

# Who Owns Athens? Urban Planning and the Struggle for Identity in Neo-Classical Athens (1832-1843)

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## ABSTRACT

Planning and building of Neo-Classical Athens under the Bavarian administration does not fit easily in a typical program of European nation-building. Scholars have understood this common European process using the concepts such as “invented traditions” and “imagined communities” arguing that it was the Greeks who invented Modern Greece. Here I argue that the power relations between the powerful European rulers and the impoverished Greek natives were far more influential than previously believed. The Greeks, even though physically in Europe and for centuries the focus of European Enlightened imagination, were treated more like colonial subjects. It was actually the subaltern Greeks who had to live their everyday lives in the European “imagined community” and they resisted the European Neo-Classical dream.

**Key words:** Urban Planning, Neo-Classicism, Athens, Nationalism, Colonialism, Subaltern.

## ¿Quién es el dueño de Atenas? Planificación urbana y lucha por la identidad en la Atenas neoclásica (1832-1843)

## RESUMEN

La planificación y la construcción de la Atenas neoclásica bajo la administración bávara no parece encajar bien en el típico programa de construcción nacional europeo. Por lo general los investigadores han entendido este proceso a través de conceptos como “tradiciones inventadas” y “comunidades imaginadas” argumentando que fueron los griegos los que inventaron la Grecia moderna. En este artículo mi tesis es que las relaciones de poder entre los poderosos gobernantes europeos y los empobrecidos griegos fueron mucho más influyentes de lo que se creía antes. Los griegos, incluso aunque físicamente se encontraban en Europa y habían sido durante siglos el objeto de la imaginación de los ilustrados europeos, fueron tratados como sujetos coloniales. Fueron de hecho los sometidos griegos quienes tuvieron que vivir sus vidas a diario en la “comunidad imaginada” de los europeos y resistirse al sueño neo-clásico de los europeos.

**Palabras clave:** Planificación urbana, Neo-clasicismo, Atenas, nacionalismo, colonialismo, estudios subalternos.

“All the Greeks have to do in order to be what they used to be, is to mimic the Germans”<sup>1</sup>

In the recent years, there has been a wealth of scholarly work on neo-classical Athens.<sup>2</sup> What these studies have in common is the usage of the contemporary apparatus of the studies of nationalism. Using the well-known notions of an “imagined community” and “invented traditions” scholars emphasized the constructed character of Modern Greek national identity, the creation of European and Classical identity for Greece, and the suppression of Byzantine and Ottoman cultural traditions. While these studies proved to be extremely useful in illuminated certain aspects of nation building of the Greek state, they miss the target in one very important, if not the crucial, point. Greece, after the “liberation” from the Ottoman rule, was not an independent state in the same way that Italy, Germany, Mexico, Venezuela, or Argentina were. Since February 6, 1833 when Otto Wittelsbach, the second son of Ludwig I, the king of Bavaria, arrived to Athens, Greece was a dependent kingdom; one can even say a colony of Bavaria, and a protectorate of the Great Powers of Europe, namely, Britain, France, and Russia. How would the urban history of Athens look like if we were to look at the city, not as a capital of an emerging European nation, but as a colonial city, a place where the imagination of the colonizers interacts with the needs of the subaltern? I intend to pursue this new interpretation of urban planning in Athens in the early years of the Greek state using the urban planning and the construction of the new royal palace as an illustration of the conflict between the Bavarian (colonial) rulers and the native subaltern population.

