

## Why Greece matters today?

**Principal, Professor, Εξοχότατε,** Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me start in properly festive mode, by wishing the Centre for Hellenic Studies a very happy 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary and many happy returns of the day.

I should also record my thanks to the Greek Presidency of the EU Council of Ministers for sponsoring the series, and to HE The Ambassador for his presence tonight.

It is a great honour to be asked to give this opening lecture, in the presence of many great scholars and experts, whose writings about Greece – ancient, Byzantine and modern – constitute a priceless testimony to the importance of their subject. Indeed, if you want best to understand the proposition “Why Greece matters today”, my encouragement this evening will be: “Look around you!” See how the Centre for Hellenic Studies is constantly defining and redefining the importance of Greece and of Hellenism, exploring the subject with passion, creativity and scholarship through its publications, teaching and events.

For the past 33 years, since I first started to learn the ancient language at school, I too, like Keats on looking into Chapman’s Homer, have “travelled in the realms of gold”. Those of us who encounter Greece – particularly perhaps those who encounter it when young – know that to be a traveller through the physical, metaphysical and imaginative landscapes of Greece, is to be a privileged traveller. And a necessarily humble one. We know that we are always travelling in the footsteps of greater men.

For a diplomat who happens to be a student of ancient and modern Greek, and an amateur enthusiast for Greece’s Byzantine and mediaeval heritage, it is impossible to examine this evening’s proposition without some intrusion of the personal into the more analytical and objective. So alongside a diplomat’s rather cold and narrow perspective on why Greece still matters today, I hope you will indulge me in a more emotional and wider argument about Greece – as an abiding, evergreen idea: ‘the dome of Thought, the palace of the Soul’.

I should start by making one point unequivocally: That Greece matters today to the UK. It’s important to state this clearly. Greece matters to us diplomatically and strategically; in terms of our mutual commerce; and, of course, through the great exchange of people (principally but not only students and tourists) between us.

Our diplomatic and military relationships are, of course, framed by our strategic alliances: We are partners in the European Union and in NATO. Our diplomatic relations are friendly and close; we co-operate on many day-to-day matters, much in the same way as we do with 26 other Member States of the Union. We work very closely with the Greek Government on matters such as international shipping

regulation and on illegal migration. On various existential matters, such as counterterrorism, our relations are even deeper than that. On defence, we maintain close MIL-MIL co-operation, particularly between our two navies. The Greek facilities at Suda Bay on Crete continue to make a key contribution to British strategic engagement with the Eastern Mediterranean. The Greeks are proud, as are we, that the British First Sea Lord, Admiral Zambellis, is himself of Greek descent.

So symbolism too remains important in our relationship. Despite the downsizing of many missions and Residences in Europe, we retain a sizeable if leaner diplomatic presence in Greece, through our Embassy in Athens and our four vice-consulates on the islands. The British Ambassador in Athens still lives on Vasilissis Sophias Avenue in the great house that Elena Schilizzi created for her husband Eleftherios Venizelos, and which we bought after Venizelos' death in Paris in 1936. Later this year, we shall use the Residence to celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of that great statesman, Cretan and Anglophile.

As for trade, Britain and Greece share much in common. The maritime sector is particularly important for us both. Greek ship-owners control 16% of the world's shipping capacity; 40% of the EU's. The sector is worth between 13 and 19bn euro annually to the Greek economy: about 7% of GDP. Internationally, London is the single greatest provider of services to the Greek industry – in finance, insurance, brokerage and law. 50% of tankers globally are chartered in London. The longstanding relationships between Greek shipping families and London constitute one of the UK's great, unsung strengths.

We are Greece's 7<sup>th</sup> biggest export market for traded goods. Worth about 0.7bn euro in 2013. Our own exports to Greece shrank massively during the crisis, but recovered by 8% last year, and were worth about 0.9bn euro. The City's capital markets and legal framework are proving of prime importance to the recapitalization of Greek banks – and the moves towards Greek recovery.

Finally, we shouldn't underestimate the importance to the UK of education or of our tourism to Greece. Last year, roughly **12000** Greeks were studying in the UK, paying tuition fees, contributing to their local economies. Here in King's the presence of Greeks is particularly marked and welcome – not just in the Centre for Hellenic Studies.

In exchange (not a strict exchange) for all this talent, we benefit ourselves and Greece through mass tourism to Greece. Last year, just under 2m Brits escaped the misery of the British summer to live the myth in Greece. The services my Embassy and its vice-consulates offer to British tourists in difficulty are among the most important things we do.

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Of course, you might say that this is OK as far as it goes. But, doesn't the sort of conceptual framework I've just described apply to many other European states with whom we have close relations? Isn't something left hanging in the proposition of this lecture that bears examination? Given the long and rich history we have in common, how should we view the health of our relationship "today"? Can a historical perspective illuminate the issues?

