

ИЗКУСТВО И ИСТОРИЯ

ART AND HISTORY

Първи вселенски събор, „Рождество Христово“,
Арбанаси, галерия (1640-1649).
Снимка Т. Бачева

First Ecumenical Council, Nativity Church,
Arbanasi, gallery (1640-1649).
Photo credit T. Bacheva

Изкуствоведски списания 2024

Art Readings 2024



ИЗКУСТВОВЕДСКИ ЧЕТЕНИЯ

Тематичен рецензиран годишник за изкуствознание в два тома

ART READINGS

Thematic Peer-reviewed Annual in Art Studies, Volumes I-II

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Publisher

Institute of Art Studies
21 Krakra Str.
1504 Sofia
Bulgaria

www.artstudies.bg

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ИЗКУСТВОВЕДСКИ ЧЕТЕНИЯ
Тематичен рецензиран годишник за изкуствознание в два тома
2024.I. – Старо изкуство

ИЗКУСТВО И ИСТОРИЯ



ART AND HISTORY

ART READINGS
Thematic Peer-reviewed Annual in Art Studies, Volumes I-II
2024.I. *Old Art*

съставители

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София 2025

Текстовете от този том са представени като доклади на международната конференция Изкуствоведски четения 2024, модул Старо изкуство, 11-13 април 2024 г., София, Институт за изследване на изкуствата – БАН. Статиите са преминали процедура на рецензиране.

The texts in this volume were presented as papers at the international conference Art Readings 2024, Old Art Module, 11-13 April 2024, Sofia, Institute of Art Studies – BAS. The manuscripts have undergone a peer-review process.

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Изданието е реализирано с финансовата подкрепа на Фонд „Научни изследвания“, договор № КП-06-МНФ/38/14.12.2023. Фонд „Научни изследвания“ не носи отговорност за съдържанието на докладите, представени на научния форум, както и за съдържанието на рекламните и други материали в него.

The volume has been printed with financial support of the Bulgarian National Science Fund according to contract No. КП-06-МНФ/38/14.12.2023. The Bulgarian National Science Fund is not responsible for the content of the papers presented at the scientific forum, as well as for the advertising and other materials for the event.

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Religious Identity and Cultural Politics of the Great Powers in the Cretan State (1898-1913)

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Abstract: This paper analyses the cultural policies implemented by the Russians in the Rethymno region of Crete during the Cretan Autonomy period and the subsequent tensions that arose with the Italians. Furthermore, it examines how the Russians employed their Eastern Orthodox faith, which was shared by the Christian Cretans, to gain support and advance their agenda in contrast to the Italian Catholics or the Protestant British. In this context, the modernization works conducted by the Russians are surveyed along with the transfer of ecclesiastical items from Russia to be donated or sold to churches in the Rethymno area.

Keywords: urbanism, colonial cultural politics, Eastern Mediterranean, Ottoman architecture, Venetian architecture, Orientalism, Russian ecclesiastical art

Crete came under Ottoman control in 1669 following a lengthy conflict with the Venetians, who had occupied the island since the early 13th century. A hundred years later, a series of insurrections began, driven by the aspiration for autonomy from Ottoman rule. Following Greece's recognition as an independent state in 1830, the primary objective of the Christian revolutionaries became the unification with the Greek state. Meanwhile, the Great Powers supported the reform efforts of the Ottoman administration, while hindering the revolutionary movements of the Christian Cretans. Their goal was to maintain

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the *status quo* in the Eastern Mediterranean, ensuring the continued alignment of political and economic interests in the region. The Anglo-French were actively engaged in defending the Ottoman Empire with the objective of strengthening its position as a bulwark against Russia's aspirations for a descent into the Mediterranean. Russia on the other hand, perceived the "Christian Orthodox East" as a region of strategic importance, with a distinctive role for Russia to play in the area. The aforementioned interests led to the involvement of the Great Powers in the Cretan question². In 1897, during one of the revolts, a Greek military force arrived on the island of Crete with the objective of annexing it. This resulted in opposition from the Great Powers, who subsequently intervened and took control of the island³. The stated rationale for their intervention was to put a stop to the violence between Christian and Muslim Cretans and to prevent further bloodshed. A semi-autonomous, semi-colonial regime was established under the suzerainty of the Sultan, with four of the Great Powers acting as protectors. The newly established political entity, known as Cretan Autonomy (or Cretan State), lasted from 1898 to 1913⁴. During this period, Crete was partitioned into British, French, Russian, and Italian zones of control. Prince George, the second son of the King of Greece, was appointed High Commissioner, and a joint Muslim-Christian assembly was part-elected, part-appointed⁵.

