

Specialist session "Urban Historiography in Comparative Perspective"

Hellenic urban historiography in the newly-established State

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In 1830 Greece was formally declared an independent state under the protection of the three Great Powers of England, France and Russia, after a nine-year struggle against Ottoman Empire. In 1832 Otto, the eldest son of philhellene king of Bavaria Loudovick, was crowned king of the newly-established State. One year later the new king and the royal staff arrived in Nauplia, the temporary capital of Greek kingdom up to that point.

In 1833 Greece was a rural country with a low-density population, almost without any important cities. Therefore the strengthening of urbanization was part of the royal programme of transforming the Greek economy into a capitalistic one. The reconstruction of the ruinous cities and the foundation of new ones was a first priority project, which initiated with the selection of Athens as capital city and of Piraeus as its seaport together with the approval of the plans of both cities.

Several towns of course were proposed for the seat of the Administration and its official harbour, but according to Royal's Government ideas only Athens fulfilled the preconditions, since the city was standing in equal distance from all the regions of the Greek territory and its ancient settlement was famous for being both centre of ancient Greek World and cradle of modern Western Civilization.

The reorganizing of the cities had mainly two targets. Firstly, to give solution to urgent problems, such as the improvement of sanitary conditions of the old cities and the provision of the necessary infrastructure. Secondly, to apply Hippodamus' rectangular system of street planning, which was an achievement of ancient Greek civilization, in old and new cities. The last goal played also a major ideological role, as adoption of Hippodamus system put an end to the complicated and mazy canvas of old cities, which had been characterized as "Turkish cities", and created a new morphologically city, which referred directly to the Greek antiquity. Furthermore, most of the neo-hellenic (modern) cities took new names which were the names of ancient settlements and cities-states for absolutely the same ideological reason, namely the establishment of a link with ancient Greek world.

In spite of the state policy, the process of urbanization actually was depending on three factors:

- the highly centralized state apparatus that was being developed and replaced the decentralized modes of administration which existed under Ottoman rule
- the delayed construction of the road and railway network and
- the commercialization of the rural products on which the development and the transformation of the modern Greek economy from a subsistence into a market economy, was based.

All these factors of course favoured the development of Athens, meaning the seat of the Administration, and of Piraeus, Patras and island of Syros, which participated in

foreign trade through the sea and competed each other almost till the end of 19th century.

The histories which are the subject of this paper are concerned with the urban historiography of Athens and Piraeus. The latter were the first cities in the kingdom which had got their own local history during the reign of Otto (1833-1862). Later on, Patras (1888) and Hermoupolis of Syros (1874), just as important centres as the capital and its harbour, will have their own history written as well. The specific works we will present and other similar to them have come to the fore from 1980s onwards, when urban studies started to develop in Greece and historians were searching for new sources.¹

Two separate phases can be identified in this thirty-year time span; the first phase is the decade 1833-1843, which was the period of the foundation of the Greek state apparatus under the government of absolute monarchy; and the second one is the approximately twenty-year period from 1844 to 1862 and especially from 1850s onwards.

This historiography was the product of the specific process of urbanization. Thus, in the first phase the histories of Athens and Piraeus were a blend of national and local history, since the ancient Greek past was used not only as an ideal but also as a tool. On one hand the ancient past gave prestige, dignity and glamour but above all it was a focus for identity, because the nation's mythical origins were the same with the foundation myths of the ancient city-state of Athens.² On the other hand the appeal of this past justified and legitimated all the decisions that Absolute Monarchy had taken in order to create the conditions for a future as glorious as the past.

In the second phase urban histories continued to follow the general trends of modern (neo-hellenic) historiography. Therefore the focus was on the two major problems of Hellenism; firstly, the national identity which was based on historical continuity of Hellenism from antiquity until the modern times; and secondly the Great Idea, namely the idea of a bigger Greek territory.

