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Travelling and the Shaping of Images: Victorian Travellers on Nineteenth-Century Greece

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Abstract

This article examines British images of the independent Greek state and the contribution of travelling to their formation from 1832 to 1870. Its aims are to pinpoint and construe elements of discursive continuity in the image of modern Greece in travel literature and to interpret the travellers' strong impact on the British reading public. This article argues that the travellers; perceptions of Greek modernity were firmly based on contemporary notions of "civilization" and "national prosperity", although allusions to classical antiquity always filtered into their accounts. Moreover, the captivity and death of British travellers near Athens, the Greek capital, in 1870 further confirmed rather than altered the existing body of British assumptions about the Greek kingdom and crystallized them into a definite diagnosis of Greek modernity. The standards used in the assessment of Greece's advance were by no means novel or especially adopted for the Greek case. In early-Victorian Britain "civilization" implied a number of things that Britain was experiencing and valued: industrial development, free trade, material comfort and liberal political institutions.

Keywords: *nineteenth century; Victorians; travel; Mediterranean; Greece; images*

JEL Classification: Y80 – Related Disciplines

1. Introduction

Throughout the nineteenth century accounts given by travellers were considered in Victorian Britain as a highly significant source of information on the condition of modern Greece. Surprisingly the travellers' experience set the pace for both defenders and critics of the Greeks' achievements in civilization. The first could strengthen their praise by referring to "the advantages arising from a personal knowledge of that country in discussing any questions connected with it" (Hansard, 14 March 1845, LXXIII, p. 903); censurers, on the other hand, had to dismiss the travellers' testimony as "a confused recollection of heat, and dust, and gay costumes, beautiful ruins and uncomfortable inns." (Skene, 1847, p. 9)

This article examines how the experience of travelling in the Greek kingdom contributed to the shaping of Victorian images of Greece in the nineteenth century. It describes, on the one hand, the process of transmitting facts and enthusiasm or reluctance towards the Greeks from travellers to those who did not travel, to the Victorian reading public. This article also presents, on the other hand, the domestic effect in mid-Victorian Britain of an episode involving travellers in Greece; in April 1870 a group of British travellers were captured and murdered by brigands during an excursion to the environs of Athens.

Indeed, the case of the travellers who visited Greece, published their impressions of the country, or even died in its soil is ideal for rethinking the character of the commentators and the nature of comments on which a study of the position of the Greek kingdom in British public debate must focus. Were the classical education of British travellers and their readers, the philhellenic excitement of the 1820s, and their increasing interest in Greek history sufficient to explain travellers' comments on modern Greece as appeared in their published accounts or their reading of the subject should be related to contemporary notions of modernity in their birthplace, Britain, and to developments in the Greek kingdom?

In order to address these questions I will, therefore, examine the main themes that emerged in travellers' narratives from the 1830s to the 1870s, try to place them in the context of British attitudes towards other travel destinations, mainly Italy, and provide some indications of the actual impact of travel literature on British perceptions of modern Greece – the reaction to the "Dilessi murders" of 1870 will prove extremely conducive to that particular goal.

As the title indicates, the geographical limits of this study coincide with the borders of the Greek kingdom. Travellers' accounts on the Greek subjects of the Ottoman Empire are, therefore, outside the scope of this analysis. In addition, British interest in ancient Greece is examined here only when it has a direct bearing on travellers' views of modern Greece. Both qualifications stem from the main hypothesis of this work, that, as early as 1832, British understanding of modern Greece constituted a distinct and well-defined entity, which despite occasional allusions to the classical age owed its coherence to notions of progress, civilization, "character" and "race" that generally applied to the evaluation of national life in early-Victorian Britain.

It was the perceived impartiality of the occasional traveller and the "Britishness" of the author's outlook that earned him the trust and interest of his readers and made travel writing influential in shaping the image of Greece in Britain. On the other hand, contemporary commentators and reviewers had little interest in historical narratives and adopted a cautious stand on statistical works as they provided an "official and, it should seem, an authorised account" (Millman, 1842, p. 150). However, modern scholars and historians when approaching the issue of notions and images tend to favour "expert discourses on modern Greek affairs" at the expense of travel literature as the most fertile ground for the study of British commentary on modern Greece (Miliori, 1998, p. 159).