The competition between the Great Powers was not confined to the political and economic spheres; it also encompassed the cultural domain, exerting a profound influence on the island's urban landscape. The primary objective of the representatives of the Great Powers, as well as the local government, was the modernization of the cities, which entailed a process of Europeanisation⁶. It is widely acknowledged that Europe during those times of intense colonialism perceived itself as

2 The Cretan question was part of the bigger Eastern Question for which there is a lot of relative bibliography. Indicatively: *Frery, Kozelsky* 2014; *Petmezas, Tzedaki-Apostolaki* 2014; *Kent* 1984; *Anderson* 1966; *Marriott* 1917.

3 *Andriotis* 2014.

4 *Detorakis, Kalokairinos* 2001. It should be mentioned that the Great Powers withdrew their forces in 1909.

5 Prince George's mother, Olga of Greece, was the granddaughter of Tsar Nicholas I, and the Prince was selected from a number of candidates for the position following proposals and pressure from Russia. The Russians provided consistent support for Prince George throughout his tenure as High Commissioner (1898-1906), even when the other Great Powers had turned against him and his position was no longer favored.

6 *Katopi* 2023.

synonymous with the ideals of progress and 'civilization' in contrast to the notions of 'backwardness' and 'barbarism' that accompanied the Ottoman Empire and the Orient in general⁷. The Ottoman/Turkish image of the cities was perceived as incompatible with the aspirations of a European state that was now Crete. The modernization projects initiated in the severely damaged cities and countryside included the construction of roads, bridges, sewage systems, ports, hospitals, customs houses and post offices. Concurrently, efforts were made to eradicate perceived Turkish elements with the objective of transforming the 'Turkish towns' (*turkopoleis*) into modern European cities. However, what they perceived as Turkish was, in fact, the medieval city fabric and the palimpsest of Byzantine, Venetian, and Ottoman layers of the cities (**Fig. 1**).

The Russians in the Rethymno area adopted a comparable modernization approach. It is worth noting that their principal aim was to maintain order and social discipline. To this end, the Russian administration addressed a range of needs, both material and symbolic, pertaining to the diverse social classes. Initiating a series of charitable initiatives, they distributed financial assistance and food to the needy and wood to those whose residences had been destroyed. Concurrently, they provided benefits and favorable treatment to the ecclesiastical hierarchy and organized public spectacles such as sports competitions and theatrical performances, wherein the Rethymno bourgeoisie could participate in common European entertainments alongside the Russian military aristocracy. Moreover, they undertook the repair of educational facilities and other damaged structures, and circumvented regulations that prohibited commitments in relation to public works by becoming involved in a number of them.

One of the earliest Russian projects was the construction of a hospital (**Fig. 2**). This was a donation from the Russian government, constructed by an Italian architect in the neoclassical style with modern materials, some of which were imported from Paris. The rhetoric of colonialism placed a significant emphasis on the contrast between the 'filthy', 'uncivilized' East and the 'clean', 'healthy', 'sanitized' and 'civilized' West. This contrast particularly focused on the importance of hygiene and sanitation. The construction of the hospital was part of this very effort.

7 On Orientalism and Cultural Imperialism see *Said* 1978 and 1994.



Fig. 1. View of Rethymno, Crete (circa 1900). Source Internet



Fig. 2. Postcard depicting the Russian Hospital in Rethymno. Inaugurated on May 9, 1899.
Photo credit Spadidakis Collection

As mentioned, a significant proportion of the Great Powers' endeavors involved the eradication of Ottoman vestiges from the urban landscape. This included the removal of the wooden additions, known as 'kiosks' or 'sachnisia', which had been constructed by the Ottomans

and incorporated into the architecture of private residences (**Fig. 3**). These structures were linked to the hygiene of the city, as they were believed to impede air circulation. In the initial eight-month period of Russian administration, 87 kiosks were demolished, despite concurrent complaints regarding economic hardship and the inability of the populace to sustain the full extent of the implemented changes⁸. In addition, the Russians did not differentiate between Ottoman kiosks and Venetian *sottoportici*, and thus both were demolished with the support of the Christian population, who viewed them as remnants of the “horrific times of slavery of the Greek nation.”

