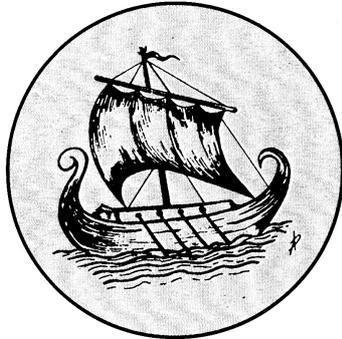


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Corfu, Crucible of Change: A Multicultural Island of Masonic Revolutionary Secrets



Abstract

Throughout the heyday of the Ottoman Empire, the Ionian island of Corfu (Kerkyra) on the north-western edge of Greece, and its capital city in particular, functioned as a cultural crucible and portal between East and



West. In shielding Corfu and its sister islands from Ottoman rule for strategic reasons, Venice unwittingly created a unique stepping stone to what was left of Greek and Byzantine culture. Retaining its Greek identity through six hundred years of Venetian, French, and British rule, Corfu received, assimilated and diffused numerous intellectual and artistic influences to produce a multifaceted, religiously tolerant and liberal culture.

The Modern Greek identity is intertwined with the struggle for independence, and the call to revolution was closely historically connected with Illuminist and Masonic ideals and principles. The Greek War of Independence (1821-1828) reshaped the map of the Balkans and south-eastern Europe, realigning the relations between the Great Powers of the day. It was a group of diplomats, intellectuals, and affluent merchants, all with close connections to secret societies including Freemasonry and the Italian Carbonari movement, who were directly responsible for creating the conditions for the Hellenic uprising through the clandestine and initiatory 'Friendly Society' (Filiki Etaireia) established in Odessa in 1814. Corfu was at the core of the cataclysmic events that changed the face of Europe, through the first Greek Masonic lodges founded there between 1782 and 1810, which became central to the propagation of these activities among the Greek Diaspora and philhellenic societies across Europe.

The main objectives of this paper are to delineate in what ways Corfu developed its unique culture in terms of its relevance to the cross-fertilization of ideas, thus demonstrating how Corfu came to provide an ideal setting for the successful establishment of the first lodges. Their role will then be mapped within the domino effect of influences spanning Europe and set in motion through the globalised character of Masonic activity. These events will then be tied in to wider European developments in esoteric thought and its social effects. Beyond its historical role in this particular period, the island features a rich architectural, artistic, literary and folkloric heritage, and which encompasses numerous aspects worthy of further study. It is hoped that this presentation will provide an impetus for the fruitful re-examination of its archives and artifacts from emergent cross-disciplinary perspectives.

Early History of Corfu

- **Prehistory - Hellenistic Period:** Corfu (Phaacia/Scheria/Corcyra): an island of seafarers and crossroads of trade
 - Indigenous Phaecians worshipped Mother-Goddess Dionysia until colonization by Euboeans and Corinthians bringing Apollonian cult. Dionysia and Dionysus became interchangeable.
- **Rome:** Protected and given independence by Mark Anthony
 - Christianised during reign of Calligula (37-41 AD) by Iasonas & Sosipatros
- **Byzantium:** Independent until Corfu requested protection from Vandal and Goth raids (555AD)
 - Fortifications built, military stationed, remains strong naval base
 - Emperor Manuel Comnenus I issues golden bull establishing "Sacred Order" (33 provincial + 33 city priests). In effect until 1864, some formalities still followed in church ceremonies.
 - 1081-1386 - Passed between Normans, Sicilians, Angevins, Venetians, with brief spells of independence in between.

Venetian Annexation: (1386-1797)

- **1386** - Delegation of Corfiot nobles (Knight Petro Capece, military commander Riccardo de Altrailla, Count Ioannis Kavasilas, notary Antonios de Henrico, galley Captain Nikolaos Trachaniotis and Jewish Corfiot David de Sertio) met with the Doge of Venice, Antonio Venier and the Signoria to establish the terms under which Corfu was to be annexed. Terms included:
 - Military and naval protection from Venice
 - Administrative support from Venice
 - Corfu gives oath of allegiance, taxation, supplies in time of war

