



### Greek Paideia in the Ottoman Empire

What was the fate of Hellenism and Greek *paideia* (education) in the early years of the Ottoman Empire? By examining the post-Byzantine period one is able to see possibilities for the survival of Hellenism in what is largely considered to be a hostile climate.

The Ottomans owed much of their success to their geographic location on the border of the declining Byzantine state. Ottoman success can also be attributed to their pragmatic approach to conquest, absorbing local administrative and taxation practices, and accommodating local authorities and administrators within their ruling institution. Under Sultan Mehmed II, the conqueror of Constantinople in 1453, Greek scribes were responsible for foreign correspondence with European states. Interesting examples of Greek documents and manuscripts from his chancellery exist. In fact, Mehmed II's library possessed manuscripts representing, in the art historian Julian Raby's terms, a "typical late Byzantine school curriculum, minus the tragedians, with grammars and lexicons emphasizing linguistic training." It was important for the Ottomans to continue to train secretaries in Greek, especially since new slave recruits generally were not educated to write and read Greek. In addition, the court of Mehmed could not rely on scribes trained by the remaining teachers from outside the court who were affiliated with the Patriarchate, or were in Italy. Thus, for security's sake, he was likely forced to educate his own chancellery staff in Greek.

Considering the survival of Hellenism and Greek *paideia* from the perspective of the Greek community, and in particular, the Patriarchate of Constantinople, it is possible to get a glimpse into the challenges faced by the Greek Orthodox community to preserve the Greek language and education. While many look to the activities of the Greek diaspora community in Italy to see the process of continuity of Hellenism and Greek *paideia*, it is clear that, in fact, it occurs in a lively manner within the Ottoman context.

As a protected population (*dhimmi*), Greeks were allowed a considerable amount of self autonomy to cultivate their interests, particularly in the world of finances. There were many types of concessions that the state sold in order to gain a quick cash return, that were also available for purchase by non-Muslims. Among these concessions were ecclesiastical offices. The Ottoman state, thus, absorbed the Greek Orthodox Church hierarchy into its fiscal organization. This situation had an immediate detrimental impact on Greek society, and culture as attested to by the sources. While some hierarchs clearly meant to carry on their vision of the true mission of the Church, others saw the ecclesiastical institution as a vehicle of wealth and access to power. Therefore, concern and care for Greek *paideia* and the classical legacy waned.

Within the institution of the Patriarchate, however, there was a small class of individuals that was highly critical of poorly educated hierarchs. While their condemnations of illiterate bishops represent a pitiable situation, these condemnations also indicate the existence of a highly educated group who valued Greek *paideia* and the Hellenic tradition. While from among this class of produce stellar intellectual figures, vivid examples of continuity of Greek *paideia* exist, that by the nineteenth-century become the standard.

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