have the pleasure of following a vivid manifestation of the ancient Greek heritage and of estimating the substantial contribution made by Byzantium to medieval art. Considered from this point of view it can be clearly perceived that Byzantine art is European, and the only art

49 Aggelos G.Procopiou, “I krisi tis sygchronis technis”, *I Kathimerini*, 5 January 1960.

50 Dionysios A Zakythinos, “To Byzantio metaksy Anatonis kai Dyseos”, *E.E.B.S.*, vol. 28 (1958), 1970, pp. 368–400; *idem*, “To provlima tis ellinikis symvolis stin Anagennisin”, *E.E.F.S.P.A.*, vol. E’, 1954–1955, pp. 126–138.

51 Panayiotis Kanellopoulos, *Istoria tou Ellinikou Pneumatos*, vol A (Athens, 1942), pp. 16–17.

52 Panayiotis Kanellopoulos, *Istoria tou Ellinikou Pneumatos*, part A, vol, A (Athens, 1966), p.11.

between East and West which kept alive that spirit of Greek humanism now recognized as preeminently the basis of European values.⁵³

Against this theoretical scheme a number of objections have been raised, among which this by Talbot Rice. Educated within the framework of “colonial archaeology”, Talbot Rice could not attribute a purely European character to Byzantine art. In this manner, although he admits that the classical elements traced in Byzantine art may be accepted as truly European, there are other elements, bearing an Eastern influence, that are also distinct. He concludes by arguing that:

This is not purely an academic question but is very germane to the attitude of mind with which we must approach Byzantine art in order to grasp its nature fully. We must, in fact, accept that we have to learn a new language if we are to appreciate it completely, and that language is not a wholly European one in the narrowest sense of the term. Even today the Greeks, Byzantine’s most direct heirs, speak of ‘going to Europe’ when they visit London, Paris, Berlin or even Vienna. This extraneous element is thus perceived by them, even if they would be the last to admit it overtly.⁵⁴

Greece’s integration into the EEC in 1981 boosted the myth of Europeanism. In the application Greece submitted for its official integration into the E.E.C., the Greek Prime Minister Konstantinos Karamanlis, addressing to the community’s dignitaries stated that:

Greece belongs and wishes to belong to Europe, where it has been placed by its geographical position, its history and tradition -an element that it shares with the cultural heritage of your countries.⁵⁵

A number of events were organized supporting Greece’s integration in the decades that follow; regarding the Byzantine studies, two major symposia held were entitled “Byzantium and Europe”: the first took place at the European Cultural Center of Delphi in 1985,⁵⁶ while the second at the Paris Maison de l’Europe, under the auspices of the Greek presidency in Europe in 1994. Byzantium is by now legitimized as a true part of the European heritage. Quite characteristic is the statement with which the prominent medievalist Jacques Le Goff concluded his 1994 speech:

Within the perspective of the united Europe, which summoned us here under the auspices of Greece, I believe that both western historiography and public opinion have:

1. To legitimize Greece’s Byzantine past.
2. To reintegrate Byzantium into the General history, to Middle Ages as an entity. And finally,
3. To acknowledge Hellenism’s position within Europe, though today’s Greece, which we love. Even if we no more speak of the “Greek miracle”, the Greek heritage constitutes the first great cultural heritage of Europe; as such we have to grant Byzantium with its own

53 Manolis Chatzidakis, “Foreword”, *Byzantine Art, a European Art*, exhibition catalogue, Zappeion Exhibition Hall, April 1st- June 15th 1964 (Athens, 1964), p. 11.

54 David Talbot Rice, “Byzantine Art, A European Art?”, *The Appreciation of Byzantine Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 67.

55 Konstantinos Svolopoulos, “I entaxi stis Europaikes koinotites”, *Istoria tou Ellinikou Ethnous*, vol. 16 (Athens, 2000), pp. 340–345.

56 *Byzantium and Europe*, First International Byzantine Conference, European Cultural Center of Delphi, Delphi, 20–24 July 1985.

right position: Byzantium, an original place of creation and acculturation, of Hellenism and European history altogether.⁵⁷

Museum of Byzantine Culture: Towards a “Europeanized” Narrative

The question of founding a Museum for Byzantine art and culture in Thessaloniki came up again in 1975, year when Democracy was restored, following the Dictatorship that tormented Greece for seven years. In 1977 a nationwide architectural competition was announced, to be won by Kyriakos Krokos. In 1989 the foundation stone was laid while the building was completed and handed over in 1993. The 11 rooms of the Museum’s permanent exhibition opened gradually to the public from 1997 to early 2004. The entire project of the Museum’s completion coincides with the decades that signal Greece’s course within the European community.