People sometimes whisper to me that our relationship has cooled, with other regional players such as Turkey becoming more important to the UK. Couldn't Greece and the UK be closer? Why don't we care more about the crisis in Greece? Why aren't we palliating the impact of Eurozone, of German policy on Greece? Have we forgotten the historic role we played in Greece and the importance Greece formerly had for us?

Some of these are difficult, painful questions. And occasionally I answer them by inviting my questioner to examine the proposition from the other side: how important to Greece is the UK now? As important as Germany? As important as the ECB? The US? As important as some Greeks apparently think Russia is? What is it that Greece formerly sought from the UK that it no longer seeks or expects?

A comparative history of British-Greek relations over nearly two centuries of state-to-state diplomatic commerce would be beyond my general competence and, I guess, your present patience. But I would like to offer a few broad characterizations, which I hope are valid, in order to help us think through the current relationship and prospects for the future.

For some 200 years, the closeness of our two countries has, of course varied, often markedly so – with ups and downs sometimes occurring within even the very shortest of timescales. (I think particularly of the impact of the great relationship between Venizelos and Lloyd-George, and the consequences for Greece when that relationship was ended by the Greek ballot-box in 1920.) Still, until 1947, when the exhausted and broke British Government handed over to Washington the burden of supporting the Greek Government against the Communist insurgents, Britain had had a strong, sometimes commanding but rarely uncomplicated position in Greece for over a century, and Greece mattered accordingly.

There have been, I would suggest, three periods when the importance of Greece to the UK has really registered, and the relationship has been equally crucial to both sides:

- The revolutionary period (from 1821 to 1832);
- The entry of the schismatic Greek Government into the Great War, and its aftermath; and
- The period of the Resistance to the Nazis and the defeat of Communism in Greece.

In the revolutionary period, which gave rise to the birth of the new nation state, the idea and eventual reality of the new Greece mattered to Britain in different ways at

different times, as British policy strove to adapt to the advances and defeats of the Greek cause. Professor Beaton has recently given us a wonderful account of the part that Byron played in this, and the part that liberal idealism – particularly the idealism of Shelley – played in the development of Byron's thinking. Of course, despite Byron's eventual association with the liberal, Westernising modernisers, such as Mavrokordatos, the long course of the war would eventually see British state intervention, not in favour of a liberal republican model, but with the fist of Great Power realpolitik: attempts to limit the impact of the formation of the new Greek state on the tottering Ottoman Empire, and the imposition on the new state of an authoritarian monarchy that crystallised the authoritarianism of Capodistrias' Presidency. Greece mattered because the new state had forced itself on the Great Powers' efforts to maintain the balancing act in the East.

Nearly a century later, again Greece came to matter a great deal to Britain, as a launching ground for the defence of Serbia against the Austro-Hungarians: an expedition that began in October 1915 with the British and French landings at Salonica, and would continue early in the next year with the formation of the Macedonian Front. Behind this stood, of course, the great friendship of Venizelos and Lloyd-George; and Venizelos' willingness to stand against the supposed neutralism of Constantine, even to the extent of dividing his country. The Macedonian Front, the events that happened there and the long tail of ensuing events for which they were, in part, an impetus, deserve to be better known in the UK and in Greece, and I hope we will be able to use these coming years of the centenary of World War One to tell the stories: both national and personal.

One of the greatest possessions of the Residence where the British Ambassador in Athens lives is a Cretan icon from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Large in size, it depicts the Mother of God as the Γλυκοφιλούσα, with the Christchild snuggling up against her cheek. As faux Byzantine script on it explains, it was given to us in March 1941 by the Mayor of Athens, when Greece and Britain stood alone in Europe against the Nazi threat. A month later Athens had fallen, and Britain had evacuated the Greek Court and Government and our Embassy to Crete and on eventually to Cairo.

We are proud, I am fiercely proud, of the role that my country played in fighting the Nazis in Greece and then, as the war reached its denouement, keeping Greece in the western fold: Churchill's famous 'percentages agreement', concluded with Stalin in Moscow in October 1944. Greece mattered to Churchill, the British Government and the British people; it mattered to the officers of the SOE who supported and aided the Greek Resistance; it mattered to the ordinary soldiers, airmen and seamen whose graves, now serene and at peace, are gathered together in the Commonwealth Cemeteries of Alimos and Suda Bay. Veterans – proud and tough old men in their 90s – still gather every year on Crete, in painfully if inevitably diminishing numbers, to join their old comrades. Resistance to Nazism mattered then. And it matters today, whether we encounter neo-Nazism masquerading in Greece or elsewhere.

Still, we shouldn't romanticise or exaggerate. Despite these moments of closeness, Britain was often frustrated by Greece, and vice versa. One might mention the Don Pacifico affair, the hostility between England and the Bavarian Crown, the Nicholson incident, the tortuous history of City loans to Greece.

