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The Contribution of Hellenism to the Historic and Cultural Richness of the Levant Region

Abstract:

The Levant has represented a unique human-historic space from as early as 50 centuries ago. Comprising the Holy Lands of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, it continues to exert enormous influence on our world's evolution to this day.

The contributions of earlier Levantine civilizations to the evolution of Hellenism and then, in turn, Hellenism's own contribution to the continued evolution of the region, constitute strong evidence of the region's historic and cultural richness. As the Levantine peoples began to trade across the seas, Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations emerged in Greece at the end of the Bronze Age (3rd millennium BCE). During the 6th century BCE, the Ionian philosophers of the city of Miletus were the first to seek empirical explanations from their observations, and to reject the myths and fanciful beings to whom the origin and operation of the Earth were attributed. Their thinking continued into Roman times, resurfacing during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. In the 4th century BCE, the rising power of the Macedonians overcame the Hellenic city-states, culminating in Alexander the Great's eastward expansion. Alexander's conquest of the Levant was a crucial point in its history: thereafter, Hellenic language and thinking inducted the region into the Greek and Roman worlds.

Classical Hellenism's greatest contribution to the Levant's cultural evolution was the Greek language. With its alphabetic writing, Greek became a driving force behind sociocultural evolution, much like the later Arabic numerals; these two contributions would drive philosophic and scientific evolution via the Great Islamic Age, having lasting effects well into the 18th Century Enlightenment and beyond.

Keywords: Hellenism contribution: language, philosophy, culture

Introduction

In his 1917 poem “Levante”, the great Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti¹, born and educated in Alexandria, recalled his departing voyage across the Mediterranean in the following verses:

“and the ashen sea
trembling sweet and restless
as a pigeon”

Ungaretti’s Levant is not his North African land, nor is it the coast of Alexandria that he leaves behind. For him, the Levant is a *space-in-between*; and it is not by chance that the poem is set on a ship that is moving through a space that does not correspond exactly to a national entity.

For Ungaretti, the Levant is *time*, during which the past appears in the present. The Levant shifts through time, never remaining permanent.

Earlier still, the ancient Egyptians had called it “the Great Green Sea”, while for the Hellenes, during the time of Homer, it was the “wine-dark sea,” viewed as a source of danger as well as opportunity.

Jacqueline Kahanoff², an Israeli writer born in Cairo, proposed a fascinating definition of Levant in which the millennial stratification of the Mediterranean basin emerges in all its prismatic essence:

“The Levant is a land of ancient civilization, that has a character and history of its own. [...] Here, indeed, Europe and Asia have encroached on one another, time and time again, leaving their mark in crumbling monuments and in the shadowy memories of the Levant’s people. Ancient Egypt, Ancient Israel and Ancient Greece, Chaldea and Assyria, Ur and Babylon, Tyre, Sidon and Carthage, Constantinople, Alexandria and Jerusalem are all dimensions of the Levant. [...] It is not exclusively Western, or Eastern, Christian, Jewish or Moslem. Because of its diversity it is compared to a mosaic [...]. Indeed, the concept of light is contained in the word Levant [...], and perhaps the time has come for the Levant to reevaluate itself by its own light.”

¹ Ungaretti, 1917.

² Kahanoff, 2011.

The Levant is, in fact, the cradle of early civilizations and of the evolution of humanity as a whole, an area representing a unique human historic space from 50 centuries ago, spanning the Holy Lands of Judaism, Christianity and Islam – a singular instance of multiplicity and diversity existing in one framework, maintaining reciprocal relations, integrated over thousands of years.

Viewed from Western Europe, the Levant represents its critical eastern sea border. It is called the 'Near', or 'Middle' East, in relationship to Europe. Indeed, "seen from Asia, it could just as well be called the 'Middle' West"³.

The Balkans and South-Eastern Europe have long been in contact with the Levant (including the Middle East and Northern Africa), and I strongly believe that Constantinescu's (2013) initiative⁴ to rediscover this old cradle of humanity and civilization will contribute significantly to future cultural diplomacy in the region, reminding us of our global responsibility towards the present and towards future generations.