2. Literature Review

The examination of travel writings constitutes a fitting introduction to the study of early-Victorian images of Greece provided that the numerous travellers' accounts are looked at from a perspective conducive to the study of perceptions. In existing works two distinct approaches tend to emerge, which do contribute to the detailed presentation of British travelling on Greek soil, without, however, being free of elements that compromise their effectiveness in highlighting attitudes in the nineteenth century.

Firstly, British travel writings have been used as historical documents providing supplementary information on the condition of the Greek people; this approach does not treat the world of the traveller but rather labours to prove whether "the picture offered by these travellers is reasonably clear and accurate" (Angelomatis-Tsougarakis, 1990, p. 211). On the other hand, the world of the traveller has in many recent works become the centre of attention, although research on Greece as a travelling destination usually has looked at the years before the establishment of the independent Greek kingdom in the 1830s. This line of argumentation understands the eighteenth-century voyage to Italy, Turkey, and Greece as "both a social and cultural necessity" (Schnapp, 1996, p. 258), treats the rediscovery of Greece during the eighteenth century within broader ideological developments – "the rediscovery of good surviving in the modern Greeks, was part of sophisticated Europe's preoccupation… with childlike cultures…, with the naïve in literature" (Constantine, 2011, p. 152) –, and, most interesting for the present article, describes and endeavours to explain comments on the Greeks in reference to the traveller's world. For example, "enthusiasm for the Classical inheritance" and the revulsion to "the supernatural powers of relics, saints, indulgences, and images" are invoked as explanatory factors for the travellers' "expectations of finding the descendants of Phidian and Praxitelean models" among the modern Greeks and their derogatory comments on Mediterranean Christianity (Pemble, 2009, pp. 179, 216, 119). However, besides brief allusions to the fact that eighteenth-century attitudes persisted into the nineteenth century, developments in both travelling to Greece and writing about the experience after 1830 have not been systematically studied.

A third approach to British travelling into Greece is possible, especially with regard to the rather neglected period of the nineteenth century. By adopting this approach to travellers' thought and works the study of their case would communicate with another field of historical inquiry, commentary and judgmental pronouncements on continental nationalities – on the Greek nation in particular – in nineteenth-century Britain, which, as Parry (2008) has argued, "turned on the purposes and values that Britain should assert, much more than on attitudes to specific overseas people" (p. 2). Indeed, an inquiry into the experience of British travellers, who wrote at great length about ancient and modern Greece in English and for the British public that followed their lives and, occasionally, their deaths in the Greek kingdom, could prove extremely constructive to the study of the relation between the Greek kingdom and the formation of its image in Victorian Britain, which is still in a seminal state.

In existing works two distinct approaches tend to emerge. The tradition of literary philhellenism is clearly traceable in Gourgouris's Dream Nation; insisting on the "coincidence between Hellenism and Orientalism", Gourgouris (1996) has attributed to classical learning the canonical role which Said's Orientalism assigned to oriental studies in the imaginative construction of the Orient (p. 73). Unimpeded by the presumptions of Orientalism, Roessel (2001), in his In Byron's Shadow, has conceded that "although ancient Greece, Hugo's 'Greece of Homer', and modern Greece occupy the same geographical space on the map, they are two distinct entities in the Western imagination" (p. 4). According to Roessel's analysis radicalism and literary philhellenism blent together during the revolutionary years and personified by Byron constituted a powerful legacy, appropriately termed "Byronism", which designated the boundaries of British and American commentaries on Greece between 1833 and 1913 (p. 81, p. 115). On the other hand, Margarita Miliori has offered a different and more illuminating account of British images of the Greek kingdom in the period 1832-1864. Miliori (1998) has posed the question whether "the weighty shadow of an 'idealized' Greek antiquity" (to which we may add "Byron's shadow") sufficiently facilitates our understanding of "images of Greek modernity". Miliori has convincingly placed "British discourses on the Greeks within the context of a wider British discourse on the national, in its relation to politics and history, and in its relation to the identity of Europe" (p. 10). More recently, Koundoura (2007) has rejected "the Romantic, current tourist, or Greek nationalist" approach to Western interest in Greece (p. 8). In The Greek Idea, she has convincingly read philhellenism as a "self-serving enterprise", and concern for modern Greece as "Europe's concern with its own contemporary necessities" (Koundoura, 2007, p. 12, p. 139).

