In Search of a Usable Past: Modern Greece's Troubled Nationhood and Ideological Disillusionment – The Case of the First Athenian Cathedral

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Abstract:

The paper focuses on the troubled relationship between regime and nation-building in early independent Greece, by following the discourse about the first cathedral of modern Athens, and the ideological choices that its construction signified. Through attending this narrative, delicate shades in the process of state-building in modern Greece and the actors that determined it are illuminated, and the workings that led to the romantic ideological synthesis which left its mark for over a century are highlighted.

On February 11th, 1834, a man named Georgios Psyllas, local war hero and head of the Athenian prefecture in the newly established Greek kingdom, returned to his town after having visited the capital (the port of Nafplion in the Peloponnese) where he was received by the royal authorities. Upon his arrival, he called on the small number of his fellow citizens to gather in the ancient temple of Hephaestus at Theseion, under the hill of the Acropolis, that was still functioning as a Christian church dedicated to St. George, the largest one in the war-torn village that Athens was at the time. There in an improvised, but no less triumphant ritual, he read to his audience the royal decree that had just been signed a few days before in Nafplion by the young monarch and the Regency. The decree declared the devastated town of Athens to be "the permanent capital of the new kingdom and royal residence," and laid the plan

of the final preparations for the transfer of government from Nafplion.[1] The crowd responded to the announcement with enthusiastic acclamations. A *Te Deum* was held, and a statement of gratitude to the royal government was drafted and signed by those present. After the completion of that ceremony, the local authorities raised an inscription at Hadrian's gate, at the remains of the ancient city's Roman fortifications, reading "Athens, once the city of Theseus and Hadrian, is now Otto's city."[2]

The above episode incorporates all elements featured in the story that this article aspires to tell, and which constitute the basic themes to be encountered in any analysis that attempts to approach state-culture during the first regime of modern Greece, as this paper hopes to do. The call on the war-ravaged town of Athens to fulfil the role of the capital in the modern Greek kingdom would be primary among these. The infatuation with classical antiquity, and the respective discourse on the conflicting aspects of the nation's tradition, are equally important pieces in the mosaic described. Finally, the Germanic administration's input in that scheme and the symbolic choices it made; public religious worship connected with state rituals, and the need for the equivalent space to conduct it; and the anticipations and hopes of the populace and its response to the choices of the government and its various ideological innovations, are all crucial themes in this context.

For this reason, the focal point of this narrative will be the case of the first cathedral of the modern city, the church of Saint Irina (from here onwards 'Hagia Eirini'). The troubled history of its construction, as well as its proper description, outstandingly exemplify the main problems, paradoxes, and dilemmas that the new state faced in the process of formulating its modern identity, especially as reflected in the realms of symbols, art, and culture. Consequently, the church proper will be described, as well as the models that its design rested upon. Lastly, this article will summarize the ways in which the cathedral mirrored the troubled path followed by modern Greece in the mid-19th century.

[1] See for description Costas Bires, *Athens: From the 19th to the 20th Century* [*Αι Αθήναι από του 19ου εις τον 20ον αιώνα*] (Athens: Melissa Publications, 1966), 32.
[2] Eleni Bastea, *The Creation of Modern Athens: Planning the Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 10.

Otto and the Bavarians: Establishing a European Capital in a War-Torn Land

It is best to begin the analysis with a brief description of the first regime of modern Greece, and its character, values and ideology. When the liberated Balkan statelet was established in the late 1820s, and after the assassination of the first governor, Ioannes Kapodistrias (who had allowed himself to get extensively involved in the local feuds among regional warlords), the protective powers assumed exclusively for themselves the mission to locate an appropriate successor, based on their own criteria.[3] The choice fell upon Prince Otto von Wittelsbach, second-born of King Ludwig I of Bavaria, who had the reputation of being a great philhellene, and the status of the liberated country was upgraded to a sovereign kingdom. The standards of the selection, the background of the new monarch, and the commonly accepted assumptions about the new nation's identity and proper future course, determined the mentality and approach of the new government towards its subjects. David Holden has described this picture by writing, with a strong sense of irony, that

> "In January 1833, Otto arrived at Nafplion on board of a British warship, accompanied by 3,500 Bavarian soldiers to keep the peace, and a panel of three Bavarian regents to help him run the place. Modern Greece had been born at last."[4]

Infatuated with German neoclassical idealism and assisted by the *carte blanche* that the absence of any constitutional restraints signified, the Bavarian regency proceeded, during the first period of Otto's reign, in governing the nation by applying the axiom that was termed as *metakenossis*.[5] According to this, Greece was supposed to re-establish ties with her classical heritage by the formation of cultural and political ties with Europe. Germany was, in this regard, the unconditional role-model, entrusted with the goal of exposing once again

[3]Kapodistrias was a noble from Corfu who had successfully pursued a career as a statesman in Imperial Russia.
[4] David Holden, *Greece Without Columns: The Making of Modern Greece* (Philadelphia and New York: J.P. Lippincott Company, 1972), 115.
[5] Defined by Matallas as "the transmittance and transformation of the modern notions of nation, in social schemas much different from the ones they originally stemmed from," see Matallas Paraskevas, *Nation and Orthodoxy: The Adventures of an Affair: From the Greek to the Bulgarian Schism* [*Έθνος και Ορθοδοξία*: *Οι περιπέτειες μιας σχέσης/ Από το Ελλαδικό στο Βουλγαρικό Σχίσμα*] (Heracleion: University of Crete Publications, 2002), 13.

the new unrefined Balkan populace to the lights of true ancient civilization that had been inherited by her.[6] The German leaders of nineteenth century Greece chose to "elevate the ancient past above and beyond history, discouraging dialogue with and, especially, criticism of this past."[7]

The praxis, though, of Bavarian policies, revealed the artificiality of this image of Greece, and the distance which both the neoclassical axiom and the state it created had from the actual course of popular culture and history in the preceding centuries.[8] Indeed, as art historian Antonis Cotides says, attending faithfully the principle of *metakenossis* meant that "the prospect of any originality, on behalf of the modern Greeks, in realms that had already been methodologically cultivated in western thought and practice, was repudiated beforehand."[9] Therefore, with their policies the Bavarians demonstrated "a relative indifference towards the people of the country which their idealism celebrated."[10] As a result, instead of realizing the romanticized task of re-establishing links with the country's classical heritage, the modern nation modelled every aspect of its apparatus on those of western Europe - and, more often than not, Germany. This led to the creation of a modern Greek state that, in its normative structures, and in all of its political and social functions, "was set up with the sole aim not to be Greek," in the way that Greekness was embodied in the everyday life of its citizens.[11]

