

For the benefit of the Greek “Great Idea”: the excavations during the Asia Minor campaign (1919-22)¹

Dr. Kalliope Pavli

Post-doctoral Fellow

Panteion University, Faculty of Political Sciences & History, GREECE

Abstract

Upon the landing of the Greek troops in Smyrna on May 1919, that inaugurated a 3-years military campaign, the Greek Government sent archaeologists to excavate some of the most famous archaeological sites of the western coast, while the Greek Army also participated by gathering artifacts on its way to Ankara. The researches attempted to “prove” the “since ever pure” and “solid” Greekness of Asia Minor by diminishing, on the other hand, the role of other ancient people into the creation of the Aegean and Anatolian civilization; even the Islamic monuments were built by Greeks, according to Greek scholars and to the racial classification of people and their abilities.

The Greek campaign hadn't been simply a matter of historical (mis)interpretation; the Greek ruling class never hide that their ultimate goal was the raw materials of Anatolia even if the ethno-historical myths history and the archeological interpretations added a widely accepted gloss in the war. This paper aims to introduce the predetermined archaeological assessments in relation to the necessity of the Greek government to become more effective ideologically, especially on realizing that the campaign was no more politically and militarily tenable...

Key Words: archaeology, war, politics, colonialism, collective conscience making

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In search of the “ancestors”

The late 19th century is characterised, among other things, by the sharpening of the struggle for colonies and by the intensification of the economic monopolies. In such a frame, the internal disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, of the most politically charged regions, facilitated the British, German and French capital to take over control in banks, navigation trade, mining, water supply, railways; goods whose their unequal distribution in colonies was the evidence of the capitalistic interests and their established regulations. The Greek ruling class supported the Europeans’ ambitions in the shape of the post-war world; they supplied France with Greek troops in the Crimean war against the Bolsheviks, and the Allies, in return, approved the Greeks’ occupation of Smyrna (modern Izmir), a cosmopolitan city with a large Greek-Orthodox population and part of the Greek “Great Idea” (Μεγάλη Ιδέα). The Greek presence in Asia Minor could be useful to Europeans; Turkish liberation movements were already set in motion after the Armistice of Moudros, and the Greek troops would keep them under control offering to the Powers the time to solve their disagreements on the share of the Ottoman regions.

Colonialism dominated history and archaeology perhaps unlike any other event. The main archaeological approach in the late 19th and early 20th century was the so-called Culture-Historical one, reflecting a certain socio-economic development, and the late prolonged European depression that reinforced the racial theories. Hence it was widely accepted that certain types of material remains were of a specific ethnic group, biologically and culturally unchanged through centuries, therefore, the past of the glorious “ancestors” was pointing out the territorial rights of the “descendants”. In accord with this theory the German archaeologist Gustaf Kossinna provided the prehistoric remains as “evidence” that the Poland and the neighbour lands have been German since the Iron Era (Bettina 1992, 30-37); not such an innocent delusion since it became the key alibi for Nazis to enter Poland and Czechoslovakia. French, with eyes on Anatolia, recalled their “ancestors” the Gauls, who once lived in the central Anatolian plateau, having also started to excavate the ancient Ionian city of Phocaea (Foça), for the Phocaeans were considered the founders of Marseille. Moreover, according to them the Franco-Ottoman alliance of the 16th century had been a “teacher” to the “barbarian Easterns”; the French traders, among the other Europeans who brought the Mexican and Peruvian gold and silver to the Middle East, “taught to the Ottomans commerce, law and military organisation” (Sartiaux 1918, 54). Italy, on the “mare nostrum” theory sent archaeologists and geographers to excavate in Libya —once part of the Roman Empire— in order to exercise the timeless Italian rights. Selective excavations, though: the mission turned its back on Cyrenaica, where its Greek antiquities deny the “exclusive” Roman past of North Africa, and focused on the region where the birth of the emperor Septimius Severus took place. Under the same ideology, Asia Minor was their ancient *provincia Asia*, and the temple of Augustus (Monumentum Ancyranum) in Ankara the benchmark of their old domination. Thus, as soon as the Italian troops occupied the north-western coast of Asia Minor, they started to excavate Halicarnassus (Bodrum) and to transport discoveries in Rome (Major Philippou Smyrna 21.9.1919).

