

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

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Corfu(Slide 1) is a minute speck on the edge of the Adriatic, with a history that is in places so intriguing that it can truly be said to be stranger than fiction. It has seen many conquests and reversals of fortune – yet somehow always managed to retain a peculiar semblance of independence, and due to its colourful history, developed a unique set of cultural characteristics, many of which are both interesting and constructive with regard to the study of W.E.

Following an essential, though brief sketch of some of Corfu's earlier background, (Slide 2) I will focus on the period between the 17th and the 19th centuries, outlining the main events and figures in the build-up to the Greek War of Independence and the Corfiot and Masonic role in its inception. This period witnessed the convergence of multiple simultaneous historical influences, including the imminent collapse of the Venetian Empire, the gradual decay of the Ottoman Empire and the resulting brief period during which Corfu was the only place where the ideas of individual freedom and responsibility that informed the sociopolitical aspects of the Enlightenment could come together in the minds of intellectuals whose lives, beliefs and experience incorporated the currents of thought so prevalent in the rest of Europe.

Inspired by a combination of principles originating from esoteric philosophies and a version of romantic nationalistic fervor, the conjunction of people, events, politics and ideas conspired to make Corfu a crucible of change, the ripples of which have had influences up to the present. These, as we will see, are closely connected to Corfu's unique nature that quite literally made it the only piece of land that can be said to have remained Greek throughout the four centuries of Ottoman rule.

Early History (Slide 3)

Since antiquity the island of Corcyra, as it was known in pre-Hellenic times, was seen as a natural border between East and West. The island was also known as Scheria, or (Φαιακία), Latinised to Phaecia meaning grey, or spectral, and it was considered to be akin to paradise, or the world of the next life. Its emblem, depicted on Bronze Age coins, is that of a rudderless ship – associated with the ship of the dead - and Homer tells us: “For the fast ships of the Phaecians have neither rudder nor captain, rather they follow the thought of man of their own accord...”ⁱ

From the Bronze Age until the fall of Byzantium, Corfu passed through the hands of many different conquerors and protectors, yet was somehow always granted the privilege of relative independence and the right to self-administration. Following

repeated raids by Vandals and Goths that culminated in its almost total destruction in 555 AD, Corfu was integrated into the Byzantine Empire. The new rulers took advantage of the island's pivotal geographic location, reinforced existing Roman fortifications and used it as a naval base for incursions to both West and South. The Byzantine feudal system was established, and in part thanks to its rigidity, many customs, dialects, place-names and surnames have survived nearly intact until today, so that the names of villages and families in Corfu still readily reveal their roots.

(Slide 4) An intriguing element of Byzantine feudalism that forms a parallel line of influence in this story was the inspired decision of Byzantine emperor Manuel Comnenus the 1st (1143-1180) to establish a unique religious hierarchical system which preserved Corfu's inherently Greek Orthodox character for the next 800 years. 33 provincial priests and another 33 urban priests were responsible for maintaining the Orthodox faith and ensuring the subordination of the populace. Collectively known as the "Sacred Order" – they were given the surname "Lefteriotis" – meaning free, and the name and position were passed from father to son.

According to one historian, the number of 33 priests was selected on the basis of Pythagorean theory, and this priestly cabal used the Jewish calendar alongside the Christian one, to enhance their mystique and ensure their dominance when necessary.ⁱⁱ The main significance of this relates to the role played by the Orthodox Church, throughout Ottoman and Venetian rule, both in the mainland and in Corfu, since it was greatly responsible for preserving the Greek language and elements of its history and culture.

As the first Crusades swept down from Western Europe in the 11th century, Corfu was repeatedly pillaged, and despite brief spells of independence, it was passed from conqueror to conqueror until the sack of Constantinople during the 4th Crusade in 1204. With the Empire crippled in the East, from the West, Venice quickly took advantage of the situation, and Corfu was annexed by Venice in 1386, to remain one of Venice's most prized assets until La Serenissima fell to Napoleon in 1797. (Slide 5) Corfu's sister islands of Paxos, Zante (Zakynthos), Cephalonia, Ithaca, Cythera and Lefkas were also claimed by Venice, but were later conquered by the Turks. Corfu was the sole part of Greece that remained unscathed by Ottoman rule.