Religion

- Orthodoxy remains the predominant religion.
- Catholics quickly intermarried into the Orthodox population
- Catholic/Orthodox ceremonies carried out in concert (still occurs today). No particular friction between the communities except in matters of politics where ultimately Orthodox cabal holds sway.
- The large Romaniote Jewish community is well integrated, enjoying civic rights and privileges. Corfu known as a centre for Torah study
- Large influx of Apuleian (Italian) Jews during 14th and 15th centuries, Sephardic Jews after 1492
- Nathan of Gaza (1643–1680, prophet of Shabbetai Zevi) successfully spread teachings about Zevi and laid ground for Sabbateian movement in Corfu
- Upper classes "First Corfiot (Venetian), then Christian." Lower classes kept in check by priesthood. Various folk traditions, some with evident pagan roots, kept alive in the villages and during religious festivals
- Inquisition forbidden to interfere in Corfiot matters by Doge Piero Loredan (1569)

Society-Politics-Economy

- Corfu was largely self-sufficient financially, with large salt-works, olive groves and olive oil exports to East and West, and the beginnings of local industry, as well as being a pivotal trade centre for the Mediterranean
- Feudal system still in place: Aristocracy impenetrable except through birth and rare instances where members of wealthy middle-class could fulfill a number of prerequisites, including ownership of land.
- Due to trade, many merchants quickly amassed considerable wealth. A large population of descendants of the Byzantine military also remained on the island (mainly in the southern villages and around the town), who could not be classed with the peasant classes, nor in the aristocracy. Limited rights are granted in 1430, and a series of uprisings across the seven islands (mainly in Corfu and Zakynthos) in the 16th and 17th centuries lead to the urban middle-class gaining positions in the administration, significant military positions and most importantly, political influence.

Culture-Arts

- First influx of intelligentsia, scholars, etc following the fall of Byzantium (1453)
- Second influx following fall of Crete to the Ottomans (1669)
- Septinsular School of Art developed out of the Cretan School, peaking in the 17th century. It was characterized by a blend of Byzantine iconographic techniques with Western (Venetian) use of perspective, freedom of form, and depiction of more secular subject matter.
- Corfu's theatrical and musical tradition grew up around the theatre of San Giacomo (est. 1720). Due to the comparative religious freedom and liberalism on the island, artistic exploration was, if anything, encouraged, and so Corfu developed into a centre for the arts.

The Greek Enlightenment - Diafotismos (Διαφωτισμός)

- In contrast to the Enlightenment -Age of Reason in Western Europe, the Greek Enlightenment was if anything, more a product of the Counter-Enlightenment and the Romantic ideals suffusing it; a form of cultural patriotism characterized by a desperate struggle for freedom and resurrection of an occupied nation that defined itself by its ancient roots, strict religion, and fixation on freedom and the right to self-determination.
- Two main contributing factors: Waning of Ottoman power around the end of the 17th century & empowerment of the middle class
- Influenced by Western Enlightenment ideas and principles this provided room for the galvanisation of Greeks from the Diaspora: Strong expatriate communities in Paris, Vienna, Budapest, Marseilles, Odessa, several Italian cities, including Venice.
- 3 main channels of dissemination within the expatriate networks of the Greek Diaspora (wealthy merchants-scholars), Literary Salons, Masonic Lodges, quasi-Masonic organisations & Societies.

- Individual scholars (best examples Adamantios Korais (1748-1833) –Rigas Velestinlis-Ferraios (1757-1798) revived the language, translated, returned to occupied Greece to disseminate and teach elements of Greek philosophy and history
- Greek newspapers and pamphlets circulating within the expatriate communities helped to spread the word and ignite nationalistic sentiments
- Salons and quasi-masonic societies ignited philhellenic sentiment among members of European cultural elite – most notable example was Lord Byron who fought and died in Greece
- Masonic lodges provided a ready-made network through which messages and ideologies could – and did – travel.

Freemasonry in Corfu:

Corfu fulfilled the role of a stepping stone between Europe and occupied Greece, and was the only place where these ideas and their discussion and development would not be persecuted. Early Freemasonry in Corfu was briefly persecuted by the Venetian rulers, but this ended with the fall of Venice. French and British governors were open and positive towards Freemasonry.