Similarly, according to the Greek “Great Idea”, the Anatolian peninsula was Greek since the migration of the Ionians and kept being Greek due to the so-considered Greek empires of Alexander the Great and of the Byzantine kings. Thus the Greek Government, in collaboration with the Archaeological Society at Athens, sent archaeologists on a zealous hunt for artifacts. Excavations were undertaken at Nyssa and at Klazomenes, and at medieval

Ephesus (modern Seljuk) as well, at the enormous church building of the Justinian era on Ayasuluk hill. For the Byzantine artifacts and history were also monopolized; the Byzantine archaeologist expressed his dissatisfaction that the Armenians claimed Christian sites of Ephesus as theirs.

Besides the systematic excavations, the work has also focused on collecting artifacts. The head officer of the Archaeological Department of the Greek High Commission in Smyrna travelled in the hinterland during the war to collect them and to arrange their transportation to Smyrna in order to be placed in the newly-established archaeological museum. Archaeologists and war journalists shifted the focus on legendary areas —stretched from the ancient coastal Ionian cities to Polatli area, where Alexander the Great overcame the "Gordion Knot" and the Battle of Sakarya took place. According to them, the remains indicated the "since ever established" Greek conscience; inscriptions in Greek on marble reliefs and funeral stele, columns and sculptures —even of the Roman era— turned into Greece's ethno-political heritage, as the Byzantine finds turned into heritage of the Hellenized Christendom. Even the Greek Catholics of Syria were considered "pure" descendents of the ancient Greeks and the Christian Arabs as having "*Greek national conscience*" (Karolidis, 1909, 32, 80-1, 105). As for the Phrygians, Lydians, Carians, Cappadocians and the others, they had been "*homogeneous race*"; therefore their history shouldn't be studied individually from the Greek. For under the Greek "hegemony" any Anatolian civilisation turned into "Hellenic", while not only the Greek "race" but the monuments themselves "fully Hellenized" Anatolia, as well as Mesopotamia, Syria and Egypt, where the "Greek" empires once extended (Skalieris 1922, 415). The use of the word "hegemony" by the Greek and European scholars in order to describe the effect of the ancient Hellenic aesthetic and writing denoted more than a cultural predominance. As such perceptions were directly rooted to a specific political milieu, denoted also the geopolitical predominance of the European social, political, and economic values upon non-European countries.

As about the abundant mosques and other Islamic landmarks representing different eras of the Islamic civilization, they were a threat to nationalist images of the past. Thus the Byzantine archaeologist "explained" that they were not made by Ottoman craftsmen, "*race barbarian*" and "*unable to create any valuable object*", but "*by the gifted Greek craftsmen of the Ottoman Empire, therefore the Islamic monuments were also Greek*". Besides, according to racial dogmas, Ottoman Turks were "*by nature insufficient*" and unable to evolve, hence unworthy of any consideration (Sotiriou 1920, 59, 60). Through a similarly absurd viewpoint a university professor "Hellenized" the British railway: since Greeks were working in it, the railway was Greek (Antoniadis, 1909, 10).

Excavations were held by the Greek Army also. The military officers repeatedly sent letters to the Greek High Commission informing for the many Greek antiquities they noticed embedded in mosques, in Muslim cemeteries, in fountains, in walls, in stony bridges, being aware of the role that excavations could play: "*would persuade for the Greekness of Asia Minor, hence the Allies would realize that it has been Greek and should remain Greek*" (Papavasileiou, 15.11.1921). Thus, the head officer of the Archaeological Department of the High Commission asked to the Administration of the Army to contribute, and indeed, soldiers were ordered to pick up artifacts on the march considering them symbols of pride and patriotism, using amateurish methods and causing considerable damages. Their contribution was highly appreciated, not only by the Greek bourgeois Press but by the foreign bourgeois Press as well, such as the *New York Times*, the *Daily Telegraph* and *Le Temps*. Officers and soldiers, victims of the populist policy and of the prejudices that were introduced through

education —such as nationalism, religionism, racism—, were convinced, at least at first, that Greece possesses a genuine heritage that extends beyond the Sakarya river. That they walk on a ground stained by the blood of the ancestor warriors who bravely fought once Persians and other “barbarians”, and that, as the hundreds of publications propagated, the current dead soldiers would become the bloodied nation incarnate, elevating their sacrifice to the highest ranks of nationalism.