A last point of interest in bibliography refers to the much discussed and promoted in the nineteenth century dichotomy between "an ideal of sincere, independent travel against the degraded tourism" (Buzard, 1993, p. 29). Though complaining about "tourists" was rather "a rhetorical strategy for guaranteeing the complainer's difference" (Buzard, 1993, 94), in Victorian Britain being a "traveller" had certain connotations connected to a person's status and to his writings' influence. Tourists travelled by railways whereas travellers relied mainly on horse power to carry them through. Tourists were "Cookites", the puppets of Thomas Cook and organized tour. Travellers moved independently, seeking the authentic pleasure of travel. More crucially, tourists had no apparent object but amusement, they were looking simply for change from their everyday duties; travellers were motivated by their intention to benefit from their experience and hence benefit the nation. Lastly, travellers were men of property, while tourists represented the British masses (Buzard, 1993). The case of Greece in the years 1832 – 1870 can safely be classified to the travellers' camp. The country had no railways, Thomas Cook did not organize tours in the kingdom, there were but a few things to "amuse" and "revivify" the spirit, a considerable amount of money were needed to travel through the country. Britons who visited Greece perceived themselves as travellers and, more importantly for the present study, the British public could find few arguments to deny them the title.

3. Modern Greece in Travellers' Eyes

The end of the war of independence and the establishment of the Greek kingdom in 1832 reopened the Greek lands to British travellers in the East. Although the eastern Mediterranean was not among the most popular destinations of the Grand Tour in the eighteenth century, "Greece was becoming more popular by the 1780s" and this upward trend continued until the outbreak of the Greek revolution in 1821 (Black, 1985, p. 29; Angelomatis-Tsougarakis, 1990, pp. 6-8). For the following ten years the British who visited Greece were primarily the philhellenes fighting for the freedom of that "classic soil". Already in the 1830s, however, the first signs of a recovery became evident and were reflected in contemporary sources. As early as 1834 an English traveller was complaining that the Greek capital was already "swarming with tourists": "during our very short stay at Athens we counted no less than thirteen English travellers" (Temple, 1836, p. 75). A year later George Cochrane predicted after his visit to Athens that "for the next ten years, Greece will be supported by foreigners who will be attracted to view her antiquities" (Cochrane, 1837, p. 150). In 1838 a vice-consul was appointed at Piraeus, the port of Athens, provided with an extra amount in his salary "as he would be exposed to a certain degree of expense, in consequence of the great number of English travellers who visit Athens."[1] In 1840 the first Murray's Handbook for travellers in the East included Greece and justified the need for a guide "especially since the means of communication with them [Greece and Turkey] have improved and multiplied… and the consequent increase of travellers in scenes of such deep and varied interest" (p. iii). Also in travellers' books and in the correspondence of the newspapers from Greece "the facilities afforded by steam navigation" were connected with the great number of travellers who were visiting the kingdom after 1837 (Times, 4 November 1837, 4e). Besides the great increase in numbers, however, Greece, alongside Spain, remained "in the third rank of the Mediterranean destinations of the Victorians and the Edwardians." (Pemble, 2009, 49)

The great expense, which a visit to Greece in the first decades of its independence entailed, determined to a large extent the social and professional profile of the British visitors. Thomas De Quincey (1842) himself a traveller in Greece, compared the money required for a tour in the Rhine, in France or in northern Italy with the expenses of a travel in the Levant. While travelling in continental Europe was a consideration for a wealthy man who could dispose one hundred pounds, "for the Mediterranean, and especially for the Levant - these he resigns to richer men; to those who can command from three to five hundred pounds" (p. 129).

Travellers in Greece shared another common characteristic, "the common recollections of every educated man" (Morning Herald, 31 July 1839, 4c), which continued to constitute the main, though not the only, incentive to visit the country throughout the nineteenth century. Byron's legacy, the pilgrimage to the Holy Land, "the Victorian love of strenuous outdoor activities" (Eisner, 1993, pp. 127-130), and the acquisition of knowledge and experience – "the tour could broaden one's horizons [and] make one a better citizen at home" (Buzard, 1993, p. 100) – also attracted British travellers to the Greek kingdom.