In her PhD thesis, Tiziana Carlino noticed that the term 'Levant' can be seen as an old word with a new meaning. As a matter of fact, in recent decades growing academic interest about the Mediterranean as a space of multiple connections and cultural symbiosis has allowed for a reorientation and redefinition of the Levant's history⁵.

The contribution of Hellenism to the historic and cultural richness of the Levant

The contributions of earlier Levantine civilizations to the evolution of Hellenism – and then, in turn, Hellenism's own input to the continued evolution of the Levant's historic and cultural richness – are fundamental. Where would we be today, without the Library of Alexandria? Would there have been a Renaissance and Enlightenment in Europe had it not been for the Arab custodians and translators of the ancient Greek writings during the Islamic Golden Age?

In the Hellenic region, around the end of the Bronze Age (ca. 3rd millennium BCE), as people in the Levant started to trade across the seas, Minoan and then Mycenaean civilizations emerged in the region of Hellas, deeply influenced by the great traders of the time: the Phoenicians and

³ Kahanoff, 2011.

⁴ Constantinescu, 2013.

⁵ Carlino, 2006.

the Egyptians⁶. In the first lines of his *Histories*, the “father of history” himself, Herodotus of Halicarnassus (430 BCE), assumes a causal connection between the Phoenicians and the contrast and interaction between Orient and Occident.

As Herodotus mentions, in the Balkan Peninsula to then north of the Levant commercial and cultural relationships had developed between Dacians, Getae and Thracians even before historic times (8th-6th centuries BCE), followed by the establishment of several Greek colonies along the western coast of the Black Sea (750-550 BCE). Among these, the most famous were Histria, Callatis and Tomis (in present-day Romania). With the exception of Histria, these colonies persevered until the Byzantine and post-Byzantine period, contributing to the cultural enrichment of the region; they are now subsumed into the cities of Mangalia and Constanța.

The greatest contribution of Classical Hellenism to the Levant’s cultural evolution was without a doubt the Greek language. This common language, with alphabetical writing (like the later Arabic numerals) became the vehicle for the evolution of philosophy and sciences that, via the Great Islamic Age, had lasting effects and impacts well into the 18th century’s Enlightenment and beyond. Around the 6th century BCE in the city of Miletus, the Ionian philosophers of Asia Minor (Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes), were the first to reject the myths of gods and other fanciful beings to whom folklore and religion attributed the origin and operation of the Earth, and clamoured for empirical explanations derived from their own observations. Their thinking continued into Roman times, only to later resurface during the Renaissance and the Age of Enlightenment.

In the 4th century BCE, the rising power of the Macedonians overcame the Hellenic city states, and then, under Alexander the Great, turned its attention eastwards. Alexander’s conquest of the Levant was a crucial point of inflexion. It resulted in the region’s inclusion in the Greek and later Roman worlds, through the use of the Greek language and way of thinking. The Levant would be an integral part of this world, occupying an important and sacrosanct place both culturally and politically within it, until the Arab-Islamic conquest in the 7th century CE.

The father of Ancient Greek tragedy, Aeschylus, is the first to mention the term “*Arabia*”, the cradle of the Arabs, and “*Arabos*,” in his tragedies “Prometheus Bound” and “Persians”, which is considered the oldest known reference to the Arabian Peninsula and its people. It was followed by the account of the Greek historian Herodotus (440 BCE), who often mentioned the ‘*Arabs*’ and the ‘*Arab Gulf*’ (referring to the Red Sea).

⁶ Gatier, Gubel, Marquis, Nehmé, Rousset & Yon, 2000.

During the Arabic conquest of Syria and Egypt in the 7th century CE, the invaders experienced a profound cultural influence from the Greek populations living there. It is noteworthy that, roughly a century after the Arabic conquest, the Greeks still remained the administrators of these areas. The Arabs ruled the Levant for over three centuries, and were powerful neighbors of the Byzantines. It was along the borders of the Taurus and Euphrates that the Christian world met the Islamic world, exchanging different cultural, religious and ethnic characteristics. This amalgamation is reflected in the medieval Greek poems of the 'akritic' cycle, which have notable parallels in Arabic poetry. The Arabic philosophy and science that flourished in the 9th century was influenced by the ideas and achievements of a Greek culture that had spread throughout the Middle East since the time of Alexander the Great. In Edessa, Harran, Antioch and Alexandria (among others), cities where the Hellenistic spirit was alive, the works of Aristotle, Galen (Galinos), Dioscorides, Ptolemy and other ancient philosophers were translated into Arabic⁷. Any account of the region's history during this period must necessarily focus on the coexistence, consolidation, and fusion of different cultures. It is altogether admirable how the local populations of the Levant took up first the Hellenic and later the Roman civilizations and adapted them to their needs, accepted them, or even rejected them outright; this fusion continued throughout Byzantine dominion, during the Islamic Golden Age and even during the Ottoman Empire.