Allow me to start this paper with some quotes that I believe encapsulate perfectly the attitudes of the main actors in the drama of urban planning of Athens. Many visiting European expressed candidly their disappointed and even outright revulsion with the conditions in Athens. Accustomed to the image of Periclean Athens created from their textbooks and the heroic image of Greece created by Winckelmann, Herder, Hölderlin, and Hegel, they were thoroughly disappointed. Karl Friedrich Schinkel, the renowned Prussian architect submitted in 1834 his plans for the phantasmagoric new royal palace in Athens, to be situated on the top of the sacred hill of Acropolis. His plan was rejected, partly because of the lack of funds, and partly because it endangered the highly valued classical ruins. Schinkel actually never visited Greece. An official who informed Schinkel of the rejection of his plan wrote to him: “It is better for you that you have not seen New Athens; it is a miserable shanty town that would

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<sup>1</sup> Georg Ludwig von Maurer, a member of the regency council during the minority of Otto I, the first king of Greece. He was the author of a very influential survey of Greek history before the liberation from the Ottoman rule, *Das griechische Volk in öffentlicher, kirchlicher, und privatrechtlicher Beziehung vor und nach dem Freiheitskampf bis zum 31. Juli 1834*, Heidelberg, 1835-1836.

<sup>2</sup> Beginning with Yannis TSIOMIS, *Athènes affaire européenne, Catalogue de l'exposition*, Athènes, Ministère de la Culture, 1985. See also, Vilma HASTAOGLOU-MARTINIDIS, “City Form and National Identity: Urban Designs in Nineteenth Century Greece”, in *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 13:1 (May, 1995), 99-123. And Eleni BASTEIA, *The Creation of Modern Athens: Planning the Myth*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

cause you to faint under the columns of the Parthenon.”<sup>3</sup> These kinds of comments were not completely racially motivated, even though they express the disdain of the colonial administration toward the local and the subaltern. Athens was just a small Ottoman Greek when it was proclaimed the capital of the new kingdom. Greece had several bigger, more commercially significant, and more representative cities than Athens; but Athens was chosen by the Bavarian administration for its classical heritage and not for its contemporary importance.



Fig. 1. The siege of Athens by Kioutachi Pasha (1826-1827) painted by D. Zografos.

As soon as the village called Athens was created the capital of the new kingdom, architects from all over Europe, but in particular from German lands, started to draw plans for the city's construction. Since most of these architects were not Greek, but rather mostly German, one needs to look at their intention in the European, and not primarily in the Greek context. Their program was essentially imperial, based on the ideal of Greece as a German utopia, the spiritual homeland of the Teutonic race.<sup>4</sup> This is best expressed in the words of Georg Ludwig von Maurer, a member of the regency council during the minority of king Otto who simply said: "All the Greeks have to do in order to be what they used to be, is to mimic the Germans." In order to achieve these political ideals, the Bavarian rulers of Greece sought the help of court-architects from various European courts, such as Karl Friedrich Schinkel and Leo von Klenze. The Bavarian administration had also been inundated with various proposals of architects of formally lesser standing (non-court-architects, such as Eduard Schaubert, Friedrich von Gärtner, and Stamatis Kleanthes, who sought to offer their vision of the new city, whose cultural capital far exceeded the small boundaries of the Greek state.

<sup>3</sup> Prince Hermann von Plückler-Muskau quoted in Eleni BASTEIA, *The Creation of Modern Athens*, 91.

<sup>4</sup> As pointed out by Neni PANOURGIA, "Review of The Creation of Modern Athens: Planning the Myth", in *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 19:2 (October, 2001), 293-299.

All the new city plans of Athens centered on the future royal palace.<sup>5</sup> Their development can be grouped in four distinctive phases. The first was the Schaubert-Kleanthes plan, calling for the almost total destruction of the city. Adopted on June 29/July 11, 1833 this plan was the most radical of all. It called for an outright destruction of the old city, the preservation of the archeological areas and the construction of the new city, centered on the royal palace, from which a Versailles-like trivium of streets would originate.<sup>6</sup> The second was the Schinkel's plan for the building of the royal palace on the Acropolis. Schinkel proposed quite an outlandish plan for the construction of the royal palace on the Acropolis. In that way, plan was brilliant, since it left the old city intact, while claiming the symbolic ownership of the most important space in Athens. According to Schinkel's plan, the Parthenon, and the whole ensemble of the Acropolis hill would actually become a garden of the royal palace. Both of these plans failed due to resistance from the local population. The third phase was represented by the intervention of the royal Bavarian architect, Leo von Klenze, who saved the old city, and suggested a new place for the royal palace, on the eastern slopes of the Acropolis, where the ancient Athenian cemetery Kerameikos was located. This plan was adopted and eventually executed, except for the royal palace. Finally, the fourth phase removed the royal palace from the location where Klenze had put it and moved it to the far Western outskirts of the city. In this way, the palace faced the back side of the Acropolis. This is where the palace was eventually built, on an exceptionally high platform overlooking the whole city. Also this was the location where the Greek rebels surrounded the king when they rose up against what they called "Bavarocracy" on the night of 3rd of September 1843, thus forcing king Otto to grant a constitution.<sup>7</sup> What is immediately asserted in all these schemes is a direct Bavarian/German ownership of the city, its classical heritage, and its antiquities. This was no longer on the level of the Lord Elgin affair, bribing the Ottoman administration for a permission to take "some pieces of stone" from the Parthenon.<sup>8</sup> This was a claim to an outright physical and symbolic ownership of the city.