As was the case all across Europe during that era, the main arena for the expression of neoclassicist ideology was that of public art and aesthetics. This was even more pronounced in the Greek kingdom, for at the time of independence the vision of neoclassicism offered an aesthetic cohesion with the proposed national identity. As it has been said, it "embodied the logical development of the historical, ideological, and morphological amalgam that had

[6] SeeFani-Maria Tsigakou, *The Rediscovery of Greece: Travellers and Painters of the Romantic Era* (New York: New Rochelle Publications, 1981), 63.
[7] Bastea, *The Creation of Modern Athens*, 104.
[8] Stoneman summarizes the picture by characterizing Otto's Greece as "a fairy-tale kingdom, just as based on fantasy, and unrelated to political reality," see Richard Stoneman, "German Scholars and Otho's Greece," *Dialogos*, *Hellenic Studies Review*, no. 4 (1997): 70, and adds that this inadequate bonding made Otto treat his realm "like a tourist destination" (71).
[9] Antonis Cotedis*, Greek Art: Painting of the 19th Century* [*Ελληνική Τέχνη/ Ζωγραφική του19ου αιώνα*] (Athens: Ekdotiki, 1995), 20.
[10] Stoneman, "German Scholars and Otho's Greece," 71.
[11] See ChrestosYiannaras, *Orthodoxy and the West in Modern Greece* [*Ορθοδοξία και Δύση στη Νεώτερη Ελλάδα*] (Athens: Domos Publications, 1996), 109.

been adopted as the new national creed, always preserving the ingredient of memory."[12]

The method by which this was naturally applied, already with the first laws after independence, was that of urban planning and architectural creation. Building legislation, and the main urban projects designed and approved during this period promoted the notion of a common national culture based on the memories of the classical past, whilst simultaneously mixing those ideas with the principles of utilitarian modernization, rationalism, and functionality.

Public Space and Aesthetics in the New Capital

The area in which this neoclassical fascination with city planning, art and aesthetics, was most pronounced was in the development of the new city of Athens. Indeed, it is right to call the creation of Ottonic Athens the neoclassical period's "most-authentic expression."[13] The transfer of the capital from the Peloponnesian port of Nafplion to the minor Turkish village of 6,000 inhabitants that, at the time of independence, was no more than a "heap of ruins," was in itself a non-negotiable choice of the regime, testifying its approach to the country and the people it ruled.[14] To the absence of infrastructure, glorious memories were projected, and as court architect Leo von Klenze ensured, it would be "the name of Athens alone which will help to reconstruct the city."[15] Since Athens was essentially an empty canvas as far as contemporary artistic infrastructure was concerned, the task of fulfilling the goal, signified "a great need for architects, stone-cutters, decorators, artisans, but above all else…painters and sculptors."[16] These, therefore, came mostly from Europe, and were considered by the new administration to be "as indispensable as skilled civil servants."[17]

[12] Manos Bires, and Maro Kardamitsi-Adami, *Neoclassical Architecture in Greece* (Los Angeles: Publication of the J.Paul Getty Museum, 2001), 302.
[13] Vilma Chastaoglou, *The Ottonic Greece, and the Establishment of the Modern Greek State* [*Η Οθωνική Ελλάδα και η Συγκρότηση του Ελληνικού Κράτους*], ed. Alexander Papageorgiou-Venetas (Athens: European Cultural Centre of Delphi/ Goethe Institute of German Studies in Athens, 2002), 306.
[14] Tsigakou, *The Rediscovery of Greece*, 64.
[15] Papageorgiou-Venetas, *The Ottonic Greece*, 17.
[16] Marina Lampraki-Plaka, in *National Gallery/ Museum 'Alexander Soutsos' - Four Centuries of Greek Painting from the Collection of the National Gallery and the Euripidis Koutlidis Foundation* (Athens: 2001), 36.
[17] Ibid.

The effort of the establishment showed little appreciation and respect for the local tradition and urban realities. Its pioneers, historian of architecture Eleni Bastea says, "often approached their distant subjects with unmasked arrogance and a sense of superiority."[18] The sense of inferiority regarding the cultural present and marginalization of the existing tradition in architecture, extended to the treatment of the buildings of the old town of Athens. Alexis Politis, a contemporary historian of the era, explains that "just like the language, the capital was also purified; the city shook off every subsequent heritage, in order to erase the intervening time."[19] All such remains that were not traced to antiquity, such as the Turkish baths, the fountains, and even the Byzantine churches, did not fit the picture that the new Greeks wanted to project for themselves. Indeed, the Byzantine tradition was particularly seen as vulgar, and thus unsuitable in both national culture and the Athenian landscape, and hence a campaign of defaming the city's Byzantine monuments commenced. During that period, state-appointed archaeologists demolished many of Athens' Byzantine and post-Byzantine churches, usually in order to excavate the ancient ruins upon which these were thought to have been erected.

The first to recommend and advocate this policy was Leo von Klenze, who had stated that "all the remains of barbarity should be removed, in Athens as in all of Greece, so that the remains of the glorious past will be brought in the new light, as a solid foundation of a glorious present and future."[20] Kostas Bires estimates that over a hundred masterpieces of traditional ecclesiastical architecture were completely demolished and "went to oblivion" during that period, a fact for which later western archaeologists expressed their dismay.[21] All of this, it should be noted, coincided with the policy of the enforced autocephaly of the Greek Church, her subjugation to the state, and the shutting down of most of the liberated lands' monasteries. Referring to this policy, an anonymous letter published in the newspaper *Athena* in December 1834

[18] Bastea, *The Creation of Modern Athens*, 84.
[19] Alexis Politis, *Romantic Years: Ideologies and Mentalities in Greece of 1830-1880* [*Ρομαντικά Χρόνια/ Ιδεολογία και Νοοτροπίες στην Ελλάδα του 1830-1880*] (Athens: Nefeli Publications, 1993), 85.
[20] Bastea, *The Creation of Modern Athens*, 102.
[21] Costas Bires, *Athenian Studies,* vol. 1 [*Αθηναικαί Μελέται*] (Athens: 1938), 24.

exclaimed “Believe me, my brothers, the Turks, when they did not prosecute the Christians, were not raging like that during peace-time.”[22]

The outcome of this period of neoclassical nationalism and building activity was indeed the total remake of the old town. Or, to be more precise, its re-emergence from the ruins into an aspired European metropolis, the first in the formerly Ottoman Balkans. The work of the foreign masters and their Greek pupils brought about a transformation in the city’s appearance, after one or two years, that, as Greek architect and archaeologist Ioannes Traulos has put it, was astonishing. Indeed, as archaeologist Ludwig Ross observed, after 1836, a visitor coming back to Athens would see “everywhere new faces, new buildings, new mores.”[23] However, others, such as the Danish visitor Hans Christian Andersen, discerned a “tragic lie” in every feature in the surroundings of Athens.[24]

Simultaneously, the construction of the new capital also served the purpose of fostering the acquaintance of its inhabitants with the basic notions of official nationalism, and thus functioned as a form of civic education in the kingdom’s ideological creed. In this process, the response of the populace was not always uniform. Built space became as often the site of expression of popular approval, as it also became the pretext for resistance to the state’s policies and the regime as a whole. It became, that is, as Bastea again says, “a repository of dreams, struggles and memories.”[25] Nonetheless, despite the manner in which the all-embracing neoclassical model was imposed, popular reaction was not transformed into a wave of overt disapproval over the ideological direction the nation had taken under the Bavarians, and stayed afar from challenging the regime’s aesthetics.