The thick network of interests

The Greek campaign hadn't been simply a matter of historical (mis)interpretation or of fake promises by the European powers. The necessity of the Greek upper class for economic expansion had been pointed out by an economist on his return from the western Anatolian coast: Greeks should replace the soonest possible the sovereignty of the Hollanders in steamboats, of the British in railways and of the French in banks (Antoniadis 1909, 9-10) — according to the imperialist values; where a country proved its technological force by the number of banks, steamboats and kilometres of railway, whose the unequal and disproportionate distribution in the colonies was the evidence of the promotion of the capitalistic interests. The Greek ruling class never had hidden that their deepest aim was the Anatolian's raw materials, praising the efforts of the Greek bankers and industrialists to increase through the war —and because of it— their profit. After all, Prince George, who served as a major general, explicitly addressed the campaign as “*colonial*”. The Greek maritime shipping was as active as never before during the Great War, with a peak between the years 1919 and 1922, and the growth of the Greek banks also had been remarkable: they loaned money to farmers and kings with high interest rates, and the Greek state as well, to continue the war in Asia (Sifakis, Hatzioannou 1921, 69-99, 104-116, 141-188).

The above was not only a threat for the Anatolian people —as the Greek proletariat press repeated, protesting against the goal that would subjugate them to imperialists (Proclamation of the Socialist Labour Party of Greece, 10.9.20 & Rizospastis Newspaper 30.7.1920)— but also a bleed for the Greeks. The campaign had been an awful waste of money and men. Since Greece continued to participate in wars over the last years, its growth was held back preventing the youth manpower from education and production, and subjugating the basic sectors of the national economy to foreign capitals (Georgiou 1945, 31-38). Thus the labour movement drove the workers to strikes in 1921 that the government punished by sending them on the Asia Minor front —however, they carried their anti-war propaganda among the soldiers, who at that time were also looking forward to the end of this campaign.

The excavations ran a multiple role. It is difficult for us to analyze here all the reasons that motivated them so we'll concentrate on the political content —although there was undoubtedly a scientific concern as well, since the Greek archaeologists, despite their chauvinism, looked after the restoration of the Seljuk mosque and Turkish baths of Ephesus. In what concerns the domestic policy, despite the eschatological speculations and the narcissistic version of the national history that gave a gloss to the military campaign, the Greeks were soon discontented with the war, demanding through the general elections of 1920 its termination. The new government that violated its pre-electoral promise and ordered, instead, the advance towards Ankara, hoped that the antiquities would persuade for the “since ever” Greek ethno-political rights in Anatolia, therefore that the war was a patriotic one, fair

and necessary. On the other hand, the Treaty of Sevres never entered into force despite the pervasive bourgeois propaganda that the Allies would cede to Greece the Aegean coasts up to Constantinople; the fake rumours didn't stop even when Allies openly stopped to support Greece after the elections of 1920 that established a German-friendly king. Thus, the ancient remains of a golden era would play an essential role, investing in the fact that the Europeans in whole had a great admiration for the ancient “European” empires; in them imperialism saw a reflection of itself.

Epilogue: On the subjection to the ruling ideology

A moment's reflection is enough to convince that the army walked on a land of multiple layers of history: the Anatolian context before and after the immigration of the Greek tribes, the continuous movement of populations that created a multicultural environment, the pre-national socio-political conditions that differentiate the concept of “identity” from its modern version. And the disregard of the current ethnological element had been fatal, as later admitted a military officer; for the monuments themselves were *not* a sufficient reason for the advance in places where only Muslim populations lived (Ampelas 1937, 94).

Today we more or less realise that the ancient remains do not necessarily relate to specific human groups, not to mention that the excavations of the western coast —sanctuaries, burial rites, statues, pots— indicate the flexible and multiple identity of its population, as it is shown by the Ionian literature, too: in the ancient Greek dramas there were sentences in the Lydian and Phrygian language, so the poly-ethnic audience could understand the play (Crielaard 2009, 57-62 & Emlyn-Jones 1991, 20). Undoubtedly, the researches and questions set in the vast colonialist environment and in the dominant aesthetic couldn't be answered objectively. Yet, already in light of findings of the 19th century it was clear that the Anatolian populations shared a mutual cultural environment, even if people have been sublimated to the irredentist ideology —further ensured through state institutions, such as the school, the army and the Church. However, and apart of the involvement of politics in subject areas like history and archaeology, the question remains: in what sense the ethnicity could be considered *crystallized* and *unique* and the culture *self-created* and *self-reliant* in socio-cultural interactions? Ancient world was not made of clearly cut cultural boundaries, and certainly it was not made of attractive sagas, brilliant heroes and glorious kings only; there was also famine, injustice, poverty and fear that were common through out empires. And despite the dominant historiographical version, nations don't walk in the great loneliness “*of the valley of dry bones*”, rising from death to restore their land, as in the vision of Ezekiel.

There is no doubt that we still have a long distance to cover until we realize that the study of the “Other” involves “Us”, that the study of the “Difference” involves the “Same”.

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