In accordance with the emerging concept of an airy and prosperous healthy city in the 19th century, the Venetian walls were also perceived as an impediment to urban development, restricting air circulation and hindering the city’s growth. In Europe, the connection between the health of the citizens and the unobstructed circulation of air, the ideal of straight, wide and tree-lined avenues, of gardens for walks in place of the now useless walls, had already led to the demolition of walls in most large cities (e.g. Paris, Vienna, Berlin, Barcelona, Turin, Milan, etc.)⁹.

In collaboration with the Cretan government, the British, French, and Russian occupying forces proceeded with the dismantling of select sections of the Venetian walls in Heraklion, Chania, and Rethymno (**Fig. 4**). The stated objective was the establishment of efficient communication networks between the newly constructed areas of the cities and the existing old towns, as well as the implementation of improved hygiene standards. What is interesting is that the destruction of these walls provoked a strong reaction among Italians, who regarded the Venetian monuments in Crete as part of their own cultural heritage. This was despite the fact that, at the same time, comparable demolitions were occurring in Italy itself as components of the country’s modernization initiatives. Although they did not openly acknowledge it, the Venetian monuments in Crete served to substantiate the Italians’ irredentist aspirations for the island. Therefore, despite the ostensible collaboration between the Great Powers, profound rivalries were brewing beneath the surface. In Italy, articles were published denouncing the Cretan ‘barbarians’, but there were also allegations

⁸ See the Rethymnian newspaper *Αναγέννησις* [Renaissance] (6/6/1899).

⁹ On this much-discussed topic, see indicatively: *Pinol, Walter* 2003.

concerning the catastrophic mania of the representatives of the Great Powers, primarily of the Russians, but also of the British and French¹⁰.

At the same time, archaeology became a forum for the expression of competitive interests among European countries. The concept of European modernity was being constructed using devices such as archaeology and museums, which were employed to create and display the mythological origins of the nations and nationalisms that were emerging at the time. The degree of scholarship in a given society was perceived as an index of that society's level of advancement. It was a source of national pride and was often used as a marker of whether or not a country was keeping pace with its rivals¹¹. The period of Cretan autonomy represents a pivotal moment in the evolution of Minoan archaeology, coinciding with the commencement of excavations at Knossos by Sir Arthur Evans. Minoan Crete was lauded as the "cradle of European civilization". Evans and his disciple Gordon Childe postulated a fictitious notion of a genuinely European civilization, asserting that Minoan civilization had established the foundations for both the Hellenic and the modern European civilizations¹².

The process of securing archaeological sites for their archaeological missions has been described as "archaeological colonization" of the island of Crete by English, French, Italian, and American scientists¹³. In contrast to the other European powers however, the Russians did not engage in the competition. The reason for this shift in focus is unclear, but it may be attributed to the growing interest in Byzantium among Russian archaeologists at the time. It is notable that a Russian archaeologist, Novosadski, is mentioned in Crete a decade prior to the commencement of the 'battle' between the Great Powers for the securing of sites for excavation¹⁴. However, there is no evidence of any Russian involvement during the Cretan Autonomy period. In 1895, the Russian Archaeological Institute of Constantinople was established, led by two prominent Russian Byzantinists, Fyodor Uspensky and Nikodim Kondakov. The institute conducted excavations and research across the entirety of the Ottoman Empire, removing a considerable

10 Indicatively: *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, anno XXX/27 (July 7, 1903).

11 *McEnroe* 2002: 62.

12 *Papadopoulos* 2005.

13 *Momigliano* 2002: 266.

14 *La Rosa* 2000/2001: 73-74.