The first two plans, of Kleanthes-Schaubert and of Schinkel have in common their emphasis on the royal (Bavarian) ownership of the city. Kleanthes and Schaubert, both disciples of Schinkel, envisioned the destruction of (practically) entire Ottoman Athens, and replacing the old city with a centrally located royal palace, and a series of "archeological parks" where future excavations would take place. The plan failed because of the lack of money to pay for such extensive appropriations. Intervention in the dense urban fabric can only pay off if the land that is cleared can be redeveloped and sold. Kleanthes-Schaubert plan preserved the land for archeological excavation and as empty surroundings of future monumental buildings. Local population quickly

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<sup>5</sup> Unlike other scholars who had cast their "net" much wider, I focus only on the plans that were officially sought or sanctioned by the government, in order to simplify the narrative and obtain a chronological clarity. In that way, a clear distinction can be made between the dominant space and the subaltern space, as envisioned by Henri Lefebvre. See Henri LEFEBVRE, *The Production of Space*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1991, 68.

<sup>6</sup> General Archives of the State, City Plan, file 10, no. 5090.

<sup>7</sup> The term "Bavarocracy" (Βαυαροκρατία) has very special meaning in Greeks, because it implies the foreign rule, like the "Frankocracy", (Φραγκοκρατία) the rule of the Crusaders over Greece, or the Tourkocracy (Τουρκοκρατία), the Ottoman rule.

<sup>8</sup> James CUNO, *Who Owns Antiquity?*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008, ix.



noticed this. It complained that new monumental buildings, and Kleantes-Schaubert planned many, including two monumental houses of the Greek Parliament, were surrounded by “so much space as is not taken up by the buildings in London, or Paris.”<sup>9</sup>