Indeed, the brilliance which the capital had acquired through the magnificence of the main public buildings and projects did in fact overshadow, for its inhabitants, the shortages in infrastructure and state building with which they were every day faced. To be sure, occasional opposition to building

[22] Bastea, *The Creation of Modern Athens*, 9. This stance eventually provoked reaction, which, Bires notes, is the reason that the few remaining sites of the kind were preserved (Bires, *Athenian Studies*, 24).
[23] Politis, *Romantic Years*, 77.
[24] Hans Christian Andersen, *Journey to Greece* [*Οδοιπορικό στην Ελλάδα*] (Athens: Hestia Publications, 1999), 41.
[25] Bastea, *The Creation of Modern Athens*, 118.

projects was expressed, but it did not "question the western planning principles but rather the method of implementation."[26] Overall, Bastea explains,

> "Greeks learned to observe and participate in state functions while standing on newly-paved and tree-planted streets in the presence of the king, the Church, and the government. They gathered in newly opened rectangular squares that bore historical names, and celebrated the religious and national holidays in the new cathedral. Civic architecture ascribed a formal and spatial vocabulary to the beliefs and rituals of the new capital."[27]

The most representative protagonist of this effort in the architects' community was Lyssandros Kaftantzoglou, the artist who marked the rebirth of Athens, – and whom Traulos calls "an austere and fanatic classicist."[28] He was the primary figure in the scene of Athenian architecture in the 1840s, and also the director of the School of Arts and Sciences at that time. A graduate of the great Western academies of architecture, and a follower specifically of the Italianate tradition (he studied at St. Luke's Academy in Rome and called Italy "the spiritual homeland of artists"), he firmly held that the establishment of the proper style of Hellenic neoclassicism was conditioned on the purification of Greek architecture from the degenerating tradition of Byzantium and the Ottoman rule that succeeded it.[29]

On the other hand, another group of artists, also of German background, favored an architectural orientation that, while preserving its neoclassical characteristics, tried more consistently to draw inspiration from the local tradition. Stamatis Kleanthis and Edward Schaubert - both graduates of the German *Baukakademie* - exhibited interest in using features from the local Byzantine and Islamic tradition in their works. Along with Francois Boulanger and Dimitrios Zezos, who designed the second and current cathedral, they were

[26] Bastea, *The Creation of Modern Athens*, 147.
[27] Bastea, *The Creation of Modern Athens*, 147.
[28] Ioannes Traulos, *Neoclassical Architecture in Greece* [*Νεοκλασσική Αρχιτεκτονική στην Ελλάδα*] (Athens: Commercial Bank of Greece, 1967), 32.
[29] For more on this aspect of Kaftantzoglou's legacy, see Kostas Baroutas, *The Art Scene and Aesthetic Education in 19th-century Athens* [*Η Εικαστική Ζωή και η Αισθητική Παιδεία στην Αθήνα του 19ου αιώνα*] (Athens: Smili Publications, 1990), 64-65.

the representatives of the Romantic trends in Early Modern Greek architecture, that softened the classicist academicism of the early years.

Greek neoclassicism was implemented within the context of ecclesiastical art, especially in the fields of architecture and iconography that developed in the new capital during the first decades after liberation. The form that post-independence ecclesiastical art should acquire within the wider milieu of the aesthetics of the new kingdom became a debated issue almost from the beginning of Otto's reign. This debate was focused on a central dilemma, whether art in this genre should continue to be based on the Byzantine tradition, or reinvented in accordance with the novel aesthetic orthodoxy in the kingdom and its capital. Departure from tradition, when it came to ecclesiastical art was more difficult, since the masses were, through religious worship, more customarily attached to it. Concurrently, despite the triumph of the neoclassical movement across Europe at the time, the prototype forms of Byzantine art had begun attracting attention and appreciation from the art community in Europe.[30] This made it in principle harder for the neo-Hellenic elite (which esteemed foreign opinion) to discard the only artistic form that qualified as Greece's native contemporary tradition.

Nonetheless, the determination of the Greek elite to establish a school of art and aesthetics that was in harmony with its nation-building scheme and ideology managed to overcome these considerations. Kaftantzoglou had expressed his surprise that

> "Many in the west, especially among the people won over by romanticism, give us advice, on the issue of ecclesiastical architecture, to abandon the rules of our [ancient] forefathers, and seek our inspiration in those dark ages of slavery and decadence, imitating the forms of the aesthetically-poor buildings that were then erected."[31]

Kaftantzoglou further exclaimed the positions that epitomized rather eloquently the anti-Byzantinism of his generation, concluding that in 19th century Greece

[30] As in the *Baukakademie* in Munich.

[31] Dimitrios Philippides, *Neohellenic Architecture: Architectural Theory and Praxis (1830-1980) as a Reflection of the Ideological Choices of Modern Greek Intellectual Life* [*Νεοελληνική Αρχιτεκτονική/ Αρχιτεκτονική Θεωρία και Πράξη (1830-1890) σαν αντανάκλαση των Ιδεολογικών επιλογών της Νεοελληνικής Κουλτούρας*] (Athens: Melissa Publications, 1984), 97, 96.

there was no living Christian architecture. In another speech of the same period, he goes so far as to characterize Hagia Sophia of Constantinople as "a monument of poor art!"[32]

As a result of the influence of the school he led, the dominant form of church architecture in the first years after independence was a variation of orthodox neoclassicism. The modification of the pre-existing Byzantine style was also the policy favoured in regard to the other pillar of ecclesiastical art, that of iconography. Again, the dilemma faced after independence was whether to preserve the Byzantine heritage (which reached its zenith in the latter days of the Greek empire and continued throughout the Ottoman centuries), or to introduce western-style church painting and the use of perspective. As in architecture, the group led by Kaftantzoglou strongly argued in favour of the latter, considering Byzantine iconography "an art of decadence, static, fossilized," and "Turkish-like," which, in order to be used again as a model or reference by modern day artists, should be "revitalized by the examples of the beautiful renaissance and post-renaissance art in Europe."[33]