Fig. 3. Woodcut engraving depicting a street in Chania with houses with wooden additions called 'sachnisia' (circa 1890). Source *L'illustrazione popolare*, Fratelli Treves Editori - Milano, 1890 /<http://commons.wikipedia.org/>



Fig. 4. Rethymno 1899, Demolition of Gate of the Sand (Kum Kapi). Photo credit Historical Folklore Museum of Rethymno

number of relics, manuscripts, and other discoveries to Russia. It is widely acknowledged that the Institute was established as a statement of foreign policy, in line with the Russian Empire's assertion of succession to the Byzantine Empire as the 'Third Rome' and its



Fig. 5. Episcopal mansion of Rethymno, funded by the Russian administration of the city in 1900. Photo S. Katopi



Fig. 6. Russian paten and cover, Ecclesiastical Museum of the Cathedral Church of Rethymno. Photo M. E. Fragkopoulou



Fig. 7. Russian Epitaph, St. Elijah Monastery in Roustika, Rethymno Province. Photo S. Katopi

historical aspiration to conquer Istanbul from the Ottoman Empire¹⁵. The archival documents indicate that the Institute sent archaeologists in 1897 to search for Byzantine antiquities and manuscripts in Cretan monasteries¹⁶.

It seems that the Russians pursued a distinct cultural policy with the intention of securing the allegiance of the Christian population. This involved the utilization of homodoxy and the cultivation of close ties with both the Church and the Prince. The adherence to Eastern Orthodoxy by both Cretan Christians and Russians, in contrast to the Catholicism and Protestantism espoused by representatives of the other Great Powers, was repeatedly emphasized in the press¹⁷. The Russian sub-consulate regularly received letters of appreciation from Christian leaders thanking the Russian commander. Joint liturgical ceremonies were conducted in Rethymno, encompassing both Greek and Russian languages, with the involvement of Russian army choirs despite the availability of a church exclusively for the Russians. Furthermore, the Russians in Rethymno provided the financial resources and supervised the construction of a new episcopal mansion in the Neoclassical style, which was inaugurated in 1900 (**Fig. 5**). Additionally, Russian officials oversaw the restoration of the cathedral's bell tower and the installation of new bells, which were inscribed with the names of the relevant officials.

However, their primary objective was to provide the impoverished churches and clergy of Rethymno with the requisite ecclesiastical items. Boxes containing epitaphs, chalice sets, censers, blessing crosses, gospel covers, and ornately decorated episcopal vestments were dispatched aboard Russian vessels that were coming to Crete to supervise the island's coastline (**Fig. 6, 7**). The archives provide evidence that the Holy Synod of Russia made systematic donations of ecclesiastical objects to churches and monasteries in Crete as early as the 1860s¹⁸. It seems likely that those donations were connected with the efforts to prevent the Orthodox population from converting to Catholicism.

15 Papoulidis 1987; Pyatnitsky 1991; Basargina 1999.

16 *La Rosa* 2000/2001, 73-74.

17 The presence of Russian flags and images of the Tsar throughout the town prompted the Athenian press to accuse the Russians of engaging in pan-Slavic propaganda. In response, the Rethymnian newspaper *Αναγέννησις* in the issue of 28/2/1899 asserted that the Russian troops were fulfilling a civilizing role.

18 *Gerd* 2020.

Such a movement had manifested itself in the years 1859-1870 with the presence of Catholic missionaries on the island who attempted to aggressively proselytize the Orthodox Christians. In response, Russia augmented its political presence on the island by establishing the Consulate General in Chania and local sub-consulates in Rethymno and Heraklion in April 1860¹⁹. It is evident though that the process of sending ecclesiastical items intensified during the Cretan Autonomy period, when the Russians became one of the occupying forces.

The presence of Russian ecclesiastical items, predominantly inexpensive and mass-produced, has been documented even in the most isolated regions of the Rethymno Prefecture (**Fig. 8**). It is plausible that some of these objects were donated by Russian military personnel, as evidenced by the inscription on a Russian gospel in the church of the remote Apodoulou village where a Russian squad was stationed (**Fig. 9, 10**). It seems reasonable to conclude that a considerable number of these items were imported in bulk. Documents in the Russian vice-consul's correspondence in Heraklion indicate that Bishop Evmenios requested in 1899 permission from the vice-consul to open a box, citing a need for ecclesiastical vessels²⁰. Moreover, the documents demonstrate that a considerable amount of the Russian assistance, including financial contributions, flour, and wood, was channeled through the bishops, not only in Rethymno but also in other regions of Crete under the control of the other Great Powers.