Deeply influenced by this certain ideological framework, the new museum adopted a narrative that would accentuate Byzantium’s relation with and the contribution to Europe. This attempt is best exemplified in the first issue of the new journal the Museum of Byzantine Culture initiated; the introductory text by Dr. Eutychia Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou, director at the time, provides a detailed mission statement of the new institution, in which European culture maintains a central role.⁵⁸

First, we have to comment on the obvious references made on the relation between Byzantium and Europe that are traced within the narrative the Museum initiated. The post-Byzantine era, a historic period that for a long time had been neglected by historiography for a number of reasons,⁵⁹ has been dedicated two of the total eleven rooms of the permanent collection. It is precisely the historic era when the relations between the former Byzantine world and Europe become extremely apparent. Room 10 entitled “*Byzantium after Byzantium: The Byzantine Legacy in the years after the Fall of Constantinople*” (1453-19th c.) represents the variety of religious painting schools in both Ottoman- and Venetian- ruled Greek areas. The parts of Greece under Venetian rule are presented to have enjoyed more favorable living conditions. The display emphasizes their contact with the West through the incorporation of contemporary and earlier Italian painting elements into the art of the Cretan and Ionian schools. Not by chance, the completion of this specific display was co-funded by the Third Community Support Framework, Operational Programme “Culture”.

Room 8 is dedicated to the Dori Papastratou Collection, which consists of 18th and 19th century engravings, “paper icons”, as these are called in the museum narrative. The display demonstrates the western provenance of this specific medium that was adopted by the Orthodox Church circa the mid-17th century. It also underlines the places where these engravings were produced: they were initially printed in European cities with strong Greek communities, which had the necessary modern technology. Like their western counterparts, the engravings, depicting panoramic views of monasteries, were the monasteries’ chief means of encouraging financial support: they were distributed to the pilgrims as *eulogia*, “blessing”.

Room 11: Discovering the Past constitutes the final room, the “epilogue” to the permanent display. It illustrates the procedure archaeological findings follow from the excavation to the museum display. In this way, Byzantine artifacts are not differentiated from the ones of other

57 Jacques Le Goff, “I Dysi mprosta sto Byzantio, elleipsi katanosis ke pareksigiseis”, in *Byzantio kai Europi*, Symposium, Paris, Maison de l’ Europe 22 April 1994 (Athens: Ellinika Grammata, 1996), pp. 104–105.

58 Eutychia Kourkoutidou – Nikolaidou, “A Museum is Born. Aims and Orientations”, *Journal of the Museum of Byzantine Culture*, Museum of Byzantine Culture, Greek Ministry of Culture, 9th Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities, Thessaloniki, vol. No 1/1994 (Athens: Editions Kapon, 1994) pp. 14– 20.

59 The historical framework of the negligence of the Post-Byzantine era is analyzed by Eugenios Matthiopoulos in his article “Istoria tis Tehnis sta oria tou Ethnous”, in *Istoria tis tehnis stin Ellada...Ibid.*

periods or areas. In the same room a digital display presents the history of the museums. Starting by locating the ancient Greek provenance of the term “mouseion”, this exhibit focuses on institutions and events that led to the birth of the museum from the Italian Renaissance and the Enlightenment to the mid 20th century “purified” museum of modern art. It constitutes an “archaeology” of the museum history seen from a West-European perspective.

On a second level, we will attempt to analyze theoretically the narrative as a whole the Museum of Byzantine Culture introduced. The emphasis is given to several aspects of the Byzantine culture, as for instance the religious life, the burial customs, everyday life at home and in the market. Art and architecture are utilized only to illustrate these thematic units. This turn justifies the proposition made in 1997, year of the museum’s opening to the public, to rename the Thessaloniki’s Byzantine Museum into “Museum of Byzantine Culture”, a title that would best correspond to the narrative the display initiated.