Religion (Slide 6)

On a religious level, the island remained remarkably liberal during Venetian rule. The Orthodox Sacred Order controlled the lower classes, intervened in politics as necessary, and despite occasional power struggles, Catholic and Orthodox ceremonies were often carried out in concert. Orthodoxy remained the predominant religion and most Catholics in the aristocracy were absorbed into the Orthodox community by marriage, while in the upper classes, the Venetian attitude of "First Venetian, then Christian" carried over to Corfu as well. In 1569, Doge Piero Loredan issued an unprecedented ducal decree forbidding the Holy Inquisition to interfere in Corfiot matters in any way.ⁱⁱⁱ

From the 13th century on, Corfu had also become a centre for Torah study, as it was home to a relatively large Jewish community, comprising a large number of Romaniote Jews, who had settled in Greece after the first Diaspora in 70 AD, developing their own unique culture, language, and liturgy.^{iv} Corfiot Jews were

afforded considerably more civic privileges and rights than in any other part of the Byzantine and Venetian Empires, attracting an influx of Italian, or Apuleian Jews in the 14th and 15th centuries, while Sephardic Jews settled in Corfu after the expulsion from Spain in 1492, and the Sabbateian movement of the 17th century also found fertile ground there.

Society-Politics(Slide 7)

Like Venice, Corfu was ruled by an oligarchy of nobles, comprised of members of the Venetian and the local aristocracy – descendants of Byzantine nobles and members of Byzantine chivalric orders. Up until the 16th century, the aristocracy was essentially impenetrable, acknowledged by birthright alone. However, partly due to the large military presence on the island that eventually intermarried with the local population, and also due to the increasing wealth amassed by merchants, an urban middle class began to develop which rapidly acquired considerable influence. Granted restricted rights by the Doge of Venice in 1430, following a series of uprisings in Zakynthos and Corfu during the 16th and 17th centuries, by 1652 the middle class had gained considerable ground against increasingly decadent and bankrupt nobles, and thus came to enjoy citizen, or burgher status^v. This shift, in conjunction with the religious liberalism and external influences mainly channeled through the Greek Diaspora essentially laid the ground for the later independence and liberation movements.

Culture-Arts (Slide 8)

Venetian military protection, constituting a basic part of the agreement of 1386 between Corfu and Venice, allowed Corfu to flourish culturally during the years of Ottoman rule in mainland Greece, and added to the liberal mentality of the island. Following the fall of Byzantium in 1453, members of the cultural elite fled from all over Greece to the still-Venetian Crete and to the Septinsular complex of the Ionian archipelago headed by Corfu.

A second such influx occurred following the fall of Crete in 1669. The Cretan school of religious art dominated the Greek cultural Renaissance throughout the 15th & 16th centuries, but it was in Corfu that the “Eptanisiaki” or “Septinsular” school evolved its distinctive style, blending traditional Byzantine iconographic techniques with elements of the Cretan school and Western influences. The Septinsular style peaked during the 17th century, in this region which remained the only centre for free artistic expression in former Greek territories, resulting in a unique *mélange* of artistic experimentation.

(Slide 9) In 1720 the Theatre of San Giacomo, aka the “first theatre in the East” was established in a majestic Venetian building in the centre of Corfu town, now used as the Town Hall. A strong musical and theatrical tradition quickly grew up around it. The first operas in the Eastern Mediterranean were “piloted” in Corfu before being played in Venice, while it was said that the Corfiot reception of new performances was a trusted gauge of their popularity in the capital.^{vi} Corfu’s growing reputation as a centre for the arts that was even more liberal than Venice, attracted visiting artists, nobles and scholars, contributing greatly to its unique atmosphere, and laying the cornerstone for later cultural and ideological developments.

Enlightenment

The two main factors which made room for the downfall of the aristocracy and the evolution of a set of circumstances leading to the rise of the liberation movement and the Greek War of Independence were the waning of Ottoman power following a series of unsuccessful raids on Corfu in the mid-18th century, and the increasing empowerment of the middle class that had established itself towards the end of the 17th century.