The faction supporting this view was again ultimately successful, so that Greek ecclesiastical painting became fully westernized soon after independence. The alteration of the style commonly used until then occurred through the reception and advancement of the techniques practiced by the school of those following the German Nazarenes, especially in the manner that the Nazarene style had been fused with historical painting by Peter von Cornelius. Their foremost representatives in Greece were the Bavarians Maximilian Seits, and particularly, Ludwig Thiersch. They were the artists who were entrusted with the mission to bring about these necessary "corrections" in the Byzantine style.[34] With the domination of this new style, "nothing was left of the Byzantine tradition. Naturalism, saccharine beauty, and anatomic representation of the bodies, were taken from now on as rules."[35]

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[32] Baroutas, *The Art Scene and Aesthetic Education in 19th Century Athens*, 24.
[33] Constantinos D.Kalokyres, *Art in the Church of Greece during the Older and Modern Eras* [*Η τέχνη στην εκκλησία της Ελλάδος κατά την Παλαιότερη και την Σύγχρονη Εποχή*] (Thessaloniki: Publications of the Holy Diocese of Thessaloniki, 1988), 48.
[34] Alongside Thiersch, the renowned Bavarian artist of the Nazarene climate and pupil of Cornelius, the best-known representatives of that trend in 19th century Athenian art were Constantinos Fanellis, Spiridon Hadjiyannopoulos and Constantinos Artemis.
[35] Kalokyres, *Art in the Church of Greece*, 49.

This controversy and division regarding the scheme of Europeanization of Greek ecclesiastical art, exemplifies what Bastea calls *dualism grec*, which "at once embraced and resisted the central authority in its efforts to westernize the kingdom."[36] As the nation-state building policies of the establishment proved increasingly problematic in the 1840s, the reality of public discontent was fused with the interest and pursuits of the Romantic movement. Romanticism stressed the need to dive into the historical past in order to find the "true" national character and idiosyncrasy of a people, and argued about the preservation of these cultural features in the treasured purity and simplicity of the lower classes, and especially of the peasants. In the Greek context, Greek Romanticism could not but draw on Byzantium and Constantinople, which, as David Holden has said, remained "so immediately dominant of the Greek imagination that it required no further identification."[37]

As in all other areas, the state had to make concessions and adapt its profile in the field of art, aesthetics and city-planning as well. The interest in pure classicism and ancient monuments waned, and therefore the unconditional projection of the Athenian classical past was played down. Instead, a new legitimizing justification of the city's purpose in reborn Greece was synthesized, which would be smoothly incorporated by the scheme of the 'Great Idea'. The rebirth of Athens was now viewed as a phase of modern Greece's mission of civilizing the East, rather than being plainly justified on her classical glory.

Concurrently, and as the importance of the nation's Christian tradition was now emphasized, this idea of a new Athens became reflected in the development and life of the capital, where the state fostered the creation of a unified national-religious front, encouraging a "continuous criss-crossing between the official religious and Greek civic life."[38] This was evident by such events as the establishment of the Annunciation of the Virgin as a national day, or the institutionalization of compulsory prayer in school**.** By such measures, the public manifestations of the Greeks' traditional attachment to Orthodoxy

[36] Bastea, *The Creation of Modern Athens*, 120.
[37] Holden, *Greece without Columns*, 70.
[38] Bastea, *The Creation of Modern Athens*, 36.

were multiplied, and the monarch could pose as the "protector of the faith."[39] Thus, by the early 1840s, a ruling order that had initially tried persistently to diminish the importance of ecclesiastical tradition, had now turned, with the advent of Romanticism, into one attempting to play its card, in order to enhance its own legitimacy and popular leverage.

In the architectural booming which modern Athens was experiencing, this project for a new Athens was expressed through a retreat from the dominant classical manner of the first Ottonic decade, and an emergence of "a more malleable, less symbolic aesthetic climate," based on the moderation of the austere dogmas of antiquity-inspired art.[40] In practice, this meant that classical features did not disappear, but were used with greater freedom of composition, and in fusion with other artistic styles and elements, ranging according to the purpose of each building. In church architecture this eclectic trend was predominantly expressed through a more frequent appearance of some Byzantine architectural features, particularly with the introduction of the dome, as well as with the addition of Romanesque and Gothic elements, leading to a novel synthesis that prevailed in ecclesiastical architecture for a century, now known as 'neo-Byzantinism'. However, the use of actual features that indicated a revival of a pure Byzantine architecture was somewhat limited. Rather, the dominant style that succeeded ecclesiastical classicism signified a convenient version of the concessions to tradition which the artistic establishment was willing to accept.

A Tale of Two Churches

We have, thus far, analytically examined the main successive phases which aesthetic ideology and ecclesiastical art in post-independence Athens went through during Ottonic rule. We can now follow the debate in which all of these issues and concerns were reflected, and which their advocates used as the appropriate arena to argue for and encounter each other: that of erecting the first cathedral of the new city.

[39] Otto was also declared head of the Greek church under the constitution of 1843.
[40] Bires, Kardamitsi*, Neoclassical Architecture in Greece*, 102.

In the Christian history of Athens before independence, there had been numerous churches which functioned as the town's central minster. For most of the Byzantine years, it was the Parthenon that (along with the rest of the well-preserved ancient temples) had been converted to a church, dedicated to the Virgin. After the Venetian seizure of Athens during the Fourth Crusade (1204), and up until the Turks occupied the whole of mainland Greece in the 1450s, the Parthenon was being used as a Latin church by the Frankish rulers of the area, while the native population used as their cathedral the medieval church of St. Panteleimon in the old market area. The Ottomans did not return the Parthenon to the local population for the service of its religious needs, but used it first as a mosque, and shortly afterwards (and for the remaining of their rule) as the town's main stronghold. Therefore, St. Panteleimon continued to function as the cathedral, until it was destroyed in the War of Independence.

On the eve of liberation, only two of the Christian churches of Athens were still properly functioning, though both needed extensive repairs.[41] Traveller Christopher Wordsworth wrote around 1832 that "the churches are reduced to bare walls and heaps of stones and mortar. There is but one church in which service is performed," this being the picturesque late Byzantine chapel of the Gorgoepikoos, which stands today next to the current cathedral.[42] It was chosen to be used as the town's main church, until a larger one was repaired, as the Bavarians prohibited the use of ancient edifices for Christian worship. Hence, liberated Athens appeared from the beginning to have a problem of limited available space for ecclesiastical use. This problem was intensified when the town was declared as the kingdom's capital, a step which also created the need for an appropriate state-cathedral.