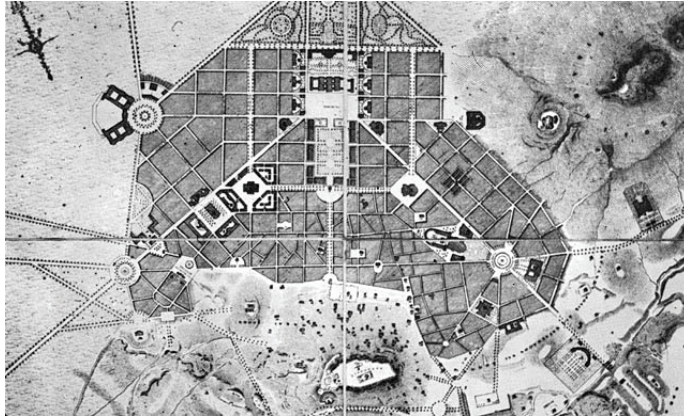


Fig.2 The First Plan by Schaubert and Kleantes

The Schinkel's plan asserted the ownership symbolically by placing the royal palace on the top of the “sacred rock” of Acropolis. Previous scholarship dealing with these two plans concentrates on their European context and the active role of Greeks in the creation of their national identity in the newly created Greek-Bavarian dominion.<sup>10</sup> There is a lot to be said in favor of this approach. The urban planning of Athens occurred in a very delicate phase of both German and Architectural history. The court architect of Prussia, Schinkel, and the court architect of Bavaria, Klenze, were engaged in a debate on the nature of contemporary German architecture, the role of Greek revival, and the appropriateness of the eclectic Classical and Gothic styles for the architecture of the day. This artistic debate was not limited to the circle of professional architects, but was also a part of the large political struggle about who will lead the struggle for German unification. In this debate, Klenze advocated the strict Greek revival, as it can be seen in his major projects in Munich, the Glyptothek, the Propylaeum, and the Walhalla. Klenze was backed in this struggle by Bavarian king Ludwig, who tellingly explained that Greek style is absolutely appropriate for post-Napoleonic Germany, since “the Athenian Parthenon was not only a model of perfection, but closely linked to the Greek victory over the Persians.” In other words, as the ancient Greeks defeated the Persians, so the modern Germans defeated Napoleon. What is interesting to point out here is not the European context of these words, but their Greek context; modern Bavarians are doing now what the ancient Greeks did in

<sup>9</sup> *Athena*, 3:171 (18 August, 1834). Also quoted in BASTEIA, *The Creation*, 121.

<sup>10</sup> The most comprehensive survey of the issue is Eleni BASTEIA, *The Creation of Modern Athens...* where the author often emphasizes that the interpretation of Athenian urban planning should be found in its European context.

the past.<sup>11</sup> Or as Klenze himself put it, “there was and is only one architecture [...] which realized its perfection in the formative years of Greek civilization... [and that architecture] belongs as much to Germany as to Greece.”<sup>12</sup> Klenze was absolutely right and, indeed, prophetic, since three years later after he wrote these words, Greece literally became a Bavarian “property.”

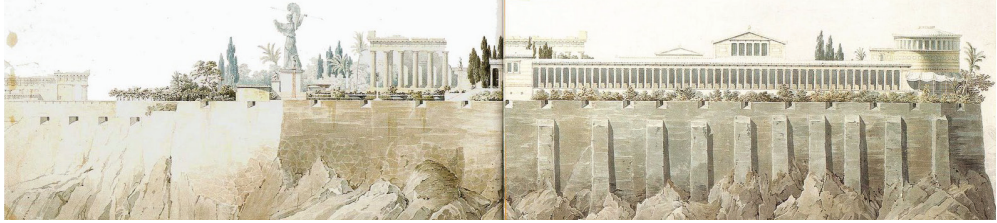


Fig. 3 Schinkel's Plan for the Acropolis – Elevation

Schinkel's approach to the issue of Greek revival was different. He advocated a “modern” approach, not merely a revival of ancient architecture. “The only art that qualifies as historical is that which in some way introduces something additional – a new element—in the world, from which a new story can be generated,” wrote Schinkel.<sup>13</sup> For this reason, “the new element,” for placing function ahead of form, Schinkel is considered a forerunner of modern architecture. But this is how things look from the German and European perspective. In the Greece context, Schinkel's plan for the royal palace on the Acropolis illustrates literally that “new element.” If built this “new element”, new palace would make the Parthenon a decorative piece in the courtyard of the royal palace. It was a different approach from Klenze, bolder, directly claiming the symbolic ownership of Athens and its antiquities, not just merely the physical ownership.

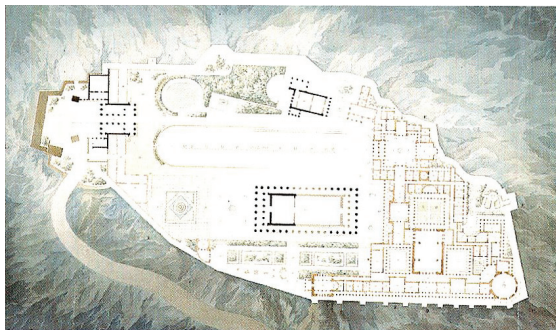


Fig. 4 Schinkel's Plan for the Acropolis – Outlay

<sup>11</sup> Barry BERGDOLL, *European Architecture 1750-1890*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, 150.