(Slide 10) While the Age of Reason dawned across Europe and the first stirrings of Illuminist and Romantic ideas had begun to take root, in mainland Greece aside from a few secret schools run by the Orthodox clergy, based in caves and monasteries, the populace had remained largely illiterate for 400 years, while those members of higher social standing who had not fled west to the Ionian, had for the most part come to terms with the status quo and collaborated, or at least cooperated with the Ottoman rulers. Members of the Greek Diaspora however, had established thriving, mainly mercantile, communities as far afield as Paris, Vienna, Budapest, Marseilles and Odessa, as well as in several Italian cities, naturally including Venice. These communities had amassed considerable wealth and influence, and included highly educated individuals who translated the Enlightenment principles in light of their own preoccupation with the liberation of their homeland. For individuals such as Velestinlis, Korais and many others, this had to begin with reminding the population what it meant to be Greek and instilling, or reviving a sense of pride and responsibility for the cultural heritage that was theirs.

In contrast to the focus on Reason that characterised the Western European Enlightenment, the Greek Enlightenment was if anything, more a product of the Counter-Enlightenment and the Romantic ideals suffusing it: 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 self-determination. Where religious conflicts were at the heart of the turmoil in Western Europe that spawned the Enlightenment, the Orthodox Church was a symbol of Greek identity and a repository of language and history. Encouraged by the church, returning expatriate scholars sought to ground the Enlightenment principles in Greek philosophy, language, and above all, identity. In a very real way, the classical legacy being rediscovered and taught by the scholars of the Greek Enlightenment became their own perennial philosophy in terms of the dynamic and impetus for action that it induced. What matters of doctrine were to the various religious factions in the rest of Europe, was transformed into what could be termed cultural patriotism in the Greek reality, this being one of the foremost aspects which allowed the revolutionary movement to burgeon as it did. (Slide 11) Within the expatriate network, Enlightenment principles and revolutionary ideas were disseminated through publications and pamphlets, such as this Greek-language newspaper established in Vienna in 1792 – aptly named “Hermes the Scholar.”

With its liberal nature and privileged geopolitical status, Corfu became the one place where these ideas could converge and evolve not only in theory, but also in practice. Thus, as the movement acquired a distinctive identity, it was then disseminated to the

mainland, via Corfu which acted both as a melting-pot, and as a stepping-stone to the occupied mainland.

(Slide 12) Superimposed upon and connecting the expatriate network, the three main channels through which these ideas proliferated were the literary salons of the day, Masonic lodges, and quasi-Masonic secret societies of a literary, philosophical, and invariably patriotic character, very similar in their respective aims and structure to the more or less contemporary Italian Carbonari movement, and with a scope that spanned Europe. They worked towards the explicit aim of creating a rallying point for expatriate patriots, and the dissemination of pro-liberation material, with the hope of igniting philhellenic sympathies among the cultural elite. Between the late 18th and early 19th centuries, a good number of these were founded in various European cities, culminating in the establishment of the “Society of Friends”, in Odessa 1814, which coordinated and directly instigated the Greek war of independence. These three channels frequently intertwined and overlapped, and after the mid-18th century formed a powerful conduit with its own momentum that would eventually result in the reestablishment of Greece on the map and a permanent shift in the balance of power in Europe.

The first Masonic lodges on Greek territory were established in Corfu, and from their inception, they were to demonstrate a strongly political character, apparently with the blessing of the French and Russian forces that were also to play a central part in the developments that followed. Beneficenza (Bienfaisance) lodge, immediately popular among scholars, merchants and patriots, was originally established in Corfu in 1741, and following several false starts for reasons of irregularity, it officially reopened on June 13th 1782 with the approval of the GL of Verona and with Padua as its base.

(Slide 13) In 1797, the Venetian Republic acceded to Napoleon’s forces, a development welcomed in Corfu where strongly nationalistic sentiments had been growing for some time. The Russian-Turkish alliance, then in opposition to the France, claimed Corfu in February 1799, but two months later proclaimed the Septinsular complex an independent state, with Corfu as the capital. This was ratified in 1800 with the treaty of Constantinople, recognizing the Septinsular Republic as an independent entity, with its own constitution, marine border, army, navy, flag, diplomatic corps, bank, currency and university. Thus, by the autumn of 1801, the seven Ionian Islands became the first territories of liberated Greece, officially recognized by the Great Powers of the day, and the revolutionary idea acquired tangible ground on which to grow and spread. Written along the American model, the Republic’s revised constitution of 1803 contained elements of the French revolutionary constitutions, and made clear provision for human and civic rights.