The Regency was the first to attempt to tackle the problem, by issuing a decree with which it declared its decision to realize the plan expressed by the local heroes during the War of Independence, of erecting a church dedicated to Christ the Saviour as thanksgiving tribute to Divine Providence for allowing the defeat of the Ottomans and the establishment of the Greek state.[43] The design was initially assigned to the court architect Edward Schaubert, who

[41] Bastea, *The Creation of Modern Athens*, 10.
[42] Ibid.
[43] The decree is republished by Bires, *Athenian Studies,* 3.

presented an initial plan for the cathedral to the municipal council in 1832. However, this was deemed too costly, was not endorsed with enthusiasm, and was soon abandoned.

As this debate emerged, the state initially responded to the problem of limited space for worship by repairing the ecclesiastical buildings that were in better condition, while many damaged ones were demolished. Indeed, twelve of the churches that were used before the war had been reconstructed (usually in new shapes and forms) by 1838, all of which were modest in size. Among them was the church of Hagia Eirini. It was a medieval half-destroyed church near the market that had been the second largest functioning church before the war.[44] Its initial reparation was completed by 1835, and the church of Hagia Eirini was now the largest of the twelve functioning ones.

Given that the issue of the proper cathedral remained practically dormant in the first years of Bavarian rule, and the apparent need for a place where religious rituals could be held in the event of civic celebrations, the municipal council selected this particular church to temporarily fulfil that function, until more specific plans were approved. In the memoirs of his trip to Athens in the 1830s, Hans Christian Andersen commented on the absence of a proper cathedral, and also explained that Hagia Eirini was chosen because it was the only such building with sufficient space to host the officials during civic events.[45] Thus, Hagia Eirini became the town's temporary cathedral, and the icon of St. Filothei, Athens' patron saint (a local martyr of the Ottoman period) was brought to the church in 1836.[46] The elevation of the church as a cathedral was approved for a transitional period, but would become fixed in the years that followed. Hagia Eirini would remain the sole cathedral for the whole Ottonic period.

After her initial restoration and establishment as the temporary cathedral, and as the materialization of the building project of the new Athens was proceeding, the church of Hagia Eirini was increasingly seen as insufficient

[44] Information provided by Fr.Ilias Drossinos, who has been the church's parish-priest, and has written a book on its history. He also mentions that there was possibly a second church edifice next to the main one, a chapel that probably belonged to the Penteli Monastery outside of Athens. This chapel escaped destruction during the war. See Ilias Drossinos, *Hagia Eirini: The Old Cathedral of Athens (1833-1862)* [*Αγία Ειρήνη: Η παλαιά Μητρόπολις των Αθηνών (1833-1862)*] (Athens: 2001), 9.
[45] Andersen, *Journey to Greece*, 70.
[46] Drossinos, *Hagia Eirini*, 12.

for the function it had been assigned, and the government was viewed as unduly slow and neglectful in addressing the matter seriously. Such criticism from the press and the public intensified as the decade was drawing to a close, particularly because proper churches were being erected for other denominations.[47] The newspaper *Athena* wondered in 1840, why it was that Athens had acquired "theatres, palaces, etc., and does not even have one church appropriate for celebrations for the whole city," while there had been "magnificent churches erected for other denominations."[48] Public sentiment was reflected in the memoirs of General Makryiannis, who asked: "even though [Otto] made a palace, he does not have the will to build a church for God; on feast days, he goes with the Consuls and the other foreigners into a hut [meaning Hagia Eirini]…When Europe was in our situation, did she also have luxuries, did she have theatres?" The issue of the cathedral became so extreme, that it allowed for discontent to be eventually expressed even by the allies to the regime hierarchy of the Greek Church. Hence the Bishop of Athens publicly urged to the king, at the anniversary of the beginning of the War of Independence, in 1838, to assume personally the responsibility for the resolution of the problem.[49]

Facing public reaction to his inactivity on the matter, Otto sought to appease criticism, and reinstated his commitment to the cause of the cathedral, explaining that progress was slow due to a fear of building in haste. Although dormant, the debate for the construction of the Church of the Saviour had not been formally closed. While the consideration of plans and alternative designs for this project by the municipal authorities had long ceased, the public discussion for the location of the new cathedral (as well as the fund-raising effort that had commenced for the same purpose since 1832) were resumed. As the town centre had acquired a specific shape by the beginning of the second Ottonic decade (1840s), it was clear that the cathedral would be constructed in the wider area of the market, rather than in Otto's square, as was

[47] Details on the construction of the Catholic Cathedral of St. Dionyssus in Athens are given by Eugenios Dalezos, *The Cathedral of St. Dionysius the Areopagete in Athens, with a Short History of the Catholic Parishes of Mainland Greece (1830-1965)* [*Ο εν Αθήναις καθεδρικός ναός του Αγίου Διονυσίου του Αρεοπαγίτου, Μετά συντόμου ιστορίας των καθολικών ενοριών της Ηπειρωτικής Ελλάδος (1830-1965)*] (Athens: 1965).
[48] Bastea, *The Creation of Modern Athens*, 162.
[49] Drossinos, *Hagia Eirini*, 17.

the original plan. Therefore, the various parishes in this area began to compete to become the location where the new cathedral would be erected. During the same period, Lyssandros Kaftantzoglou drew his first designs for a basilica located at the old market area.

As the discussion on the cathedral revived, and the various sides (parishes, artists, clergy or press) joined in the debate to argue for the solutions they considered most appropriate, the issue became highly ideologized. As the competition for influencing the government on the specific issue intensified, the nature of the arguments used were crystallized, allowing for the division of those involved into two groups: one that was more approving of the ecclesiastical policies which the regime had thus far unleashed, and a second one that appeared to be in pursuit of a more traditional ecclesiastical expression, and tacitly conveyed public discontent about the regime's prior treatment of religious sentiments and symbols. As the Ottonic regime chose to shift its legitimizing ideology towards the orbit of Romanticism, the two groups increasingly overlapped in their rhetoric and demands. It was not, however, until after the 1850s, that the different views appeared to have finally produced a synthesis. However, under the period here discussed, towards the middle of Otto's reign, when the issue of the cathedral was highlighted and building activity commenced, the competition surrounding it had a clear and at times divisive ideological dimension.