Although few Britons visited Greece with a view to studying its internal condition or its future role in the Eastern Question, many travellers were interested in the present state of the country, recorded their observations during their travels and included them in their publications. Books about Greece should be "useful for future travellers and amusing to others" (Giffard, 1837, p. 3); to the Englishman especially "who habitually studies the political prospects of his own country in his morning readings and his evening conversation, the present state of the Levant presents a most attractive theme" (Usborne, 1840, p. ii). An element of what O'Connor (1998) in regard to British travellers in the Italian peninsula has described as a "profound sense of moral obligation… [the] desire to exact meaningful pleasure out of their travels" (p. 39) can be traced in the writings of their counterparts who, as a rule, spent at least a few paragraphs of their accounts of travel in Greece in the cause of probing into the material and political condition of the kingdom. They could thus avoid the accusation often held against "tourists" of ignoring "the vibrant, if banal, ongoing life of contemporary places." (Buzard, 1993, p. 211) As the "general introduction" of Murray's Handbook for Travellers in Greece put it in 1854:

> There the politician may contemplate for himself the condition and progress of a people, of illustrious origin, and richly endowed by Nature, which, after a servitude of centuries, has taken its place among the nations of the earth. (p. 2)

The material condition of the kingdom, with particular references to its infrastructure and lack of domestic comfort, was the first criterion which British travellers applied to measure the progress of modern Greece. Comments on these aspects of national life appeared regularly in the writings of British travellers in European countries (Porter, 1984, p. 410, p. 422). The British travellers who visited Greece during the first years of its independence were shocked by the scenes of destruction and misery; the towns were reduced to “mass of ruins” (Giffard, 1837, p. 100), “some villages almost entirely unroofed” (Baillie Cochrane, 1840, p.128), and the population lived “in a state of starving poverty” (Blewitt, 1840, p. 626). Travellers’ stories were sometimes highly coloured:

> Miserable town Corinth! one vast ruin, the work of Moslem; I have seen nothing so melancholy - street after street of roofless houses. Pompeii is positively more cheerful. (Cumming, 1839, p. 96)

Gradually the first signs of recovery began to appear; “new houses were everywhere building” (Levinge, 1839, p. 99), while towns like Patras could boast not only “several wide streets, most of the houses being new, and many of them well built” but also a considerable commercial activity (De Vere, 1850, p. 31). But visits to the provinces and especially to the most remote places of the country usually led to the conclusion: “ages must elapse before Greece will assume that position in the scale of nations which she was expected to acquire as soon as the yoke of Turkey was removed” (Cumming, 1839, p. 92); a night’s stay in a local inn, or, even worse, in a peasant’s house, made the traveller acquainted with the “intolerable fleas and rats” and “the want of table and chair”, the total lack of domestic comfort (Mure 1842, vol. 1, p. 120). British travellers to the Greek kingdom in the first decades of its independence viewed material change as progress and, therefore, they were not “predisposed to interpret change as loss” (Pemble, 2009, p. 179).

A common obstacle to the progress of the Greeks and to the comfort of the traveller was the condition of the infrastructure of the kingdom (Usborne, 1840, p. 44). The want of sufficient means of communication was also understood to be one of the reasons, which prevented the complete exploitation of the natural resources of the kingdom. The picture of a country with rich but uncultivated lands was frequently displayed in the travellers’ impressions from Greece: “the traveller is grieved and disappointed… at beholding beautiful districts of most fertile land only half cultivated, by a scanty, uneducated, lawless population” (Crawford, 1854, p. 766). In general travellers were describing a kingdom where “agriculture stagnates: manufactures do not exist: the communications, except in the immediate neighbourhood of the capital… are deplorable” (Howard, 1854, p. 174).

The themes of foreign and absolute rule, of the perils of a large standing army for the liberties of the people and the prosperity of the country and of an irresponsible and selfish monarch dominated the travellers’ comments on the political situation in Greece. The Bavarian troops and the Bavarian officers who served in the Greek kingdom according to the provisions of the treaty of 1832 were held responsible for the problems of Greece even after their dismissal in the late 1830s and early 1840s, just as the Austrians and the Bourbons were charged with the difficulties of Italy (O’Connor, 1998, p. 44). The Greeks were right to complain for the inactivity of the government “which has… sat like an incubus upon the country and drained it of its resources, while German adventurers have thronged into the country” (Baillie Cochrane, 1840, p. 128).

However, it was mainly the personal appearance, the mental abilities and the political skills of King Otho that were constantly commented on by British travellers. The reports on Otho’s deficiency, which were published in the English press after 1838, strongly predisposed the travellers. “Otho appeared to me a better-looking man than his mind makes him” (Cumming, 1839, p. 109); in his military uniform he “looked so amiably stupid, that both his appearance and popular report do him great injustice, if he be otherwise” (Blewitt 1840, p. 657). The indifference of Otho to the well being of his subjects was evident in the large sum of money he had spent in building his new palace “racking his wretched subjects with taxes and heavy imposts” (Borrer, 1845, p. 40).