And British influence on Greece and the importance of Greece to the UK shifted markedly, of course, during the Cyprus crisis of the 1950s, when even personal, wartime friendships were ruptured. Some people tell me that Greece and England (they usually say 'England') have 'unfinished business'. They generally mean Cyprus: not only the events that led to Cypriot independence, but also, of course, the events of 1974 and the long stalemate that has ensued. A painful sign of those times is the fact that in the 1950s the street where I live was renamed, in the first and lowest block where the Residence stands, after two EOKA men who were hanged in Cyprus after being found guilty in a court of law of murder. The Residence on Loukianou is not, in the eyes of the municipality, on Loukianou at all.

More recently, Greece has mattered intensely to the UK because of the economic crisis. We live in an interconnected world. Britain's biggest trading partner is the Eurozone. Whereas few decisions look wiser than that to keep the pound sterling, it is not and has never been in the UK's interest for the Euro to fail. Since late 2009, when Greek bankruptcy and GREXIT first looked a real possibility, policy-makers across Europe and beyond have intervened in and watched Greece as closely as a patient in intensive care. We have all feared the domino effect of a disorderly Greek exit.

Since 2012 when the ECB made a decisive statement and the German Chancellor committed herself to Greece's staying in the Euro, Greece's destiny has looked all the more fixed to the Eurozone. The biggest ever bailout of a sovereign and the many sacrifices of the Greek people have stabilised some of the macroeconomic fundamentals.

In fact, all of this has rather renewed UK Government interest in Greece, as the outlying example of what it's become fashionable to call the peripheral economies. Many policy-makers, in the HMT, FCO and elsewhere, have realised how little they knew Greece; how little they understood about Greece's ambiguous relationship with the EU.

As one of the oldest nation states to have been created and subsequently consolidated out of a national liberation movement, Greece has retained, curiously unchanged, a notably exceptionalist national ideology. Despite European money, the process of European integration and, in recent years, uncontrolled immigration, Greece has remained a stubbornly homogeneous, socially conservative society, somewhat resistant to pluralism and diversity, with an archaic and very untransparent relationship between state and the citizen. It has also remained an astonishingly protectionist and closed economy: the export of goods accounts for only 15% of GDP.

I think that the economic adjustment programme, however painful it has been, could mean a closer alignment between Greek and British interests. We might see any of the following:

- An increase in economic liberalism in Greece – greater entrepreneurship; welcoming of foreign capital; growth of domestic capital markets; reinvigoration of the productive economy; a drive towards exports; support for free trade.
- We might see liberalization of the university sector – improving the Greek market for Greek and foreign students and for foreign universities.
- We might see cleaner Government: with increased transparency and accountability; rules-based procurement; clear rules for party funding and management.
- We might see the real development of Greece as a regional energy distributor – through new pipelines; LNG facilities; off-shore installations.
- Greater confidence regionally might lead to forward-leaning Greek efforts to stabilize its neighbourhood, particularly in the Western Balkans;
- And in relation to Cyprus we might see the Greek Government boldly prepare its own population for a new negotiated settlement between the two communities. This in turn would have the potential to transform historically fractured relationships in the wider region – not least between Greece and Turkey.

None of these things is inevitable. But the need for a Greece which has irrevocably committed itself to Eurozone membership to live within the terms of that membership, will motivate at least some of them. Any of them would, I think, have the effect of bringing the UK and Greece closer together. And of making it more likely that Greece still matters to the UK in the future.

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Those are some of my thoughts as a diplomat. But I'm well aware that my analysis so far – high-level even in its own terms – has been a very partial exploration of the proposition 'Why Greece still matters'.

The challenge in giving a full response to the proposition lies, of course, in the very tricky meaning of the simple word "Greece". I have friends and colleagues, who count themselves philhellenes, admirers and lovers of Greece, but who have barely set foot in the country itself or may not have visited it for several years. For them Greece exists in the mind, or at least in the library and lecture-hall. And it is a diachronic concept, existing across time, not simply in the specific here and now. But it is no less real to them than the diplomatic, strategic, commercial and consular considerations I have been describing to you above.

This is the Greece inhabited by writers and intellectuals and idealists. Shelley, one of the greatest of English Philhellenes, who never made it to Greece, captured very clearly this classic view of Greece in the Preface to Hellas:

The human form and the human mind attained to a perfection in Greece which has impressed its image on those faultless productions, whose very fragments are the despair of modern art, and has propagated impulses which cannot cease, through a thousand channels of manifest or imperceptible operation, to ennoble and delight mankind until the extinction of the race.