<sup>12</sup> L. von KLENZE, *Sammlung Architektonische Entwürfe*, Munich, 1830, 1. Also quoted in BERGDOLL, *European Architecture*, 150.

<sup>13</sup> BERGDOLL, *European Architecture*, 195.

How did the subaltern Greeks react to these often grandiose and costly plans? When the restorations of the Parthenon began, the Bavarian state architect welcomed king Otto by saying: “Your majesty stepped today, after so many centuries of barbarism, on this celebrated Acropolis” adding that “all the remains of barbarity will be removed, here as in all Greece, and the remains of the glorious past will be brought In new light, as solid foundation for glorious present and future.” Many Greeks suspected that removing “the remains of barbarity” really referred to them, but they also knew, as a speaker during the meeting of the Archeological society of Athens in 1838 indicated, “It is to this stones that we owe our political renaissance.”<sup>14</sup> One can even say that the formation of the Archeological Society of Athens was caused by Schinkel’s bold and outrageous plan for the Acropolis. Klenze, Schinkel’s rival, during his short visit to Athens, insisted that the Acropolis be under the watchful eye of the Society.<sup>15</sup>

The third phase is represented by the work of the royal Bavarian architect, Leo von Klenze. Sent to Athens by Ludwig I, the father of the Greek king Otto, Klenze’s task was to save the day, by creating a compromise plan. He had to save the city from destruction, but also to assert royal and German domination. Klenze performed the first goal with admirable skills. He preserved the Ottoman Athens, making only slight incisions in its texture. He also preserved the trivium of streets envisioned by Schaubert and Kleanthes, but this trivium was to become the center of the newly build Athens. Only a few of the new straight-line streets were to cut into the fabric of the old city, and they were narrower in comparison to the Kleanthes-Schaubert plan.<sup>16</sup>

The royal palace was removed from the head of the trivium, and then placed on the Western outskirts of the city. Klenze’s plan was remarkable for its lack of intrusiveness, and it was largely followed throughout the nineteenth century. He failed in the implementation of the second goal. There was really no good place for the royal palace in the Klenze’s plan. Klenze who was in Athens only for about two months, placed the palace where the remains of the ancient Athenian cemetery Kerameikos were located. This new location for the royal palace immediately drew acerbic criticism from the native population, although not because of the archeological remains there. Those were excavated only in 1870. The area was considered as unhealthy by the locals. In the hot summer months of 1835, these low lying areas had an outbreak of malaria. Local newspaper wrote, “Even the Turks preferred higher areas... while the downhill areas have almost always been unhealthy... There have always been stagnant waters at [the place where Klenze located the palace].”<sup>17</sup>

The subaltern Greeks often used humor to combat urban planning. Sometimes they even compared the wavering of plans for the royal palace with the arbitrariness of the Ottoman Turks. Thus, Athena, a local newspaper wrote in 1834, “The plan of Athens suffered [from] what the painting of Apelles suffered [from], painted according to the

<sup>14</sup> James CUNO, *Who Owns Antiquity?*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008, xi.

<sup>15</sup> BASTEIA, *The Creation*, 101.

<sup>16</sup> These were Ermou, Athenon, and Aeolou streets. The trivium of streets forming a square can still be seen today; it was called Otto square, but after the fall of the Bavarian rule renamed Omonia Square.

<sup>17</sup> *Athena* 3:206 (22 December 1834). Also quoted in BASTEIA, *The Creation*, 152.

opinion of many, or the oven of Nasreddin Hoça.”<sup>18</sup> The jibes here are double; the first referred to ancient Greek painter Apelles who hid behind his pictures in order to listen secretly what the viewers commented on his work. This comment was directed to the new class of classically educated Greeks, who now were ready to treat Apelles as one of their own. The second pun involved the favorite Ottoman character, well known to the less classically educated Greeks. Once, Nasreddin Hoça decided to build an oven in his yard. As the villagers passing by commented on the orientation of the oven, Nasreddin Hoça would tear down and rebuild the oven according to their instructions. Finally, unable to continue in this way, he built an oven on wheels so it could be moved around according to the suggestions of those passing by. The criticism in Athena was stinging, since the plans for the location of the royal palace literally moved around all corners of the city.