However, these conquerors were not entering a region without a past. On the contrary, they were preceded by very rich civilizations which, in turn, would have a certain influence over their development. Evidence of pre-existing cultures can be found in various aspects of Hellenistic life, such as religion, art, architecture, and politics. The monuments of this era, for example, blend native elements with those of Classical Hellenic architecture⁸. Great innovations occurred in mathematics and science as well. The interplay of these multiple factors would eventually lead to the development of new, syncretic cultures. In this light, Christianity itself may be considered such an original product of the meeting of various civilizations in the Near East⁹.

After Alexander's death in 323 BCE, his newly founded new empire, stretching from Greece to the Indus, was divided between his generals – the Diadochi. Thus, at the beginning of the 3rd century BCE, the Levant

⁷ Zachariadou, 1990.

⁸ Gatier *et al.*, 2000.

⁹ Yon, 2000.

became a divided land: the Seleucids, whose territory stretched from Asia Minor to India, held the North, whilst the south fell to the Ptolemies, who primarily ruled over Egypt.

For several centuries, Hellenism had a thriving presence in Egypt and the rest of the Levant from the Hellenistic period (331 BCE) continuing until Hypatia's time (415 CE). Indeed, the unique relationship between the ancient civilizations of the Levant dates back thousands of years, and continues to this day. In fact, Herodotus visited Egypt in the 4th century BCE and claimed that the Greeks were among the first foreigners that ever settled in Egypt.

The great city of Alexandria with its renowned Library, founded by Alexander the Great in 331 BCE, became the beacon of civilization, the most significant centre of Hellenism that would continue to flourish during Roman times. Seventeen centuries since the Library's destruction, its legacy continues to be felt until present times, leading up to its re-establishment in 2002 in the marvel that is the modern *Bibliotheca Alexandrina*.

During the Hellenistic period, great innovations in mathematics, science and architecture took place in the Levant, and many Greek cities were founded throughout the region. Aristotle, alongside Plato, is regarded as one of the greatest philosophers the world has ever known, deeply concerned with physics, astronomy, literature and history. His teachings have laid the foundation for modern scientific thought.

As Yon argues, "Cultural continuity across the various Hellenistic regions can be explained on the one hand by the common origins of the settlers, and on the other by continuing cultural exchange between the kingdoms. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Levant has produced so many scholars and writers since the Hellenistic era. There was a system of education that allowed intellectual endeavor to flourish. Particular emphasis should be given to education's role in the spread of Hellenism, accomplished through the schools that were to be found in many poleis of the Levant. In this way, cities contributed to the maintenance and dissemination of a culture which, although reserved for an elite, had a direct or indirect effect on a large proportion of the indigenous population"¹⁰.

The primary literary product of this cultural syncretism is the translation of the Hebrew Bible from Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic into Greek. Beyond the transcribal efforts above, many other writers and philosophers could also be cited in this regard. Although fewer in number, perhaps, than their counterparts from Asia Minor or Greece, they

¹⁰ Yon, 2000.

nevertheless always followed the intellectual currents which characterized the period in general. Among them, the famous author of the Antonine period (119-c.180 CE), Lucian of Samosata – a native of the Kingdom of Commagene, a small region situated north of Syria – left behind a series of works concerned with the Levant. It is indeed remarkable that the Levant managed to maintain its intellectual tradition up to the end of the Hellenistic Era, especially given that the political situation at that time was anything but stable. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that in 79 BCE another philosopher from the Levant was to be found in Athens: Antiochus of Ashkelon, who taught Cicero at the Athenian Academy and, later, became its head. His move to Athens could, perhaps, be considered a sign of the Levant's continued intellectual vitality¹¹.