The self-referential and self-congratulating elements in the remarks of the British travellers became even more evident in their discussion of party politics in Greece and in the passing comparison between the state of Greece and the condition of the Ionian Islands. In their view, among the Greek political parties the “Russian” was satisfied with the weakness of the Greek kingdom, the French influence was connected with political adventurers and even with Greek brigands and, not surprisingly, the “English” party believed “that Greece should become a great and powerful state with a free constitution" (Cochrane, 1837, p. 197). Moreover, for travellers coming to the Greek kingdom through the Ionian Islands the latter's "advance in civilization" under British protection provided an opportunity to reflect upon and celebrate British administrative skills and "character". As "the mere Ionians are in character very like their brethren of the mainland", the visible difference in progress, in the Ionians' favour, between the two regions was attributed to "the protection of the great maritime nation in the world" (Gardner, 1859, p. 3), which performed "her part in the Divine mission entrusted to her for the dissemination of enlightened civilization" (Spencer 1851, vol.1, p. 221).

Travellers who touched upon the question of the "character" of the modern Greeks confirmed older stereotypes and associated the moral condition of the population with the state of the Eastern or Orthodox Church. The notions of "character" and "national character" in particular were integral parts of the political vocabulary in nineteenth-century Britain; they described and evaluated moral qualities at the level of the individual and were invoked to explain varying degrees of national progress in terms of the development of certain traits of behaviour and of specific habits in the peoples of different countries (Collini, 1985, pp. 31-33, pp. 41-43). In travellers' accounts the virtues, vices and intellectual abilities of the modern Greeks were examined with reference to and as a plausible explanation for the economic and political problems of the kingdom. British travellers' comments on the Greek "character" remained divided. Drawing on the assumption of the uninterrupted sequel of the ancient "character" some praised the "acute perceptions, bright and lively imagination and warm feelings" of the modern Greeks (Crawford, 1854, p. 758), while others assured their readers that the inhabitants of the Greek kingdom remained "the same *canaille* that existed in the days of Themistocles" (Temple, 1836, p. 87), "cunning, deceit, and intrigue [being] the very vices for which the modern Greeks are chiefly notorious" (Mure, 1842, p. 150). Similar contradictions were typical of British travellers' perceptions of the Italian "character" (O'Connor, 1998, pp. 46-47).

The Greek Church, its priesthood and rituals, were contemplated as the major hindrance in the process of improving the Greek "character", just as Roman Catholic practices were corrupting the Italians (O'Connor, 1998, p. 49); and even before the nineteenth century the "Greek Orthodox was no less abhorrent than Popery", as its "characteristic vices were sacerdotalism and superstition" (Pemble, 2009, 215). "The clergy, as a class [were] the most inefficient and ignorant men of the whole community" (Patterson, 1852, p. 364); "as a necessary result, superstitions of all sorts have insinuated themselves into the popular belief" (De Vere 1850, p. 183). What impressed the British travellers about the Orthodox creed was the worship of images and of numerous saints as well as "the faith in divinations, spells, relics, miracles, and amulets" (Spencer, 1852, vol.2, p. 278). The community of faith with the Russians, moreover, transformed the clergy to "a subject to Russian influence" securing a permanent ally for Russian plans in the East (De Vere, 1850, p. 181).

The images of economic destruction, political intrigue and dubious moral and religious standards, which appeared regularly in the literature produced by British travellers, conferred the titles of a "backward" and "illiberal" state on the Greek kingdom. Judged by British criteria of prosperity, comfort, liberty and "character" Greece and the Greeks were found wanting. Undeveloped national resources, non-existent road and railway networks, a despotic ruler unrestrained by representative institutions and surrounded, in the first critical years of his reign, by foreign soldiers and officials provided a lamentable example of political failure, confirmed the disapproval of the British for "illiberal" countries and reaffirmed the faith of the traveller and the reader in the British system.

However, although most British observers depicted Greece low in the ladder of civilization, they accepted and indeed hoped that the country could rise to an improved position under a more enlightened ruler or, ideally, if the "English" party and its principles came to power. In early travel writings on the Greek kingdom, what Mandler (2000) has called "the civilisational perspective" (pp. 225-236) was dominant, which provided opportunities for severe criticism of Greece but also allowed a certain degree of optimism about its future.