Among the various groups that voiced their views on the issue during the early 1840s, one of the most outspoken was that of the parishioners of the existing temporary cathedral of Hagia Eirini. With the church having already been elevated into a metropolitan minster since 1835, they considered the particular function of Hagia Eirini to have been a success and thought she could potentially become the permanent cathedral. The parishioners of Hagia Eirini found their stronger advocates around the circle of artists and public figures that had been closer to the regime and its policies during the preceding decade. These included Theocletos Farmakides (first Secretary of Ecclesiastical Affairs) and former Chamberlain George Typaldos, who had greatly assisted in the fund-raising and lobbying efforts of that group. At the same time, the most-prominent neoclassicist of the era, Lyssandros Kaftantzoglou, was recognized as the ideal mastermind to be assigned the realization of the ambitious project

in the event that it acquired the government's consent. On the other hand was a group originating from the new generation of native artists, including such architects as Kleanthis and Zezos, along with prominent Romantic historians and public critics, such as the renowned intellectual and art-critic Spyridon Lambros. Additionally, opposition newspapers such as *Athena* and particularly *Aion,* led the faction of the Athenians who opposed the specific idea and insisted on the erection of a new church at a different location, pointing out the limited space of the site of Hagia Eirini, which forbade, as they said, the construction of a proper cathedral. Mayor Callifronas along with most of the municipal council aspired to express public sentiment, and also sided with them.

Central in the latter party's requests was that the cathedral be constructed and modelled on the Hagia Sophia, the ultimate symbol of Byzantine splendour and Orthodox glory. The necessity for the spiritual centre of the modern kingdom's capital to evoke the nation's imperial past became a call that intensified as Romanticism progressed. On the other hand, Kaftantzoglou insisted on the "aesthetic purism" and "robust monumentality" of Orthodox classicism, and, in the style of ecclesiastical architecture, sponsored a more refined neoclassical style "enriched with features from Roman and early Christian architecture."[50] His views and works were endorsed by many as fitting the spirit of the mid-19th century Athenian renaissance, while eliciting criticism and irony from others.[51] We can therefore see how the architectural debate on the project of the cathedral reflected the antithetical forces that dominated Greek society at the time: ancient Athens on the one hand, Byzantium on the other.

As the confrontation reached its zenith in 1842, the regime officially dropped the older, and by then abortive plan for the construction of the Cathedral of the Saviour, and those who wished for the elevation of Hagia Eirini to become the permanent cathedral intensified their lobbying effort to convince the government to adopt their proposal. The pressure exercised by such

[50] Helen Fessas-Emanouil, *Public Buildings in Modern Greece, 1827-1993* [*Κτίρια για δημόσια χρήση στη νεότερη Ελλάδα, 1827-1993*] (Athens: Papasotiriou, 1993), 72.

[51] Especially among the town's populace, which is the reason, as Fessas-Emmanouil notes, that his church compositions never overcame controversy, and ultimately became less frequent. See Fessas-Emanouil, *Public Buildings in Modern Greece,* 72.

influential figures as Farmakidesor Kaftantzoglou, and their strong association with governmental officials, convinced the regime, which by spring of 1842 was by all accounts bewildered by the extent to which the issue had unexpectedly taken, to consent and sanction the plan for the renovation of the church, so that she would become the city's permanent cathedral.[52] In addition to the amount of money which the activist supporters of the scheme had collected for that purpose, the government had also financed it with half of the savings accumulated from the fund-raising efforts organized for the abandoned project of the Church of the Saviour, and pledged the rest to subsidiary church construction activity in the wider region of the capital.[53] Kaftantzoglou's camp appeared to have won, and Hagia Eirini was declared, with all solemnity, the permanent cathedral of the capital, on the basis of the design he had prepared in cooperation with famous western-trained artists of the Nazarene tradition.

The reaction of the rival party was prompt and vigorous. The conservative newspapers attributed the decision to the government's hastiness to address the problem, and her inability to discipline and prevail over the various competing sectarian interests. Spyridon Lambros published tirades against "the novel works decorating, or rather uglifying the altars of our churches," calling them "monstrosities deprived of any good taste," explicitly pointing to the school which Kaftantzoglou and Thiersch had established in Athens.[54] Encountering such a fierce polemic as that which the critics of the scheme had launched, the government compromised and announced in November of the same year, that without the project of the renovation of Hagia Eirini being recalled, a new and larger basilica would be erected. It would be built in the area of the city market, next to the Byzantine chapel of Gorgoepikoos, about 300 yards away from the church of Hagia Eirini, and dedicated to the Annunciation of the Virgin. This, after completion, would constitute the metropolitan church of the capital.

However, no further decision was made on this matter, and as the funds pledged for the latest project were meager, consisting of the remaining half of the collected amount from the earlier fund-raising efforts for the Church of the

[52] Drossinos, *Hagia Eirini*, 18.
[53] Ibid., 15.
[54] Baroutas, *The Art Scene and Aesthetic Education in 19th Century Athens*, 72.

Saviour, it remained for some time merely a declaration. The government had tried to ensure that both factions were pleased, granting formal authorization to their declared goals, to avoid growing discontent from either. It was through the zeal and commitment of each party that the actual materialization of the respective schemes now depended on in the next decade.

The proponents of the first plan, of conversion of Hagia Eirini into the city's permanent cathedral, entered this competition being much more organized and focused. An active group of parishioners, an ecclesiastical council, and a chief-architect with a concrete vision were already in place with the government's endorsement, and were thus effective in its implementation. Their main effort was to maximize the space which the new church would occupy, through the expropriation of the neighbouring building plots. The mayor had a rivalry with Kaftantzoglou and resisted the plan persistently.[55] Not unexpectedly, a constant problem was that of meeting the project's continuous expenses, particularly as the savings that had been accumulated through the various fund-raising efforts dried up repeatedly. Throughout the decade, Kaftantzoglou and his team were successful in lobbying the government for economic support (which it repeatedly gave), as well as appealing to various private benefactors, and even mobilizing the Russian diplomats in Athens and ultimately receiving assistance from the Russian government, and from affluent Russian patrons. The most pronounced aspect of the Russian contribution was the donation of the church's golden iconostasis by Emperor Nicolas I in 1847, for which the *Aion* newspaper (the mouthpiece of the pro-Russian party), stated that "the gratitude of Greece to the great benefactor is proclaimed eternal."[56] The consistent campaign of that group proved fruitful, and the renovated church was completed, and began functioning after an official inauguration ceremony (the *encaenia*) on the 12th of December, 1850, the day of St. Spyridon, honouring one of the ancient Greek fathers of the Orthodox Church.[57]

Progress for the second project, on the other hand, was rather slow, and in the first several years almost non-existent. Although an initial agreement