- **The First Lodges:** (multiple dates denote regularity issues and the closure/reopening of these lodges)

Beneficenza	(Italian)	1741, 1782, 1806
Philogénie	(French)	1807
St. Napoleon	(French)	1809
La Paix	(French-Greek)	(1807-1818)
Bienfaisance et Philogénie Rèunies (Greek)		(1813) 1815
Pythagoras	(English)	1815
Most Serene Grand Orient of Greece, Orient of Corfu		(1811) 1815
National Grand Lodge of Greece		(1812) 1815
St John and the Phoenix		1818
Phoenix	(Greek)	1843

Main Figures (all Freemasons) and Organisations:

- **Count Dionysios Romas** (1771-1857). First Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Greece (Orient of Corfu). Was a key figure in the establishment and proliferation of Ionian Freemasonry.
- **Antonios Dandolo** (1788-1863) Established St John & Phoenix lodges, following a pro-French policy to garner support for the liberation effort. Disapproved strongly of Romas' pro-British turnaround which had followed the tide of political developments.
- **Count Ioannis Capodistrias** (1776-1831), Minister of the Septinsular Republic (1802-1807), Foreign Minister of Russia (1813-1822), First Governor of Greece (1828). Brilliant and shrewd diplomat whose negotiations resulted in the brief spell of complete independence for Corfu and the Septinsular Republic

(1801-1807). He mustered Russian political support for his cause, established quasi-Masonic patriotic “societies” in Paris and Vienna, and successfully negotiated British protection for the Septinsular Republic (Vienna Congress 1814 – finalized in London 1815)

Some of the better known and more influential patriotic societies

Name	Date	City	Founder(s)	Character
Good Cousins	1790	Vienna	R. Feraios	Literary-Scholarly (Masonic)
Hotel Hellenophone	1809	Paris	G. Salykas	Scholarly-Patriotic
Philomuse Society	1813	Vienna	I. Kapodistrias	Literary-Artistic-Patriotic

- **Athanasios (Tekelis) Tsakalof** (1788-1851)
- **Nikolaos Skoufas** (1779-1818) Founders of the Filiki Etaireia
- **Emmanuel Xanthos** (1772-1851) (Φιλική Εταιρεία) Odessa, 1814

- **The Filiki Etaireia**, in many ways similar to the Italian Carbonari movement (though with the blessing of the church), also featured an oath, and system of degrees and signs of recognition that were Masonic in all but name. They multiplied in “cells” throughout the expatriate networks and across occupied Greece.
 - **(Prince) Alexandros Ypsilantis** (1792-1828) Elected head of Filiki Etaireia, Leader of Sacred Band, Coordinated early war effort, led Battle of Dragasani (1821) and initiated many other skirmishes in the Danubian Principalities to draw the Ottoman forces north so that the Peloponnesian guerilla bands could begin the revolution.
 - **The Sacred Band** (aka Sacred Company) was the military arm of the Filiki Etaireia, formed by the students of the Greek academy in Vienna. They were decimated at the Battle of Dragasani but the diversionary tactics were ultimately successful.

Brief Timeline

- **1801-1807:** Corfu becomes the capital of the independent Septinsular Republic, with its own constitution, marine border, army, navy, flag, diplomatic corps, bank, currency and university.
- **1807-1814:** France annexes the Septinsular Republic. During this time, schools and centres of learning are founded across the seven islands either with the support of Masonic lodges or by individual Freemasons.
- **1814:** Vienna Congress. The Great Powers are at a stalemate as to what to do with the Septinsular Republic.
- **1815 - 1864:** The seven islands become a British Protectorate
- **1821-1828:** Greek War of Independence
- **1828:** Battle of Navarino: British and French navies join the Greek navy to defeat the Ottoman forces.
- **1829:** Treaty of London: Greece formally acknowledged as an independent nation
- **1864:** Corfu and sister islands are united with liberated Greece.
- **(1860s onwards)** Greek Freemasonry “relocates” to Athens

Selected Bibliography*

The vast majority of the relevant bibliography is in Greek, and when researching the political history of these events, one finds that the emphasis alters significantly depending on the nationality of the writer. As is frequently the case when researching Masonic history, the relevant accounts differ and occasionally contradict each other depending on the allegiances, interests, and period during which they were written, as later Masonic history in Greece is fraught with reversals and frictions not unlike those seen elsewhere. Nevertheless, there is sufficient documentation and material to confirm the accuracy of those aspects covered in this particular paper, while numerous intriguing details are to be found in the bibliography.

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* A large number of unpublished or out of print documents and photographs held in family and private archives were also invaluable to this paper.