

The Evolution of Ottoman- Greek Interactions: from Coexistence to Nationalism

تطور التفاعلات العثمانية-اليونانية: من التعايش إلى القومية

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Received: 29/ 11/ 2025

Accepted: 13/ 12/ 2025 published 16/12/2025

Abstract:

The relationship between the Ottoman Empire and its Greek rae'ya represents one of the most complex and rich patterns of historical interaction in the Balkans and Anatolia. This relationship was not static; rather, it underwent a radical transformation, evolving from a model of coexistence within the framework of the Ottoman millet system to an existential conflict driven by the rise of nationalisms in the nineteenth century. The purpose of this study is to trace the trajectory of this development and to analyse the political, economic, and cultural factors that led to the collapse of the coexistence model and the emergence of the

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Greek national project, which ultimately challenged the very foundations of the millet system adopted by the Ottoman state structure.

Keywords:

Ottoman Empire; Phanariots; Interaction; Millet System; Nationalism ; Greeks

الملخص:

تعد العلاقة بين السلطنة العثمانية والرعايا اليونانيين أحد أكثر أنماط التفاعل التاريخي تعقيداً وإثراءً في منطقة البلقان والأناضول. إذ أن هذه العلاقة لم تكن ثابتة، بل شهدت تحولاً جذرياً من نموذج التعايش ضمن إطار نظام "الملل" العثماني، إلى صراع وجودي قاده صعود القوميات في القرن التاسع عشر. الغرض من هذه الدراسة هو تتبع مسار هذا التطور، وتحليل العوامل السياسية والاقتصادية والثقافية التي أدت إلى انهيار نموذج التعايش وبروز المشروع القومي اليوناني، متحدياً بذلك أسس نظام الملل الذي تبنته بنية الدولة العثمانية.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

الدولة العثمانية؛ الفناريون؛ التفاعل؛ نظام الملل؛ القومية؛ اليونانيون.

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the Ottoman Turks and the Greeks during the 18th and 19th centuries constitutes a particularly intricate and significant era in the study of Southeastern Europe and the Mediterranean. This analysis addresses a pivotal period, commencing with the height of Greek elite power, as seen in the Phanariot class, and continuing through the Greek War of Independence in 1821, followed by major cultural and political changes in the mid-19th century. The purpose of this article is to go beyond one-dimensional historical perspectives, especially those that utilize limited nationalist narratives depicting the Ottoman era as a time of "dark centuries" (Skotadi) in the collective memory of modern Greeks.

How can the historical contradiction be understood, in which the thriving and deepening of institutional and economic integration of the Greek elites especially the Phanariots within the Ottoman imperial structure during the 18th century served as the crucial material and intellectual foundation for the rise of the Greek Enlightenment and the eventual formulation of the national project that resulted in political independence in 1821?

The approach utilized here requires the use of a model of Civilizational Entanglement Symbiosis, which perceives the interaction as a complex, mutual process marked by interdependence and cultural and political collaboration, rather than solely concentrating on conflict. An examination of institutional and intellectual dynamics uncovers a fundamental contradiction: the structures of Ottoman governance, including

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the Millet system and the elevation of Greek elites to prominent positions, created the material and methodological foundations essential for the rise of the Greek Enlightenment (Diafotismos), which subsequently solidified the national project.

This study claims that the economic success and institutional involvement of Greek elites in the Ottoman Empire during the 18th century facilitated the emergence of the nationalist movement. As a result, the connection between the prosperity of the Ottoman Empire and the liberation of the Greeks formed a causal relationship, leading to the development of the secessionist initiative from the peak of imperial integration.

2. The Framework of Institutions for Integration: The Impact of the Rum Millet and the Phanariots

The 18th century saw a remarkable enhancement of the institutional standing of Greek elites within the Ottoman framework, especially via the Rum Millet¹ system and the emergence of the Phanariot class.²

2.1. Reorganizing the Rum Millet and Augmenting Patriarchal Powers in the 18th Century

In light of escalating external threats, particularly from European incursions and Catholic missionary efforts, the Ottoman Empire enhanced the authority of its Orthodox leaders.³ The Orthodox Patriarchs based in Istanbul were bestowed with significant powers over their followers in the provinces, who were unified under the "Rum Millet".⁴ This administrative strategy was not solely a spiritual one; it elevated the Ecumenical Patriarch to the role of Millet-bashi (Head of the Millet), granting him wide-ranging administrative and judicial powers over Orthodox

subjects, except for certain other patriarchates.⁵

This change was not confined to merely enlarging judicial authority. In the 19th century, the interpretation of the Millet began to shift towards a more radical concept: that separate Ottoman communities with varying "religious," "racial," and "linguistic" identities needed a "realm of communal freedom and autonomy" while still operating under the overarching sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire.⁶ This shift, from a focus on judicial administration to a push for autonomy, suggests the weakening of the imperial system. The administrative actions taken by the Ottomans to consolidate control over their Orthodox subjects, by reinforcing the Greek leadership framework,⁷ became the foundation and means through which Enlightenment-influenced national aspirations developed.⁸