The most important writings originating from the Levant during the Hellenistic and early Roman periods were written in Greek, mostly over the course of the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, and include the New Testament. The wealth of literary creativity to be found in the last Hellenistic century (the 1st century BCE) would again be repeated towards the latter part of the 2nd century CE. Then, the city of Tyre gave Maximus, an author with platonic tendencies, as well as the philosopher Porphyry, while Emesa sired the novelist Heliodorus, the author of *Aethiopica*. All the aforementioned Levantine authors, philosophers, historians and rhetors wrote in Greek, while some of them even conducted the majority of their careers beyond the Levantine region.

It is, therefore, apparent that the thriving culture of the Levant that began during the early Hellenistic period continued for many centuries on the foundation of a shared common language: Greek. These works of culture in Greek had a considerable influence which, thanks to translations into Aramaic, Syriac and later Arabic, continued to shape culture and thinking in the Levant and beyond well after the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 CE and the advent of the Dark and Middle Ages that followed. Porphyry's *Isagoge*, composed between 268–270 CE, is an introduction to logic and philosophy, and in its Latin and Arabic translations it became the standard textbook throughout the Middle Ages (5th to 15th centuries). The work includes the highly influential hierarchical classification of genera and species.

In contrast to the collapsed Western Roman Empire, the Eastern Roman Empire continued to exist as Byzantium or the 'Byzantine Empire', an area that included the regions of Illyria, the Danube, Armenia, Syria and Egypt. Having managed to survive the barbarian migrations that led

¹¹ Yon, 2000.

to the collapse of Rome, Byzantium continued uninterrupted until it ultimately fell to the Ottoman Empire in 1453. Nevertheless, the 'Roman' character of the Eastern Empire was fundamentally altered after 476 CE, and the quintessentially Greek Byzantine Empire continued to influence the course of human history for a thousand years to come, a worthy successor to Rome.

From the late Middle Ages (13th century) onwards, the Levant was used for Italian maritime commerce in the the Oriental coasts of *Mare Nostrum* (the Roman name for the Mediterranean Sea), including Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Turkey, Cyprus and Greece.

The renaissance of contemporary Hellenism

It is well known that the 18th century, the century of the Enlightenment, brought the rise of economic liberalism and the prevalence of the principles of free trade. By the end of the 18th century, a significant part of the trade from the Ottoman Empire to the west had passed into the hands of the Greeks.

This class of Greek merchants acquired a national and a historical consciousness, through their professional connections with Europeans and through their contact with the current of the French Enlightenment. The product of this contact was the Neo-Hellenic Enlightenment (1750-1821), expressed through notable representatives such as Adamantios Korais, Eugenios Voulgaris, Rigas Feraios, Theophilos Kairis *et al.*

Neo-Hellenism also took into account geopolitical factors, such as the activity of the *Filiki Eteria* (Society of Friends), in order to safely arrive at the final composition of the process of nation-building, which led to the Greek War of Independence and the formation of the new Greek state.

Moreover, a huge wave of Philhellenism swept across Europe in the 19th century, overtaking literary masterminds such as Lord Byron and F.-R. de Chateaubriand. The idea of Greece's revival, a nation known from Antiquity which passed to Byzantium and, now, demanded a new political organization, was well and truly alive in the broader European consciousness.

In his work, "Byzantium after Byzantium" (*"Byzance après Byzance"*), the Romanian historian Nicolae Iorga offered a clear history of the succession and continuity of Phanariotic Hellenism in the Danubian regions (Iorga, 1935)¹².

¹² Iorga, 1935.

The decisive factor was a survival force of the Greek national conservation which obviously has its roots in Greek Byzantium – roots that include language, consciousness, communities and the organization of political life¹³.

As a matter of fact, the renaissance of contemporary Hellenism can trace its roots to the Romanian territory. In the 17th century, one of the principal representatives of the Hellenic renaissance, the Athenian philosopher Theofilos Korydaleas, offered commentaries on Aristotle's manuscripts to Romanian and Greek students.