[55] Drossinos, *Hagia Eirini*, 18.
[56] Drossinos, *Hagia Eirini*, 23.
[57] The completion was possible after a final subsidy from the government for the amount of 6,000 drachmas, given three months earlier.

among its supporters had been reached regarding the style of the church to be built, and the memories it should evoke for collective consciousness, the actual design had yet to be decided upon. The government and the municipal council initially assigned the project to the Danish architect Theofilus Hansen, to formulate a design proposal, since he was considered to be among the neo-classicists who incorporated Romantic features in their work. His approach was to synthesize the dominant classical norm of the day with elements from medieval architecture. His design has been called "a combination of Lombard, Renaissance and Byzantine morphological features," where the western models were not harmoniously fused with the eastern ones, leading to an "unsympathetic result," as it was unanimously characterised.[58] Frustrated with the debate, Hansen left Greece for good in 1846, and the king announced an architectural competition to find someone to modify his plan. It was formally declared that the design should be in the Greek-Byzantine order, proving that by the second half of the decade the intellectual climate had changed. The Great Idea had prevailed in the political discourse, and the government encouraged the incorporation of Byzantine architectural elements in modern buildings, while Kaftantzoglou was *a priori* excluded from the contest, being considered a classicist.

The approved design was that of Demetrios Zezos, again in neo-Byzantine style, which included an imposing dome upon a building with Gothic and neoclassical features. Although a proper design was found, the problem of the limited resources again obstructed the progress of the project, and as the government declared that it was cautious to avoid any banalities, it was again drawn to a halt. Serious construction work finally commenced in 1853 (three years after the renovated Hagia Eirini was inaugurated and began functioning as a cathedral), and was again halted as a result of Zezos' death in 1857. He was succeeded by the French architect Francois Boulanger, who modified the design yet again. The main building was completed in 1859, as a typical neo-Byzantine church, where Byzantine elements were combined with semi-Gothic arches and neo-classical facades in the least harmonious way, and interior

[58] Papageorgiou-Venetas, *The Ottonic Greece*, 421.

decoration began.[59] The church was inaugurated as the Cathedral of the Annunciation in 1862, a month after Otto had been overthrown. Hence Hagia Eirini remained the formal stage of civic and religious rituals almost for the whole duration of Bavarian rule. She became the sole cathedral of the Ottonic era.

The Temple of Hagia Eirini

After a decade of strenuous effort and close supervision of the various phases of construction of the church of Hagia Eirini, the masters responsible for its realization appeared satisfied with the outcome. Kaftantzoglou called it "one of the best churches of our time," a belief which was also shared by the majority of Athenians.[60] The newspaper *Astu* wrote that because of the functioning of the church, "the religious sentiment of the people was accordingly elevated and inflated."[61] Bastea notes that, irrespectively of the criticism expressed in the course of construction, the public eventually applauded and approved of the function of the new buildings after they were completed.[62] Its size and luxury were also unparalleled for Athenian standards, and fostered public acceptance. It must be noted that, as a result of the completion and inauguration of Hagia Eirini in 1850, the pressure for the speedy progress of the Annunciation Cathedral faded. The press, which was not always thoroughly knowledgeable of the relevant issues, hailed it as "magnificent," "one of the most beautiful churches not only in the East, but in the whole of Europe," and "indeed one of the jewels of the Greek capital."[63]

By the time of its inauguration in 1850, the church had acquired most of its surviving features it still has today, particularly in the exterior design and the courtyard, as well as in its overall size and capacity. It should be noted that the internal fresco iconography, assigned to Spyridon Hadjigiannopoulos,

[59] As with the architectural design, the decoration of the interior "departed from the Byzantine tradition to incorporate eclectic influences," see Bires, Kardamitsi*, Neoclassical Architecture in Greece*, 97.
[60] Drossinos, *Hagia Eirini*, 19.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Bastea, *The Creation of Modern Athens*, 147.
[63] Drossinos, *Hagia Eirini*, 24.

commenced at the same time, but finished only 20 years later, after Otto had been ousted and the successive regime had been installed for some time.

Its ecclesiastical design was typical of eclectic neoclassicism, enriched with features from the Italian and the French Renaissance, which Kaftantzoglou preferred in his ecclesiastical ventures. In other words, it was a less austere neo-classical style, "pleasant" and "refined," but also simple, adapted to "the lightness of the Attic landscape."[64] It was a design in which "simplicity and economy can co-exist admirably with good taste."[65] Specialists are divided between its admirers, who call it "a composition of inventiveness,"[66] and its critics, who consider the outcome of Kaftantzoglou's effort as mediocre.[67] The building consists of a domed three-aisled cruciform edifice, with a narthex. The pediment on the façade has a cross on top, standing on a pedestal, on which an inscription reads "Within This You Win," or "In this sign thou shalt conquer." It was the omen which, according to ecclesiastical historiography, Constantine the Great saw in the sky before the battle at the Milvian Bridge.[68] One church tower stands on the north and one on the south side of the façade, each resting on four columns with a small pediment at the end, and a cross on top, very much in the Italian style.

The interior of the building consists, as in most Orthodox churches, of three parts: the narthex, the main church, and the sanctuary. In the narthex, the worshipers are welcomed by a chiselled inscription on the wall above the entrance to the main church, which read in Greek the dictum "Wash thy soul from the sins, not only thy face." It is the famous palindrome inscribed on the fountain outside Hagia Sophia in Constantinople in the fifth century when she was built. Carving such an inscription at the narthex of Hagia Eirini, where there was no fountain placed (without which the apophthegm is less meaningful), was an intentional and direct allusion to Byzantium made by Kaftantzoglou.

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[64] Bires, and Kardamitsi*, Neoclassical Architecture in Greece*, 100.
[65] Fessas-Emanouil, *Public Buildings in Modern Greece*, 68.
[66] Bires, and Kardamitsi*, Neoclassical Architecture in Greece*, 100; as well as Philippides's view in Philippides, *Neohellenic Architecture*, 95.
[67] See for the first category Bires, and Kardamitsi*, Neoclassical Architecture in Greece*, 100; as well as Philippides's view in Philippides, *Neohellenic Architecture*, 95; and for the second, Bires, *Athens: From the 19th to the 20th Century*, 137; and Kalokyres, *Art in the Church of Greece*, 46.
[68] The omen led to his decision to convert to Christianity. After having the vision, he decided to use the emblem as his army's standard, and it subsequently became an ultimate Christian and Byzantine symbol –for which reason it was also used here.

The main church occupies most of the space, extending more than 30 yards in length and fourteen yards in width, and is divided into three naves, a central larger one, with two smaller ones on its left and right sides. Above the entire east and western section of the main church (over the two smaller naves), a second-storey elevation was built, where there is a gallery. The central nave is separated from the others by two colonnades of Doric order (one on each side respectively), making the classicist spirit present in its entirety. The columns are united by a row of arch-shaped architraves, a detail evoking the Renaissance.