The repressive actions of the Russian forces against the Theriso movement in 1905 resulted in a gradual shift in the attitudes among some members of the clergy and the general Christian population towards them. The implementation of martial law and censorship, the demolition of houses and warehouses, the arrests and exile of citizens, the imposition of fines on villages controlled by the revolutionaries, and the establishment of a gendarmerie at the Arkadi Monastery were among the measures enacted. Nevertheless, in general, and despite the anti-Russian sentiment expressed by the Athenian press due to Russia's pan-Slavic policies, the local population of Rethymno demonstrated acceptance of the Russian administration and fostered a particularly favorable environment for the Russian troops.

19 Kalliataki-Mertikopoulou 2005.

20 Correspondence of the vice-Consul of Russia Ioannis Mitsotakis, 10/11/1899, Archive of the Historical Museum of Crete.



Fig. 8. Russian chalice set with chalice, paten, asterisk and zeon made of copper alloy. Parish Museum of Skordilo, Rethymno Province.
Photo S. Katopi



Fig. 9. Russian Gospel cover (back), St. John the Baptist church, Apodoulou village, Rethymno Province. Photo S. Katopi

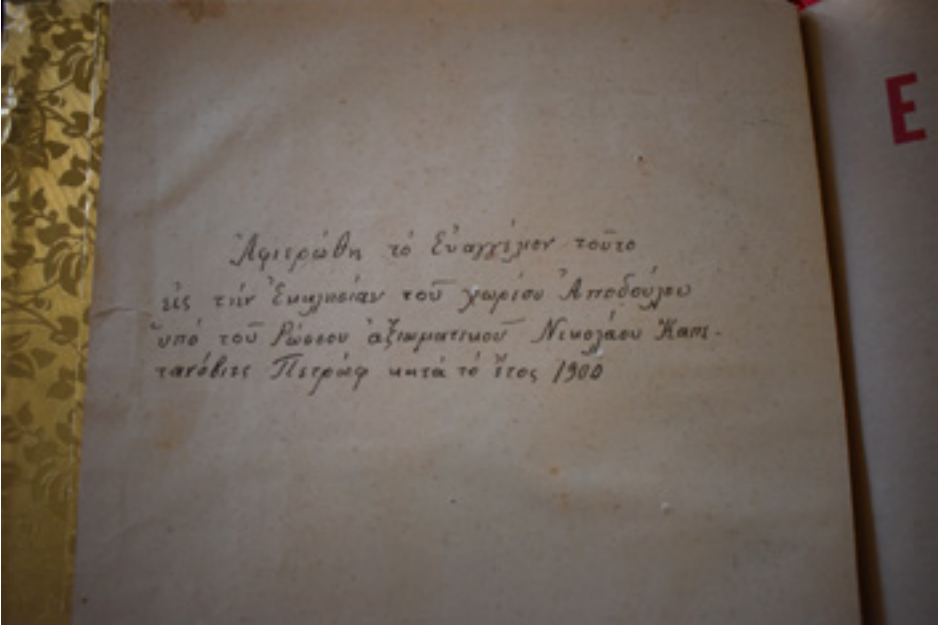


Fig. 10. Note in f.2v of Gospel with Russian cover informing us that it was a present to the church of St. John the Baptist of Apodoulou village by the Russian army officer Nicolai Kapetanovic Petrov.
Photo S. Katopi

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Religious Identity and Cultural Politics of the Great Powers in the Cretan State (1898-1913)



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In 1898, Crete was divided into British, French, Russian and Italian zones of control. The occupation of the island allowed the Great Powers to advance their political and economic interests in the Eastern Mediterranean, while engaging in cultural competition, as evidenced by archaeological projects and efforts to Europeanise the cities. Their modernisation initiatives included the erasure of Ottoman architectural traces from the cityscapes, which were considered uncivilised and unhealthy. Disputes arose over the demolition of Venetian walls, angering Italians who saw them as part of their own heritage. The paper focuses on Russian cultural policy in the Rethymno area, highlighting how they used the shared Eastern Orthodox faith with Christian Cretans to gain support, in contrast to Italian Catholicism and British Protestantism. Russian modernisation efforts and the transfer of ecclesiastical objects to the churches of Rethymno are seen as strategies of cultural influence.