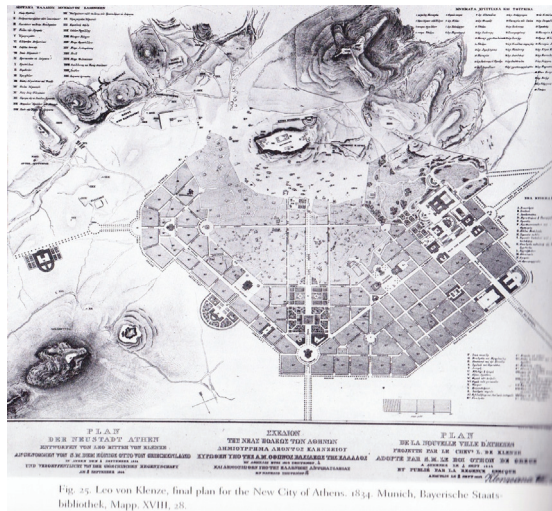


Fig. 5 Klenze's First Plan with the Royal Palace in the West (the image is flipped up-side-down to match the orientation of other plans)

The fourth phase of the plan was the decision on the final location of the royal palace. The royal palace was placed on the eastern node of the trivium. Otto's father Ludwig personally travelled to Athens to make the decision, and to put the end to the damaging palace debate. Apparently all the jokes in the local press had a stinging effect. King Ludwig arrived in November of 1835 to put the end to the affair that made the Bavarian administration look less competent than the Ottoman. The cornerstone of the palace was laid on January 26, 1836, and the planning of the palace was delegated to Friedrich von Gartner. Klenze was not consulted, apparently due to the fact that his plan located the royal palace in an area prone to malaria epidemics. Klenze, though, later continued to work in Athens, and designed the magnificent

<sup>18</sup> *Athena* 3:171 (18 August, 1834). Also quoted in BASTEIA, *The Creation*, 121.



Roman Catholic cathedral of Athens in 1844. The palace issue now finally settled, the Greeks directed their criticism to the cost involved with the building of the new palace. This was just mere complaining on the part of the Greeks. Bavarian administration used Bavarian contractors for the palace, while the local contractors were excluded. Again the Bavarian administration had cave in under the pressure. As the local newspaper explains,

“Even though they [the Bavarian contractors] have been ceaselessly spending endless amounts of drachmas for three years now, the walls of the palace have been rising imperceptibly. Having observed this, several Greek contractors made bids and undertook parts of the construction of the palace. Today the building is clearly progressing, the work is better and more solid, at less than half of what the respectable Bavarians spent.”<sup>19</sup>



Fig. 6 Klenze's Final Plan with the Royal Palace in the East

King Ludwig again had to intervene. As a cost-cutting measure, the palace was stripped of decorations resulting in a massive, but undistinguished building, as the architect himself admitted.<sup>20</sup> The royal couple moved into the new palace on August of 1843. There had little peace there. Already on the night of September 3rd, the rebellious municipal council surrounded the palace demanding the constitution.

Municipal council of Athens was created by a royal decree on December 27, 1833. Because it was elected by and of the Greeks, its powers were miniscule in comparison to the royal government. It had responsibilities, but no money and no means to enforce its decisions.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, it served as the center of Greek resistance to the Bavarian rule. Its most prominent members were heroes of the revolution, such

<sup>19</sup> *Athena* 8:605 (8 April 1839). Also quoted in BASTEIA, *The Creation*, 153.