As Eleni Katsanika and Gabriella Papadeli exhibition designers of the permanent display argue, through the display of its collections the Museum of Byzantine Culture aims at presenting both the memory and the knowledge of this culture. The exhibition material is selected and systematized so as to provide meaning, to become a complete theme. The artifacts should construct images of the life of an entire culture, in order to narrate their story in the most expressive way. For this reason, the exhibition designers searched for a language that could offer meaning to the display and communication with the public.⁶⁰ Eco’s semiotic theory can be discerned in the way the exhibition designers structure their thoughts on the display planning:⁶¹

We attempt to grant the artifacts with their semiotic entity in order to elicit the communication abilities they have. Not having the illusion that these, decontextualized artifacts would acquire in the exhibition the meaning they used to have, we use them in order to give information and emotion, the expression of a past reality, as we interpret it.⁶²

The exhibition designers accentuate the role of the emotion within the display’s narrative. By introducing a number of different themes, micro-narratives as we may call them, they lead the visitor to become part of it, to share this expression of past, to identify himself/herself with the heritage displayed. This narrative practice is best summarized by Pierre Nora:

We study the everyday life of the past because we want to return to a slower-paced, more savoury existence, and we read biographies of ordinary people as if to say that the “masses” can never be understood simply by, as it were, measuring their mass. And from the countless “microhistories” we take shards of the past and try to glue them together, in the hope that the history we reconstruct might seem more like the history we experience.⁶³

The awe-inspiring attitude towards the “magnificent” art and architecture of the Byzantine era, dominant till very recently, is abandoned in favor of a more intimate narrative. This does

60 Eleni Katsanika-Stefanou and Gabriella Papadeli, *I simiotiki tis ekthesis*, unpublished article (Thessaloniki, 1997).

61 Umberto Eco, *The open work*, trans. by Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989).

62 Eleni Katsanika-Stefanou and Gabriella Papadeli, *ibid.*

63 Pierre Nora, “General Introduction: Between Memory and History”, in Pierre Nora and Lawrence Kritzman, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), vol. 1, p. 13.

not only demonstrate the application of the new museology methods, but also evinces an ideological alteration. The nation's self-definition is now found within the limits of the common European ideals: a more intimate and based on the emotion narrative provides the opportunity to consider the things Greeks and other Europeans, inheritors of a "common" heritage, share.

It is precisely the myth of Europeanism that the Museum of Byzantine Culture narrative attests. This ideological scheme was legitimized by the Prize the Museum was awarded by the Council of Europe for 2005. By honoring the Museum, the Council of Europe and the European community in a wider sense, acknowledged the role of Byzantium into the European culture. Indicatively enough, the Museum of Byzantine Culture successful model was very soon followed by the Athenian Byzantine and Christian Museum, which adopted a similar Europeanized narrative in its 2004 collection rehanging.

Conclusion: Inventing Byzantine Traditions

Investigating the discourse that has been developed about the national Byzantine museums, we adopted the notion of ideological myth. Acting within the dominant ideological framework, myths perform consolation, allowing the subject to place itself within time: to connect imaginatively with the past, to interpret the present, and to conceive the future. Providing existential security to the subject, myths teach and motivate, confirming in an understandable way its adherence to a continuous present.

In the three myths we analyzed, nationalism emerges as the dominant ideology. Nationalistic ideology attests the nation's unimpaired genuineness, utilizing historical arguments; it has to highlight nation's uniqueness adducing efficacious testimonials. Therefore, nationalism seeks to update the past persuading the public with its significations, and soothing its contestations.

The product of the ideology construction is continuously readjusted and modified according to society's occurring needs. Political aspirations are incorporated with inherited or invented memories, which inevitably, are chosen and structured so as to serve certain ideological objectives. The notion of "myth" is, thus, mobilized to examine the relation that nationalistic ideology builds with history, reconstructing imaginatively communities of the past⁶⁴ and inventing their symbolic and didactic narratives.

We have to encounter the museum as an ideological state apparatus functioning as a reflex of an already inscribed power within the procedure of a social engineering.⁶⁵ The two moments in the history of narrating the Byzantine past in the Greek national museums are part of a larger process the Greek state undertook to "read" its past according to its occurring needs. In both museums the interpretation of the past that is attempted is retrospective: the past is construed having the present as a starting point. Informed by the dominant each time national ideology, these myths convert history, namely the representation of the past, into an eternal present.

Rendering the Byzantine past into the present within the museum, bolstered the public's identification with a heritage it should learn to share; allowed the nation's aspirations to be

64 The concept derives from Benedict Anderson's text in which "*a nation is an imagined community –and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives an image of their community*". See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso 1991) p.6.

65 Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (eds.) *Art in Theory 1900–2000, An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2003) pp. 953–960.

expressed and propagated through the narrative these institutions, as state apparatuses, adopted at certain historical moments. Whether the issue was Greek nationalism in the form of Hellenism's historical continuity or Greece's necessity to keep up with Europe, a different kind of Byzantine tradition had to be recalled or "invented", as Eric Hobsbawm argues in his celebrated text,⁶⁶ so as to legitimize the state's national policy.

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