Moreover, during the Age of Enlightenment, lectures of philosophy were delivered, in Ancient Greek, by some of the most enlightened teachers and representatives of the European spirit (among them Iosipos Moisiodax, Nikephoros Theotokis, Dimitrios Katartzis and many others) in the Princely Academy of Iași from 1764 onwards. In that period, the Academy of Iași became the academic centre of the Balkans and, along with the Academy of Bucharest, constituted the blueprints for the rebirth of the University of Athens after thirteen centuries, in the spirit of the great patron of culture Constantin Brâncoveanu, Prince of Wallachia (1688-1714).

It was therefore my privilege to defend my PhD thesis at the University of Bucharest, in the late 1970s, at the Faculty of Geology, under the enlightened supervision of Professor and Academician Dan Rădulescu, to whom I am deeply indebted. It was at that time that I met Professor Emil Constantinescu, who has honoured me with his friendship over the past 40 years. It is for this reason I feel that I, somehow, never left Romania; and, indeed, I always return.

During this period, I also had the opportunity to observe the depth of the Romanian people's knowledge and admiration of the Hellenic spirit in both ancient and contemporary literature and philosophy.

In Iași and in Bucharest, the Hellenes of the diaspora were in contact with European ideas, which resulted in a renaissance of the free and democratic idealism of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. This cultural mission encouraged the struggle for national independence of both Greece and Romania, and was strongly supported by the Romanian people. On February 24th 1821, Alexandros Ypsilantis, the leader of the secret organization *Filiki Eteria* (the Society of Friends) that coordinated the start of the Greek struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire, issued a proclamation announcing the revolution. Three days later, he raised the sacred flag of Independence in the magnificent Church of the Three Hierarchs Monastery, in Iași. Romania's contribution was invaluable.

¹³ Diamandis, 2020.

It should be also noted that Greek independence would not have been possible without the financial assistance of the Greek diaspora from across the Levant, the majority of whom were involved in shipping and trade activities¹⁴.

The Levant in modern times

The concept of the *Levantine* developed in European language usage as a type of human being whose sophistication, complicated genealogy and polyglotism had linked the Orient and Occident via the Mediterranean for centuries, thus bestowing on him the mantle of the Phoenicians¹⁵.

In modern times, Levantines are westernising people: generally involved in commerce, speaking many languages, cosmopolitan citizens of the colonial world. After World War I, they increasingly identified as part of the individual nation-states that emerged from the break-up of the Ottoman Empire. That their people are actually inhabitants of the World's cultural cradle, linked across the centuries by common language, history, and close ties, is often forgotten. Enmities and ongoing conflicts that started 70 years ago have, unfortunately, distorted the view of the Levant as a unity of culture and civilization across most of mankind's evolution¹⁶.

The first modern Greek neighborhood emerged in Alexandria in 1815, eventually reaching a population of 250.000 people. The legacy of Egyptian Greek philanthropy cannot be overstated. Large amounts were offered by benefactors for the establishment of schools, academies, hospitals and institutions, both in Egypt and Greece.

On the other hand, the cultural and academic contribution of Greek civilization in Egypt was no less admirable. Numerous writers, poets and diplomats came from the Greek community of Alexandria, among them the poet Konstantinos Kavafis (1863-1933), widely regarded as the greatest Mediterranean poet of modern times. A true Levantine, he has and continues to inspire artists around the world.

The close ties between the Greek people and all the peoples of the Levant, be they Muslims, Christians or Jews, continue today as strongly as ever, always on the basis of mutual respect and admiration for our common, centuries-long heritage and friendship, promoting peace and democracy, human rights, equality and freedom¹⁷. Carlino noticed that

¹⁴ Pomoni-Papaioannou, 2006.

¹⁵ Gaube, 2000.

¹⁶ Gaube, 2000.

¹⁷ Gaube, 2000.

the idea of the Levant as a vital cultural-economic space had begun to fade after the end of the Second World War¹⁸. From then on, the Levant may have lost its concrete denotation, only to embrace its connotation: an evocative and charming memory of a lost world that both European and non-European literature would try to recreate in its splendor.

After all, the word ‘Levant’ means “the land of the rising sun”; and this will never change.

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¹⁸ Carlino, 2006.

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