The main church is separated from the sanctuary by the iconostasis, estimated to have cost of 48,000 Francs, along with other valuables (including church-silverware, grails, opulent canonicals, etc.).[69] It is a wood-carven gold-riveted piece of art, masterly processed, on which we encounter the oil-paintings of the four main icons of Christ, the Virgin, St. John the Baptist, and St. Eirini. The paintings are in the Russian Renaissance style, which was the Russian 19th century equivalent to the Nazarene variation that had dominated Greek iconography at the same period.

Inside the sanctuary, the primary material used for the altar is marble, and there is a semi-circular niche where the stilted throne of Otto was placed.[70] The location of the throne at the sanctum sanctorum is an important element of the religious-political semantics with which the church was invested in its design, as it illustrates the correlation between the monarch and God, which Otto was eager to evoke in order to inspire his subjects' awe and respect. However, Otto remained a devout Catholic to the end of his life, and this made his use of Greek ecclesiastical semantics occasionally problematic, and always bizarre. For example, when in the church, he alone could stand, along with the priest, at the sanctuary for the whole of a service (which the Byzantine Orthodox monarch could do by the right of his status as the empire's supreme bishop). However, because of his different creed Otto could not receive the Eucharist. This detail made his attendance of the Orthodox mass meaningless in the first place. Therefore, in non-official occasions, he observed the services rather infrequently, and when he did, these usually comprised of a *Te Deum*, or other

[69] Drossinos, *Hagia Eirini*, 33.
[70] Which was removed after Otto's ousting.

commemorative celebrations (memorial rituals, etc). Instead, he worshiped weekly at the Catholic cathedral of the town, while his Consort, who was a Protestant, had her own Danish pastor and area for private services in the Palace.

This is the picture that Hagia Eirini presented after its renovation. The story of its elevation to metropolitan church, unfolded above, and of the image it came to acquire, reflect and summarize the regime's stance towards central issues of the modern Greek state's national and religious identity during the first two decades of Ottonic rule. As seen, the decision to turn Hagia Eirini into the city's metropolitan church, initially signified the reluctant fulfilment of an obligation, stemming from civic-ritual necessities, on the part of a regime that tried very little to disguise its devaluing view of the nation's religious identity. It also revealed its determination to forcefully reform the profile of the Church and marginalize its importance on domestic affairs. Faced with the utter failure of its visionary neoclassical frenzy to be absorbed by the population and contribute to the creation of a social *esprit de corps,* and confronting the rising wave of Romanticism that reached the country and awoke idealized memories of its medieval past, the Ottonic establishment began to modify its treatment of religious symbols and semantics after the late 1830s. Accordingly, it attempted to shape a model of civic-religious affairs, as well as a pattern of expression of the citizens' religious sentiment, which would not be based on outright rejection of the native ecclesiastical tradition, but would concurrently be smoothly accommodated within its ruling ideology.

Thus, the regime became entangled in the net of Romanticism, and was ultimately transformed, along with its legitimizing ideology, by the complete reshuffling of the political landscape and priorities brought about by the movement. The upgrading and renovation of the first Athenian cathedral, as well as the debate preceding these, echoes precisely the period during which these developments occurred. The church's architectural style, as well as a great part of its interior construction and decoration, reveal the classicist morale of its creators, and their enduring attraction to western forms of ecclesiastical aesthetics, and, ultimately, to western forms of religious architecture.

At the same time, the Byzantine connotations in the design reveal the effort of the patrons of the project to filter their preferences in accordance to

popular expectations, and produce the aspired result in a form more acceptable to the public. Likewise, the cultivation of the monarchist, and preferably early Christian symbols in the country's religious tradition through the church's decoration, represented the attempt of the regime to manipulate popular religious affiliations with the aim of reinforcing the subjects' obedience to the monarch. Lastly, the assistance provided by the Russian government was a reminder of Russia's brotherly concern for the religious well-being of the Greeks, dictated by the pan-Orthodox solidarity which overrode national borders, and which the regime formally acknowledged. Hagia Eirini, then, in its final appearance, which in the greatest part is still preserved today, was both the result of the rapprochement with the nation's religious sentiment which the Bavarian regime was forced by reality to pursue, as well as a tool which the latter used to mould and manipulate that sentiment for advancing its own purposes and position.

Conclusion

As one wanders around the historic centre of Athens today, and reaches Aiolou Street that leads to the ancient Agora, underneath the hill of the Acropolis, they will come across the recently renovated church of Hagia Eirini, which is no longer the cathedral, but one of the most revered 19th century basilicas in the city. At that very spot, the passerby is witnessing the fragments which, brought together, comprise the turbulent history of nation-building in the modern state, that culminated with the establishment and development of the Ottonic capital. They are at the centre of neoclassical Athens, and under the shadow of the very antique monument whose symbolic significance dictated her - otherwise arguably unjustified - selection as capital. They are outside a church that, in comparison to all the neighbouring ones, retains a simpler appearance, much more reminiscent of pure classicism and in harmony with the neoclassical surroundings. The details of its façade, as well as much more in its interior, is abundant with works of art, signs and symbolism that betray the various antithetical ideas and forces trying to stir and manipulate popular feeling and allegiances at the time of its construction. Indeed, it seems that the discerning observer has, while at this corner, the pieces of the puzzle that defined the early

path of modern Greece, formulating a national discourse of heated division, and some would say of tragic dilemmas, which marked the nation's modern rebirth, stigmatized its history, and left its visible trace up to today.

By attending the lessons of history which these monuments render, perhaps the modern observer might view the situation from a different perspective. They might wonder how a tiny and largely illiterate nation, with a ruined economy and infrastructure, located in the most backward region of Europe, and in a hostile environment that barely forgave the fact of its independence, could be continuously obsessed with a most crucial phase of its history, with issues concerning architectural styles, artistic manners, and competing aesthetics. The observer might, then, find themselves in agreement with the Romantic historian Spyridon Zambelios, who wrote at about the same period that it is "these caprices of ours, and our fantasies, and our presumptuous claims, which testify that we are *les enfants gatés de l'histoire.*"[71]

[71] Elli Skopetea, *Prototype Kingdom and the Great Idea: Aspects of the National Question in Greece, 1830-1880* [*Το 'Πρότυπο Βασίλειο' και η Μεγάλη Ιδέα/ Όψεις του εθνικού προβλήματος στην Ελλάδα, 1830-1880*] (Athens: Polytypo Publications, 1988), 106.