2.2. The Phanariots: The Ottoman Greek

Administrative Elite

The Phanariots, named after the Phanar (Fener) district in Constantinople where the Patriarchate is situated, exemplified the paradoxical nature of institutional integration. They were part of distinguished Greek families, often with noble Byzantine heritage, who rose as a wealthy merchant class in the latter half of the 16th century.⁹ The Phanariots occupied important diplomatic and administrative roles, with the most notable being the Grand Dragoman of the Porte and the Princes Hospodars of the Danubian Principalities, Wallachia and Moldavia.¹⁰

The emergence of the Phanariots can be viewed as an "Ottoman narrative," stemming from the Empire's reactions to both internal and external military and political challenges during

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the 18th and 19th centuries.¹¹ The paradox lies in the fact that this elite group, who were regarded as "loyal servants" of the Sultan and served as informants on European affairs,¹² simultaneously nurtured the cultural and economic conditions that enabled the development of Greek national sentiments.¹³ In fact, some Phanariots collaborated with Russian officials and plotted the separatist insurrection that would eventually lead to the Greek War of Independence.¹⁴

Their extensive understanding of European political dynamics and Ottoman governance, gained through their service to the Empire, equipped them to spearhead the secession movement. This demonstrates that the authority and expertise they were given to maintain the Empire's stability were the same elements that allowed them to bring about its disintegration. Additionally, the networks of Greek merchants, which reached into Vienna and Hungarian regions,¹⁵ were instrumental in funding education and promoting connections with the ideas of the European Enlightenment.¹⁶

3. Mechanisms of Intellectual Modernization: The Greek Enlightenment and Language

The Modern Greek Enlightenment (Diafotismos) was not merely an imported movement from the West; it was a structural product, driven by the economic wealth the Ottoman Empire afforded to the Greek merchant class.

3.1. The Greek Enlightenment as a Product of Ottoman Prosperity

The increasing Greek dominance in commerce within the

Ottoman Empire provided the essential financial support for the Greek intellectual awakening.¹⁷ Wealthy merchants funded a large number of young Greeks to study at universities in Italy and the German states, where they encountered the ideas of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.¹⁸

It was no coincidence that the principal Greek centers of learning in the period preceding the War of Independence (such as Smyrna/Izmir, Kydonies, Ioannina, and Phanar) were essentially thriving Greek commercial hubs. The Princely Academies in Bucharest and Iași, sponsored by Phanariot princes, also played a crucial role as beacons for teaching the modern Hellenic language and culture. The diverse atmosphere fostered by the Phanariots drew in aspiring young individuals, playing a significant role in the development of their national awareness. Concurrently, schools supervised by the Ecumenical Patriarchate focused on classical Greek language and values,¹⁹ contributing to the formation of a distinct cultural identity necessary for the later articulation of national consciousness.

3.2. Rigas Feraios and the Leap from Enlightenment to Revolution

The transition from intellectual reform to revolutionary action was embodied in the figure of Rigas Feraios.²⁰ Deeply influenced by the French Revolution, Rigas disseminated its principles, such as popular sovereignty, civil liberties, and the constitutional state. In Vienna, home to a significant Greek community, Rigas printed his pamphlets such as the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen" and the "New Political Constitution of the Inhabitants of Rumeli, Asia Minor, the Islands

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of the Aegean, and the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia"²¹ with the goal of stimulating a comprehensive Pan-Balkan uprising against Ottoman rule.

Crucially, Rigas used the vernacular Greek (Demotiki) instead of the puristic language (Katharevousa) , attempting to link the revolutionary ideology with the popular linguistic identity. Rigas's grievances against the Ottoman government were based on issues of cruelty and oppression,²² such as the forced recruitment of children (Devshirmeh/Paedomazoma) and restrictions on teaching Greek language and history.

3.3. The Linguistic Debate and the Construction of National Identity

The conflict between the puristic Greek (Katharevousa), based on Ancient Greek, and the vernacular (Demotiki) constituted a sharp cultural and political debate that lasted until its official resolution in 1976. Katharevousa was a deliberate attempt by linguistic purists to create a "pure" national language, devoid of Turkish, Slavic, and Byzantine influences.²³ This effort represents a clear political attempt to detach the modern national identity from its integrated past within the Ottoman framework.

The romantic European perspective, known as Philhellenism, reinforced this trend. By the late 18th century, a belief prevailed in Europe in the necessity of "rescuing the Greek civilization from the Ottoman rule." This idealized view of "Classical Greece" overlooked the reality that Greeks "were too poor, too religious, and too well integrated into the Ottoman society" to respond immediately to the call of European intellectuals. This tension between "Ideal Greece" and "Real

Greece" explains the intensity of the subsequent national and linguistic debate, where Greeks had to culturally secede²⁴ from their Ottoman aspect to conform to European national requirements.

4. Cross-Pollination in Material Culture and Arts:

Everyday Entanglement

While the elites struggled between belonging and liberation, civilizational interaction at the level of material culture and daily life continued profoundly, proving that coexistence transcended political and institutional frameworks.