<sup>20</sup> BASTEIA, *The Creation*, 154

<sup>21</sup> BASTEIA, *The Creation*, 107.

as Yannis Makriyannis, who became the archenemy of the Bavarians.<sup>22</sup> The culmination of the Greek resistance to the Bavarian rule came in 1843 when the conspirators Yannis Makriyannis, Andreas Metaxas, André Loutos, Constantine Zographos, Michail Soutsos and Rigas Palamidis, on the night of September 3rd surrounded with troops the new royal palace, and forced the king to agree to a constitution. Finally, Greece would have a representative assembly consisting of the house of representative and the Senate, as it was originally envisioned in the monumental plan of Kleantes and Schaubert. Since that time, the square in front of the ill fated Royal Palace is called the Constitution Square to commemorate the transition to constitutional monarchy. It should be noted here that the building for the representative assembly was not built till 1871. In the mean time, the Greek assembly met in the small brick building in the old Ottoman part of the town that the Greeks appropriately and ironically called “the Shanty” (η Παράγκα).

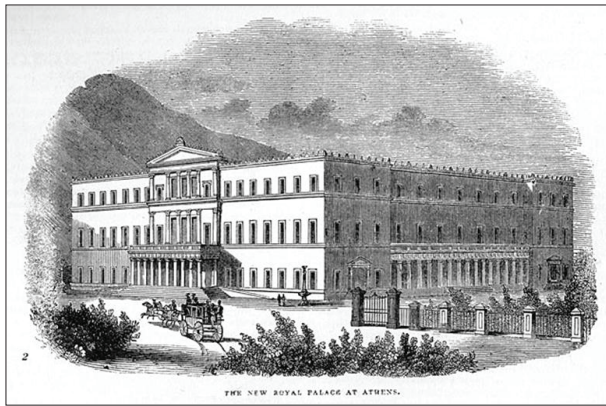


Fig. 7 The Royal Palace in Athens built by the Bavarian architect F. Goertner

The rebellion represented the culmination of the animosity and misunderstanding between the colonial Bavarian rule and the Greek subaltern population. Greece was for the Bavarians the cradle of German culture, a valuable antiquity. For the Greeks it was home that they spilled their blood for. One Greek writing to a newspaper perfectly explained this rift,

“It is true that many of the so-called foreigners often go by my village and I have had the opportunity to get to know them and talk with them. But what do you want me to learn, my friend, from these odd gentlemen who, when you ask them about the people, they examine the piles of stone, and when you talk to them about the living, they want information about the dead?”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> General MAKRIYANNIS, *Απομνημονεύματα* (Memoirs), Athens, Papyros, 1996.

<sup>23</sup> Letter signed “The Old man from Dalamanara,” *Athena* 2:112 (13 May 1833). Also quoted in BASTEA, *The Creation*, 128.

All in all, the Greeks became clearly aware what these foreigners wanted, and that was ownership, physical and symbolical of Greece. That is why the answer given by one of the conspirators, Yiannis Makriyannis to king Otto became deeply embedded in Greek public memory. When asked to renounce his role in the September 3rd conspiracy, Makriyannis said, "I am not a slave." To be a slave meant to be property, and to be without right to own property. Urban planning of Athens was not about the Greeks creating an "imagined community" or "inventing traditions." It was about Germans imagining Greece, or more precisely, Germans imagining Germany.

Almost 200 years later, during the current economic crisis, when the stock market speculators attacked Greek government bonds, the Greek government sought financial help from the European Union. The answer that came from some German politicians, such as Josef Schlarmann, and Frank Schaeffler, was that Greece should sell its islands, and even Acropolis to balance her books. The price for the Acropolis was estimated at 100 billion Euros. The enraged German politicians further added that all the Greeks need to do to achieve financial health was to be responsible with their money. They should "mimic the Germans" as Georg von Maurer tersely put it in the 1830s. I would like to finish this article with a call for reevaluation of the methodological apparatus for the study of nationalism in Europe, especially on the margins of Europe. Could some elements of Colonial Studies be useful for understanding better the process of formation of some smaller European countries, such as Greece? I believe that it could prove to be useful, especially because to imagine that Modern Greece was created only by the romantic imagination of Greek nationalists is not an accurate representation of what happened. Modern Greece had a destiny to be, at least in part, also an invented tradition of the much more powerful European bourgeoisie.

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