Presenting more or less the same images and projecting identical perceptions of modern Greece, the success of travel books depended on the professional and social status of the authors, the timing of their publication, or their literary merits. Wordsworth, headmaster of Harrow and later Bishop of Lincoln, visited Greece in 1832; his Athens and Attica and Greece. Pictorial, Descriptive and Historical, first published in 1836 and 1839 respectively, "were among the more popular travel books of the century and were revised through numerous editions" (Eisner, 1993, p. 134). William Mure, an accomplished classical scholar and later Conservative MP, saw his Journal of A Tour in Greece and the Ionian Islands reviewed in leading magazines, such as the Edinburgh Magazine (1842, 75/152: pp. 492-512) and the Quarterly Review (1842, 70/139: pp. 129-139). Carlisle's Diary in Turkish and Greek Waters was timely published in 1854 to provide a much-needed introduction into the political, social and economic condition of the Eastern powers during the Crimean war. But the two most successful travel books about Greece were written by a Frenchman, Edmond About, and owed their popularity to the witty and "light-hearted style" in which common perceptions of the country and the Greeks were presented. About's La Grèce Contemporaine and Le Roi des Montagnes, translated into English in 1855 and 1859 respectively, described the Greek kingdom in the early 1850s; the latter depicted the "respectable" life of brigands in the kingdom and "was easily the most famous novel about Greece in Europe and America during the second half of the nineteenth century" (Roessel, 2001, p. 120).

Irrespective of the appeal of the most successful travel writings to readers and reviewers, British travellers as a whole were recognized as an authority on Greek affairs. Articles in newspapers and periodicals treating the internal condition of the Greek kingdom often invoked the testimony of the travellers: "A *rencontre* with a party of *Klephts* figures in every traveller's note-book as one of the ordinary incidents of a Greek tour" (Morning Chronicle, 4 February 1850, 4a); "in a country such as we have described Greece, and we flatter ourselves our description will bear examination on the part of travellers" (Finlay, 1843, p. 355). The correspondent of the Morning Herald at Athens felt in 1841 the need to reinforce his description of the atrocities committed by the Greek government: "and let the incredulous in England apply to any of the numerous travellers who have visited this capital for full confirmation of all that has been written on these horrid barbarities" (14 April 1841, 3b). In 1845 Edmund Lyons, the British minister at Athens, presented in his correspondence with Aberdeen, the Foreign Minister, the accounts given by travellers as a reliable source of information on the condition of Greece: "I find from the concurrent testimony of English travellers and from other sources that the opinion in the Provinces…".[2] And when the Crimean war increased the need for information on the state of the kingdoms and the peoples of the East many earlier books written by British travellers in Greece were republished and the works of foreign travellers were translated into English.[3]

Although highly rated as reliable sources of information on the actual state of modern Greece, travel literature as a means of keeping contact with developments in the kingdom was subject to certain limitations. The Greeks and their British defenders could argue that the travellers' observations "for the most part are as brief and ephemeral as is their residence among the people they profess to describe." (Xenos, 1851, vol. 1, p. vii).

For all the shortcomings of their writings, travellers were regarded as indispensable allies to those in Greece who tried to present their opinions on Greek affairs to a wider section of the British public. Finlay, a philhellene who came to fight in the Greek war of independence and spent the rest of his life in Greece (Miller, 1924), presented his views on modern Greece mainly through the columns of the London press (Hionidis, 2002, pp. 37-46). But besides his journalistic endeavours, in the years 1832-1870 George Finlay became the most reliable unofficial source of information on modern Greece for British travellers and British statesmen with an interest in the affairs of the kingdom, as he combined a mastery of ancient and medieval history with an exceptional insight into the condition and "character" of the modern Greeks (Hussey, 1995, p. 476, p. 591). Finlay, who made the acquaintance of W. R. Wilde at Athens, later provided him with "information… regarding the present condition of Greece & Otho", which eventually appeared in Wilde's book of travel in the East (Wilde, 1840, vol.1, p. 440). On the other hand, Sir Edmund Lyons, British minister at Athens, had many opportunities to expound his views on Greek affairs as the host of the more prominent British travellers who visited Greece. Lyons became acquainted with MPs who visited Athens as travellers and provided information on Greek affairs to them as his correspondence proves.[4]

However influential travel writing was, the murder of travellers in 1870 became the single most significant "result" of British travelling experience in Greece in the nineteenth century that crystallized already shaped images into long-lasting stereotypes about the Greeks.