4.1. Shared Musical Exchange and the Maqam

Framework

Traditional Ottoman music and Greek music share the maqam system , indicating deep and common musical roots. Sources suggest that Greeks were not merely listeners but active participants and documenters of Ottoman music since the 15th century. The Greek Orthodox Church utilized its own notation system to record many Ottoman musical pieces, including those with Turkish lyrics.²⁵ This proves that the Greek community was a genuine partner in developing sophisticated Ottoman culture, and not merely a passive recipient. Moreover, there currently exists a great number of manuscript and printed books, written by Greeks, containing the Ottoman-Turkish music repertoire and its theory, which have not yet been fully studied in academic research,²⁶ affirming that the extent of shared cultural interaction is far greater than currently estimated.

4.2. Architecture and Visual Arts: Reciprocity in the Mediterranean

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Recent research has challenged the long-held assumption of a unidirectional "Europeanization" of Ottoman art during this era. Studies on cultural exchange in the Eastern Mediterranean late 18th and early 19th centuries demonstrated that artistic interaction between European nations and the Ottoman Empire was based on "mutual dependence and reciprocity."

Travelers and painters documented their journeys, and these artistic representations were utilized as a tool for Ottoman diplomacy, as Ottomans were aware of European representations and responded to them to defend their sovereignty and culture.²⁷ This complexity in artistic exchange led to the emergence of the Eclecticism style that characterized the architecture of both Greece and the Ottoman state during the 19th century.

4.3. Linguistic Legacy and Cuisine: Evidence of Daily Coexistence

Linguistic penetration into daily vocabulary is the clearest evidence of long-term coexistence. Today, over three hundred Turkish words are used daily in the Greek language. These vocabularies cover aspects of daily life, such as: *tsépi* / *Cep* (pocket), and *Ntoulápi* / *Dolap* (closet). The process of exchange was mutual, with Greek terms being adopted into Turkish, for example, the word *Efendi* (sir), which has its roots in the Ancient Greek term *afthendis*.

This interconnection is clearly reflected in the cuisine they share. From the 16th century up until the War of Independence, Greek cuisine was significantly shaped by the Ottoman era, which brought in exotic spices (including cinnamon and cloves) and fragrant herbs (such as mint and oregano).²⁸ These influences

fostered a common food culture that is hard to distinguish or attribute exclusively, evident in dishes and terms like Kaimaki (milk cream) and Karpuzi (watermelon).

5.The Point of Secession and the Subsequent Ottoman Impact

5.1. The Greek Revolution (1821) and the Dismantling of the Millet System

The Greek Revolution of 1821 was a significant upheaval for the Ottoman system. This revolution revealed the vulnerabilities within the imperial structure and its inability to reconcile the growing tensions between central authority and the Christian population, as well as between bureaucratic stagnation and rising public aspirations. It signified the conclusion of the era of institutional integration spearheaded by the Phanariots and set the Ottoman Empire on a path toward the unavoidable need for extensive reforms, which later took shape during the Tanzimat period.²⁹

On the other hand, the Revolution became a fundamental element of contemporary Greek national identity. This period solidified tales of bravery, sacrifice, and martyrdom, while retrospectively framing the Ottoman era as a time of "darkness," thus overlooking the prosperity and intricate cultural and financial life that existed just before the Revolution. This transformation was crucial for the revival of a nation striving to recover its identity and to create enduring symbols like Kolokotronis and Missolonghi.³⁰

5.2. Challenging the Ottoman Legacy in the Nascent Greek State

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After gaining independence and founding the Greek State, the nationalist leaders quickly implemented measures to "purify" the cultural identity and linguistic heritage. The most prominent expression of this trend was the adoption of Katharevousa as the official language of the state after 1830. The choice of the puristic language was not a neutral linguistic decision; it was a political and cultural means of seceding from the linguistic legacy that was deeply penetrated by Turkish and Byzantine vocabulary.³¹

The extensive effort undertaken by the Greek state to revive Ancient Greece and distance Turkish vocabulary indicates that the Ottoman civilizational interaction was a present and powerful element, to the extent that it required a profound linguistic and political revolution to erase its traces and establish an entirely new narrative. The European perspective (Philhellenism), which viewed Greece as the inheritor of Classical Civilization, played a role in pressuring the nascent state to adopt a separatist identity and cut its Ottoman roots, thereby helping to solidify the idea of complete cultural separation despite the continuation of popular entanglement.³²

6. Conclusion

The analysis has confirmed that the 18th and 19th centuries were a pivotal period demonstrating that institutional integration -through the Millet system and the rise of the Phanariots- was not a guarantee of imperial stability, but rather a vital factor in creating the environment conducive to the emergence of Greek modernity and its national project. The Phanariot elite were the builders of the enlightened system who ultimately became its dismantlers, due to their dual positioning.

Despite the political secession achieved in 1821, the mutual cultural legacy remained deeply rooted at the level of daily life and popular culture. This is evident in the shared musical entanglement, the common cuisine, and the linguistic penetration of Turkish vocabulary into Greek. These elements prove that civilizational entanglement was profound and difficult to fully sever by political decree.

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