Nevertheless at the same period and especially from 1850s onwards, there was an important change in the presentation and the conceptualization of the city and its past. This change was mostly due to the development of the cities, since 1833, when Athens was chosen to be the capital city and Piraeus its harbour, the former was a village of almost 4.000 inhabitants and the latter was a desert and inhospitable coast. Twenty years later Athens had become the biggest city of the country with 30.590 inhabitants; seat of the Administration and Monarchy and centre of an economy which was based on commerce, exports and all sorts of services, its social structure was characterized by an extremely developed tertiary sector and by a non productive population of public servants, merchants, middlemen and stock brokers. As regards Piraeus, it was literally a new commercial and marine city of about 6.500 inhabitants; a society of small trades-men and an industrial economy in the offing. Consequently the role of the modern cities of Athens and Piraeus in the economic, social and

¹ See L. Sapounaki-Dracaki, M. Kotea, M. Lefantzis, "Urban History in contemporary Greece" in European Urban Historiography: trends and perspectives (Dionicos-Athens, 2004), 41-73.

² See the Introduction in Rosemary Sweet, *The Writing of Urban Histories in Eighteenth-Century England* (Clarendon Press-Oxford, 1997), 1-35, esp. 2-3.

political life of the nation could be already compared with its remote past. Moreover the changes that took place were not only in the presentation and the conceptualization of the city and its past but also in term of content and authorship.

Between 1834 and 1862 four different histories were published, three of Athens and one of Piraeus. The histories of Athens were written by the same author, Dionysios Sourmelis (1798 - after 1862). Athenian scholar, teacher and participant in the Greek War of Independence, Sourmelis after the creation of the modern Greek state was occupied himself mainly with the writing of history of Athens. His first book was entitled "History of Athens" and was published at the island of Aegina in 1834. With this book Sourmelis was relating everything that had happened in Athens but also in the wider region of Attica from the beginning of the War until the transfer of the seat of the Administration from Nauplia to Athens (1821-1833).

According to author's declaration, he intended the "History of Athens" to inform the king Otto of the efforts that Athenians had made with the purpose of setting free themselves from the Turkish yoke, while at the same time they were conscious of their ancient and glorious origins and they hoped that after the liberation their City would become again what it was in the remote past. Of course, from Sourmelis' point of view, the selection of Athens as capital city of the kingdom by the king of Bavaria Loudovick gave to the modern city the opportunity to fulfill this hope and to be once again the light-giver city for the rest of the country. For all these reasons Sourmelis dedicated this book to the young king Otto.

The "History of Athens" was the result of both testimony and research, since its author was contemporary with the revolution of 1821, participant and eyewitness as well. However he made the work of an historian as he tried to record collective acts and experiences, going against the current in the historiography at that time, namely the writing of chronicles and memoirs.³

As regards the presentation of the city, Sourmelis was speaking of the inhabitants of Athens as a whole, although the population of the city consisted of four different social categories with the Athenian Lords, "Archontes", at the head of the local Greek society. The latter were a kind of hereditary aristocracy since the communal authorities were coming from their class. Sourmelis was writing characteristically that all the people of Athens with one voice revolted against the Ottomans, throwing off the old man of slavery and wearing the new Hellene.

The "History of Athens" included a long list of subscribers; 220 persons were subscribed from several regions of the country (Aegina, Nauplia, Athens, Syros, Thebes, Euboea, Livadhia and Mantenia). Among the subscribers were the king himself and the regency for 3 and 18 copies respectively. All the rest belonged to the leading groups of the hellenic society; notables, high clerics, chieftains, Phanariotes, government officials, professionnals such as physicians, engineers and architects and last but not least philhellenes and foreign officials. Of course the surprise is the names of two women for whom unfortunately we don't still have more information. Almost twenty years later, in 1853, a revised and enlarged edition of this book was published.

³ K. Th. Dimaras, *History of Neo-Hellenic Literature* (Icarus-Athens, 1975), 251-268 and P. Moullas, "The Literature from the Struggle for Independence until 1880s generation", in *History of Greek Nation* (Ekdotiki Athinon Ltd-Athens,1977), vol. 13, 492-514, esp. 493-495.