In 1807 France once again gained the upper hand in the Mediterranean, and the Ionian republic became a protectorate of France until Napoleon’s defeat.^{vii} The next seven years of French annexation of Corfu were some of the richest and most creative on many fronts. Schools and centres of higher learning were founded, and the whole infrastructure of the island overhauled. (Slide 14) In the same year, the Masonic lodge *Philogenie* was established in Corfu, and the lodge St. Napoleon 2 years later. A request for recognition was sent to the GODF by Count Dionysios Romas, a major figure in the development of Freemasonry in the Ionian and in areas of occupied

Greece. According to this document, he made clear the patriotic character of this lodge, the name itself meaning “friends of the nation.” The lodges *Philogenie and Bienfaisance* were united in 1811, and formally acknowledged by the GOdF as the Most Serene Grand Orient of Greece in 1815, with the Duke of Sussex installed as Grand Master once Corfu became a British protectorate. In 1818, Phoenix lodge was inaugurated in Corfu – and is today the oldest Greek lodge still in existence, bearing the honorary number 1. (Slide 15) Also by 1818, thanks to Romas and the pro-French Antonios Dandolos, Masonic lodges had proliferated across the seven islands and beyond, comprising powerful members of high social and political standing, who according to one historian, essentially tried to run Corfu’s sociopolitical scene according to the Masonic principles of freedom and equality. (Slide 16) They focused on educating the population, and these lodges and their members established numerous cultural organizations including the municipal music schools, whose brass bands still march around the island on high days and holidays, a medical association, library, and public art school. Before as well as during the Greek War of independence, the lodges financed and sent weapons to Greek guerrilla bands on the mainland – 40,000 rifles in one recorded case - and established further Masonic lodges throughout the occupied mainland, while the overwhelming majority of the military and guerrilla leaders of the uprising were known Freemasons in close communication with the Ionian lodges. (Slide 17) A document written by Romas in 1843 as a retrospective report to the GODF, informs us that due to patriotic activity the lodges were not always able to meet and work in a “regular” fashion. His justification, in his own words reads: “I considered that the liberation of a Classical Nation, once the cradle of light and of the brightest civilization, from the shame of such a long and humiliating enslavement, would be the work of a brave soul and of a true Mason”^{viii}.

This mentality was shared by many Greek Masons, and while Dionysios Romas was establishing and developing the Masonic network in Corfu and beyond, a young Corfiot physician, diplomat and Freemason, (Slide 18) Count Ioannis Kapodistrias – who would become the first governor of Greece after the war of independence - was using his brilliant diplomatic capabilities to the same ends. As foreign minister of Russia, he influenced Tsar Alexander to support the liberation of Greece, and used his position to energize diplomatic and expatriate networks for the same purpose. (Slide 19) At the Vienna Congress in 1814, France, Austria, Italy and Russia ended up squabbling over what to do with the Ionian islands, each having various interests riding on their fate. Total independence would set a dangerous precedent and only inflame patriotic sentiments, while no Great Power wanted the burden of responsibility that went with all that the islands had already come to symbolize with their brief spell of independence and the notoriously rebellious reputation of the now educated, politically active and Masonically influenced inhabitants. After the failure of Kapodistrias’ initial plea for complete independence under the impartial protection of all the Great Powers, he pressed for the islands to become a British protectorate, which Great Britain reluctantly accepted in 1815.

(Slide 20) While Kapodistrias pursued diplomatic solutions to the Greek issue, in Odessa three young Freemasons, initiates of Ionian lodges, came to form the Masonically inspired “Philiki Etaireia” – “Society of Friends,” in 1814, with the sole purpose of preparing for revolution based on the Masonic concept of freedom, being: “the power to act, or not to act according to individual will, and the privilege to enjoy

those rights which natural law guarantees to all men.”^{xix} With three degrees, a catechism and oath which was Masonic in all but name, Athanasios Tsakalof, Emmanuel Xanthos and Nikolaos Skoufas created what was to be the epicenter of the revolution. (Slide 21) Using the same expatriate and Masonic channels as Kapodistrias, they rapidly gathered members, and under the direction of Alexander Ipsilantis, then aide-de-camp and cavalry general in the Russian military, began to gather an army made up of Greek expatriate students, known as the Sacred Band. Its sole purpose was to create diversions by provoking skirmishes in the Danubian Principalities and so to draw Turkish forces north so that the uprising in the Peloponnese could take hold. Kapodistrias had warned that it was too early and that a diplomatic resolution with the Ionian Islands as a precedent and rallying point would be more prudent, but by this time the revolution had already begun. (Slide 21) It was March of 1821, and across Greece as well as within the expatriate communities all able-bodied men, from monks to schoolboys, as well as women in some notable cases, were forming armies and guerrilla bands with the battle cry “freedom or death.” The war never reached Corfu and her sister islands, but many refugees did, and the islands continued to send aid, weapons, and soldiers, while also acting as safe ground for the military to regroup. After seven years of bloody war, numerous international attempts to intercede and quash the revolution, eventually the Great Powers sent military and naval support to help end the conflict, and the Treaty of London, signed in 1829, formally recognized the newly formed Greek nation.