4. Travellers as Victims: the "Dilessi Murders" Incident (1870)

On 11 April 1870, a group of British travellers accompanied by an English solicitor residing in Greece, his wife and child, and the secretaries of the British and Italian Legations were captured by brigands in their return from an excursion to the plain of Marathon.[5] The brigands soon released the women, the child, and Muncaster in order to make the necessary arrangements for ransoming the captives. The negotiations with the brigands were trammelled by their additional demand of an amnesty, which the Greek government steadily refused to grant as being in opposition to the provisions of the constitution. The government dispatched a military force to surround the brigands and prevent them from taking their captives out of Attica. On 21 April 1870, the brigands and the troops clashed near the village of Dilessi and the fleeing brigands murdered their captives. The news reached England on 25 April and provoked an immediate reaction, which lasted, with fading intensity, until the end of May.

The very nature of the crime can explain the appeal of the Dilessi murders to a wider public. “The supply of a miscellaneous collection of dramas, crimes, and catastrophes… formed an important part of the mid-Victorian newspaper business,” especially in the popular Sunday press (Brown, 1985, 96). In the case of the 1870 incident, the exotic element gave an added fascination to the scene of the crime. Both the respectable Illustrated London News (7 May 1870, 476) and its cheaper contemporary, the Penny Illustrated Paper (7 May 1870, 289), published illustrations of “the massacre of Englishmen by Greek brigands,” in which the ferocious-looking brigands were depicted in the national costume, holding their long swords with their victims lying on the ground. Moreover, in May, a photograph of the heads of seven members of the band was put up for sale in London calling forth the protest of the Daily News against the “English photographers [who] would make money out of their [the brigands’] heads” and the paper’s contempt for “the love of horrors, or, at least, the fascination of them… felt by nearly all men.” (12 May 1870, 5a)

But the murders of three British subjects abroad also raised the question of the government’s response to the incident, the form of redress, which Britain was entitled to seek, and the means the government ought to employ in order to obtain it (Hionidis, 2002, pp. 162 – 164). The debate in parliament and the press departed, however, from the particular facts of the Dilessi case to become an investigation into the foreign policy of Britain and the actual condition of the Greek kingdom. Regarding the latter, the images which were brought forward in the process of castigating Greece were, fittingly, those developed through the writings of British travellers during the previous decades.

In leading articles published after the murders, the affair was regarded as indicative of a long and complete failure in civilization. Greece, although geographically a portion of Europe, ranked far below the expected standards of a European state. For the Standard, Greece was “as civilised and as well ruled as Central Africa” (25 April 1870, 4d), while the Daily Telegraph depicted the kingdom as “the standing obstacle to the civilisation of the Levant” (26 April 1870, 4cd). The activities of brigands in the vicinity of Athens were evidence of a government “affording no protection to property or industry”, which was the prerequisite for a country’s development (Globe, 6 May 1870, 1 c). In the field of material advancement, the indictments against Greece were numerous and the kingdom’s resemblance to a non-European territory seemed obvious. The Times offered to its readers a gloomy, but familiar to readers of travelling literature, picture of modern Greece: “Has it [the Greek kingdom] ever paid its debts? (…) Has even a road been made in the country, except that from Athens to Megara?” (16 May 1870, 11b)

In 1870 suspicions of relations between brigands and the political world added to the image of a disorganized community and strongly confirmed that the Greeks were morally unfit for representative government; in a country like Greece “the ‘Constitution’ is the sport of contending factions, being strained or ignored as interest or passion may impel.” (Daily Telegraph, 26 April 1870, 4d) In Greece, social hierarchy and the notion of propriety were missing and, as a result, “the line of demarcation… between a scoundrel and an honest man is so vague” (Daily News, 14 May 1870, 5e) that “ministers, magistrates, soldiers, priests, brigands, peasants seem mixed up in an inextricable maze of deceit, craft, treachery and violence.” (Times, 6 May 1870, 9d)

Brigandage and its lamentable results verified what was already known from the travellers’ accounts, that Greece remained an underdeveloped, disorganized, “uncivilized” kingdom, geographically and literally in the borderline between the progressive Western European states and the still “barbarous” East.