In 1842 Sourmelis published his second book “The State of City of Athens in Brief” (katastasis Synoptiki tis poleos Athinon). In this slim book of 88 pages the author was presenting the history of Athens through the ages, to be exact from the conquest of the city by Romans at 86 B.C. until the end of the Turkish rule at 1821 A.D. All this vast span time was divided in three long periods; in the first period Athens was under the Roman domination (86 B.C. – 400 A.D.) ; in the second one the city was part of the Byzantine empire (401 A.D – 1455 A.D.); and in the third and last period Athens was experiencing the Turkish yoke.

The main point of this work of Sourmelis was that the city of Athens came under the authority of various conquerors (not only Romans and Byzantines but also French, Spanish, Italians and of course Ottomans), therefore many monuments of ancient Greek civilization were looted or destroyed. However Athenians managed to adjust to all circumstances. For instance Sourmelis was claiming that after the domination of Christianity over the ancient Greek religion Athenians transformed their temples into churches in order to preserve them. Moreover “Athenians could make the tyrants into benefactors, the enemies into friends, the savages into charitables and the authoritarians into liberals”. In other words Sourmelis was saying that Athenians diffused their civilization to the most of their conquerors. As a consequence of all these they never left the city for good and certainly they kept to some extent the culture of their ancestors along with the pride of being Athenians up to the modern times.

Sourmelis was extremely critical with the works of some travellers during the years of Turkish domination, Europeans or not, but especially with the German historian Jacob Philipp Fallmerayer (1790-1861). Fallmerayer’s case was very serious for the Greek historiography in general, because in his capacity as a member of the Academy of Sciences of Munich, he was arguing that there was no connection between ancient and modern Greeks in his book “History of Peninsula of Morea at Middle Ages (Geschichte der Halbinsel Morea während des Mittelalters), of which the first volume was published in 1830 and the second one in 1836. His main argument was that after the invasion of Slavonic tribes in Greece during the Byzantin period, there was not even a drop of pure Greek blood in the veins of the christian inhabitants of modern Greece. As for Athens, Fallmerayer was writing that the city was depopulated for 300 years (6th-10th cent.) After this long span time Athens was populated again, but the new inhabitants were not descendant of ancient Greeks as the colloquial language proved.

On Greek side, Sourmelis was the first who tried to refute the anti-Greek theory of Fallmerayer with the help of “The State of City of Athens in Brief”. He used linguistic and historical arguments as well. Thus Sourmelis was claiming that the language of Athenians had been corrupted, as had happened to the language of all Greeks. This blend of barbaric (foreign) phonemes, words and solecisms was result of the fact that the language of Athenians was spoken by all the Greeks and the barbarians (foreigners). And of course Sourmelis was demonstrating the uninterrupted continuity of Athenian civilization from antiquity until the modern times in every page of his second book.

Nevertheless an enlarged edition of “The State of City of Athens in Brief” was available within 1842, in which Sourmelis had added three pages under the title “about Slavs in short”. In these pages the author was claiming that Byzantins fought against Slavs and drove them out of Greece and so this nation disappeared from all the regions of Greece in the middle of the 9th century. In 1846 a third edition also enlarged was available. This time ten pages had been added, in which Sourmelis was arguing firstly that Slavs descended from ancient Greece and not the opposite, because their nation came from the mixture of ancient Greeks and Skythians; secondly the original meaning of the word “Slav” was “noble” and was referring to the ancient Greek colonists of Skythia; and thirdly Slavs were enemies of Byzantins and as such they were forced out of Greek regions circa the middle of 9th century.

The first edition of “The State of City of Athens in Brief” included also a long list of subscribers; 202 persons were subscribed mostly from Athens. King Otto was again among the subscribers for 10 copies and of course Municipality of Athenians was subscribed for 50 copies; all the rest belonged to the upper and middle strata of the local society, that is politicians, intellectuals, clerics, government officials and native Athenians. Additionally in the first edition of this book a purchase price was mentioned.