(Slide 21) Within these seven short years, the death blow to the Turkish Empire had been dealt, the Russians had overturned their former allegiance to the Turks, Austria had lost its rigid grip on various principalities and protectorates, including all that remained of Venetian territories, France and Britain became allies in the naval battle of Navarino off the Peloponnese coast, and one by one, the Balkan nations sought their independence. Corfu and the rest of the Septinsular complex were formally handed over to Greece in 1864. It would take another eighty years and inestimable bloodshed for the map to be fully redrawn, but in essence, the whole face of Europe had changed for good, and the history of this revolution would become the heart of the Modern Greek identity.

(Slide 22) It may sound like an outrageous overstatement to argue that these momentous events were the result of a clutch of unruly islanders taking the axioms of the early theosophers and Masonic principles a little too literally: namely to rely on their own resources, and that all men deserved the privilege of liberty, equality and fraternity. Yet the documentation underpinning these events and delineating the interrelationship between Masonic activity and sociopolitical developments is present in the literature, official and private documents of the era, their interpretation often coloured by the teachings of ancient philosophers and leaders, and once the detail of the interweaving strands of influence are examined in light of the changes forged across Western Europe by Illuminist and Romantic ideals, the chain reaction of events becomes clear.

With specific relevance to the question of this conference, regarding the geography of emergence and influence of esoteric currents, Corfu essentially comprises a crucible in which Masonic and Romantic ideals were unashamedly mixed with politics resulting in the creation, or resurrection of a nation. The network of influences spanned Europe, and if one is to do justice to Modern Greek history, then it needs to

be examined through the lens of the Masonic sphere of influence and the specific events played out in Corfu, often behind closed doors. At the same time, to do justice to the history of Greek Freemasonry, more so than elsewhere in Europe, it must be seen primarily through a political and patriotic lens. This is not a generalization on the basis of the broad sociocultural setting, but in light of direct and intentional interpretations and implementation of ideas.

Corfu's population comprised the descendants of Byzantine chivalric orders, the Byzantine military, and the intelligentsia who migrated from across occupied Greece. While peasants slaved for their masters and aristocrats played at diplomacy, the middle class became merchants and scholars, silently rising in the ranks. While the Great Powers squabbled over their heads, the new middle-class quietly used Masonic lodges as a very real way in which to spread the revolutionary idea, and organize the war effort. Corfu can be seen as a case study where those esoteric principles embedded in Masonic catechisms were fused with those preserved elements of Greek philosophy with the principle of individual freedom at its core.

(Slide 23) As with all such broadly painted pictures, much detail has necessarily been omitted in this brief overview of Corfiot history, while the role and phenomenology of ideas discussed here are so firmly embedded in the history and events that the one cannot really be discussed without the other. Many further diverse elements of esoteric interest converge or cross paths in Corfu; including a church rife with symbolism, a strong mystical element and as we have seen, a revolutionary past, aspects of folklore, and unique artistic and cultural characteristics. Despite being consigned to footnotes after the fall of Constantinople, and disappearing from maps for four or so centuries, the truth is that the Greek contribution to cultural cross-fertilization between East and West did not end in the classical, nor the Byzantine period, and as I hope to have demonstrated today, these are omissions worthy of further investigation.

ⁱ (Odyssey, Rhaps. 7, verses 579-585 in Koukkou 17).

ⁱⁱ Klimis p. 69

ⁱⁱⁱ Klimis 106

^{iv} Central Jewish Council for Greece: http://www.kis.gr/kerkyrahistory_en.html

^v Koukkou 20-21

^{vi} <http://www.corfu.gr/en.htm>

^{vii} with the Treaty of Tilcīt, signed between Tsar Alexander of Russia and Napoleon

^{viii} Rizopoulos 58

^{ix} Rizopoulos 64