“A perfection...propagating impulses” – Greece as a sort of ideal form, giving rise to a thousand emanations, a thousand epigones: in art, philosophy and, of course, political science: for Shelley’s Hellas was surely inseparable from the sort of liberal democratic sentiment that animated him and his circle.

This is the Greece that those of us who learned Greek at school were introduced to at an early age, and if we were so inclined, strove to penetrate further in university classics or classical civilization courses.

In this lecture hall, there are many with better minds than mine, who have given more of their lives to exploring this Greece than have I. And many here have become a particular type of expert (not least because of the modern requirement to demonstrate ‘impact’ in the teaching of liberal arts courses) – experts, that is, in explaining the ‘relevance’ of this Greece to modern British reality.

Normally, as a mere student, I would hesitate to add my voice to theirs. But this is the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Centre for Hellenic Studies, and I hope I can at least pay the Centre the tribute of making a layman’s attempt at the issue.

Greece as an idea and an ideal matters still, as it did 200 years ago when, as Professor Beaton has convincingly showed us, Shelley was focusing Byron’s mind and resolve on Greek liberty. For me personally, this Greece matters for five principal reasons.

**First, because of Greek tragic drama.** In the modern western world where Christian soteriology has shrunk to being a marginal view held by only a small group of committed believers, Greek tragedy offers an alternative exploration of the limits and perils of human action and human folly, in societies where men and women are at the hands of complex, unknowable forces, and human values are constantly at stake, being relativized and painstakingly renegotiated.

**Secondly, and somewhat at variance with what I’ve just said about tragic drama, it amateurs because of the Platonic tradition, mediated through the Church Fathers and into the veins and arteries of Christian thought.** For me, this strand of thinking continues to offer much by way of a framework for exploring competing ideas of faith and reason, and wrestling with the cul de sac of contemporary materialism. (I refer any one who’s interested in this to David Bentley Hart’s recent

book *The Experience of God*, which is thoroughly indebted to Plato and neo-Platonism.)

**Thirdly, because of the great experiment in Athens of democracy and the Rule of Law.** We can and should relativise ancient Athenian democracy; it was, as we all know, a flawed experiment, but it remains an imperishable ideal. And in an age where mass media enable millions of people to join up and participate in new ways, the Athenian experiment in direct participative democracy offers us clues about the challenges and pitfalls that might lie ahead. We should continue to study it with intelligence and foresight.

**Fourthly, because of the ancient Greek experience of sexuality.** The testimonies of ancient art, philosophy, rhetoric and law have been much studied in recent years, and are, I think, of enormous significance in the modern project to understand sexuality and sexual identities. For many of us, I guess, this aspect of ancient Greece in study was a truly liberating experience.

**Fifthly and most importantly, Greece matters still, because of the Greek language and its literature: ancient, Byzantine and modern.** This is not a language like any other modern European language. People complain that Greek kids now know and use only about 500 words, or is it 200 – the number always goes down in the retelling? But they complain, not because it's true, but because any reasonably reflective user of modern Greek knows that he or she is simply paddling on the surface of a very deep ocean. One of my favourite fictional characters in the Greek crime novel is Inspector Haritos, the creation of Petros Markaris. This astute if sometimes browbeaten detective likes nothing better than to take to bed with a copy of Liddell and Scott; he is devouring the language lemma by lemma.

One of the astonishing things about Greek is that in some of its various time-bound guises it exists even now. This is not just in the academic sense that there are students and teachers of ancient and Byzantine Greek. But in the more vivid sense, that it can be encountered across time in, e.g., the liturgy; the remaining fragments and stylistic techniques of 'puristic Greek' in the bureaucracy and legal system; the power of poets, such as Cavafy, to make lexical choices diachronically; even the many Greek performances of ancient drama that take place every year – whether in the ancient language itself or, more commonly, in intralinguistic translation. Everyone who has witnessed the power of Stathis Livathinos' epic stage production of *Ιλιάδα* will know what I mean.

It is no surprise that one of the areas in which Greeks of today have acquired excellence is literature. The Nobel prize-winners Seferis and Elytis are testimony to that. Greece matters in part because its literature, written in a language spoken by only a small fraction of the planet's population, matters.

Greece is a house with many mansions. Enter it and you will find something that stays with you forever – κτήμα ἐς αἰεί – whether:



- A great idea that insinuates itself in your mind – democracy perhaps, the rule of law, the ideal form;
- An image of tantalizing beauty – the Critias *kouros*; a painting by Tsarouchis or Ghikas;
- The play of light across the waters of a turquoise bay;
- The friendliness of a fellow walker on a remote mountain-top speaking a tough dialect;
- The soul-rending chant of the *Epitaphios* liturgy; or
- A line of poetry – Homer, Erotokritos, Seferis – you can't set aside.

I've earlier given you some reasons why Greece still matters to the UK. But these are, I hope, some reasons, among many, many others, why Greece matters and should always matter to us all.