In 1854 the Athenian author published his last work which was entitled “Attics”. This book had to do with the ancient Municipalities of Attica and some districts of the ancient City of Athens. The “Attics” supplemented the previous two books, since Sourmelis was referring to some municipalities and urban districts in both of them. With the help of history, mythology and survey he found out the exact locations and names, refuting at times the Greek archeologists and the European travellers. Essentially the “Attics”, which was dedicated to the Municipality of Athenians, was another proof of the connection between the ancient and modern Athens.

The last book also included a list of subscribers; 126 persons and institutions, like the Ministry of Churches and Education, the Ministry of Interior, the members of the Holy Synod and some Municipalities of Attica. And of course a purchase price also was mentioned. Finally an enlarged edition of “Attics” was available in 1862.

As a conclusion, we can say that Sourmelis was established as the historian of Athens, trying to demonstrate that the modern city was heiress and successor of the ancient city-state, irrelevant to whomever lived in its land, Macedonians, Romans, Byzantins or Turks.⁴

The fourth book we are going to present manifests an important change in the presentation and the conceptualization of the city and its past, but also in terms of content and authorship. The “Statistics of Piraeus” was published in 1852 and its author, Georgios Angelopoulos, was cavalry captain and garrison commander of the port-city. The comments that foreigner visitors, mostly Europeans, had made on modern Piraeus were his motive for writing this slim book of 46 pages. Knowing that

⁴ K. Th. Dimaras, “*Ideological infrastructure of neo-hellenic state, the heritage of bygone days, the new realities, the new needs*”, in *History of Greek Nation* (Ekdotiki Athinon Ltd-Athens, 1977), vol. 13, 455-484, esp. 458-460.

in modern Greece always the past would injure the present, Angelopoulos tried to reverse this opinion with the detailed description of the state of Piraeus 17 years after its foundation. However “Statistics of Piraeus” was not meant only for foreigners but also for its inhabitants, a society of small trades-men and above all for the Government and the Municipal authorities, since its author referred to the things that still had to be done and he suggested the proper solutions.

Thus Angelopoulos devoted far more attention to the present state of Piraeus and divided his material in two parts; the first part referred to the city and the second one to the port; the history included also a map, which was drawn by the students of the Military School in 1850 and it was showing the extent of the city. The way Angelopoulos treated his subject manifests that he perceived Piraeus and its development as a unified whole of the place and its people. The author succeeded to give a good idea of modern Piraeus, since his book was a blend of quantitative data and of description of its infrastructure. On the one hand he was presenting the city-port through its public and municipal edifices like schools, churches, hospitals, cemeteries, warehouses, dockyards etc, but also through its streets, squares, fountains, hotels, sights, promenades, steamship agencies, factories and so on. On the other hand he was offering enough data of commercial and marine activity, of goods and passenger traffic and of the shifts in population.

Further more the “Statistics of Piraeus” mirrored the pride, self-confidence and sense of identity of its inhabitants, who had come from different places but they already felt “natives” of Piraeus because of what they had achieved as a whole up to that point. This didn’t happen for the first time; a few years earlier, in 1842, Athenians had proposed the incorporation of Piraeus with their municipality without success, because they met with strong opposition from the people of Piraeus.

As a conclusion of this brief presentation of the urban histories in the newly-established state, we should stress two facts; firstly that in the beginning histories of Athens and Piraeus were a blend of national and local history but soon enough the process of urbanization effected an important change in the presentation of the city and its past and the histories concentrated almost exclusively on local society. This change had an impact on the content and authorship as well, since government officials took on the role of historians with intent to record the achievements of their own time. In this way histories of Athens and Piraeus formed a specific urban identity and legitimacy and expressed the mentality of certain social strata in local society throughout the years. In other words Hellenic urban historiography emphasized the role of specific cities within Greek kingdom. This was the case of the seaside cities which introduced the new economic and social relationships and thus they contributed to the modernization of Greece; and secondly that these histories are the work of men who were proved consistent with their opinions. Sourmelis reissued all his books because he believed that historian never quits searching for the most reliable sources. Angelopoulos was also truly convinced that modern Piraeus would be more important than the ancient city-port, for this reason he established a steam-driven mill several years later.