5. Conclusion

The Greek kingdom remained in the margins of the political, economic and intellectual developments in Europe during the first 30 years of its existence and in Britain the affairs of modern Greece scarcely attracted the interest of the statesmen or the press. Indeed only travel literature afforded first-hand knowledge of developments in the Greek kingdom to the British public. The British travellers who visited Greece were primarily preoccupied with the ancient monuments but the literature of travel provided an almost complete presentation of every aspect of the life in modern Greece as well, indirectly compared with the political and economic conditions in Britain.

For the most part, British images of modern Greece between 1832 and 1870 examined in this article did not provide any significant diversity of opinion as to the symptoms of the chronic “disease” that had been seen to harass the kingdom from the day of its establishment in 1832. The conclusive evidence of mid-Victorian travellers attested to the lack of infrastructure and domestic comfort and its validity was rarely challenged regardless of the time of the actual experience. London newspapers reminded their readers, when in 1870 British travellers were killed by brigands outside Athens, that Greece was insolvent and bankrupt, that the Greek budget struggled against the demands of a centralized bureaucracy and a standing army, while political instability and the existence of brigandage stressed the lawless, “uncivilized” character of the kingdom. The longevity of these images and their employment by British commentators during the period 1832-1870 underline the ways in which British perceptions of the Greek state interlocked with wider British notions of progress and national success. The confidence in the degree of material advancement and in the political arrangement of Britain, which gave it the lead in modern civilization and safeguarded British institutions from the revolutionary upheavals of the continent, remained strong and set the standards by which other national efforts were evaluated by British travellers in Greece.

The standards used in the assessment of Greece’s advance were by no means novel or especially adopted for the Greek case. In 1851 the Great Exhibition offered an occasion to measure the progress of continental and non-European nations and “nations that were not Westernized or industrialized, were considered lowest in the hierarchy” (Auerbach, 1999, p. 167). In early-Victorian Britain “civilization” implied a number of things that Britain was experiencing and valued: industrial development, free trade, material comfort and liberal political institutions.

The image of the Greek kingdom that emerged was that of a country deprived of the elements that constituted an independent and civilized European state in the nineteenth century. Until 1843 the king was the absolute monarch and after that date the constitution he granted did not challenge his authority. On the contrary, the representative system introduced methods of political corruption and a spirit of intense party struggle. The revenues of the country and the money collected by the heavy taxation imposed upon the peasants were swallowed by the ineffective administration. In agriculture the methods used for the cultivation of the lands were still primitive. There were no industries, no railways, no roads. The progress in commerce was the result of individual efforts, of the special aptitudes of the Greek “character”, while the government seemed to detest any plan for the development of the natural resources of the country. Superstitious beliefs and the ignorance of the priests characterized the Greek Church. Even evidence of an “oriental barbarity” was traceable in the Greek kingdom. Brigands infested the country many of whom were in close connection with the political circles. Foreign travellers literally risked their lives by wanting to realize their classical recollections. This image of Greece was formed during the first years of its independence and the contribution of travellers to its shaping was paramount.

However, these reservations did not deter most travellers from reaffirming their fundamental conviction that the political and material condition of the Greeks could improve by the cultivation of those elements which had led to Britain’s world supremacy. Moreover, there were no references to any biological barriers that inherently prevented the Greeks from developing their country and potentially reforming their “character”.

By 1870 the issue of the internal disintegration of the Greek kingdom, which had been presented by numerous travellers during the previous 40 years and tragically verified by the “Dilessi murders”, had already acquired the status of an indisputable fact in Britain.

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Endnotes

1. Crowe to Palmerston, 17 February 1838, FO32/81, ff.30-31.
2. Lyons to Aberdeen, 20 May 1845, Aberdeen Papers, AddMS 43137, f.149.
3. See for example: Hobhouse, John Cam (Baron Broughton). Travels in Albania and Others Provinces of Turkey in 1809 & 1810. London, 1855 [First edition: 1813].
4. See for example: Inglis to Lyons, 7 December 1840, Lyons Papers, LE74 (I, J, K).
5. Lord Muncaster (Josslyn Francis, Fifth Baron Muncaster), his wife and Frederick Grantham Vyner arrived in Athens on 7 April; Edward Lloyd was employed by the company running the railway from Athens to Piraeus; Edward Henry Charles Herbert and Alberto de Boyl were the secretaries of the British and Italian Legations respectively (Jenkins, 1998, pp. 26-7).