

Diogenes in Sinop City Today: Folklore and Semiotic Approaches

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Abstract

Along with myths and historical events, Greek travellers to the Black Sea region of Turkey are also on a quest for familiar figures such as Diogenes. The cynical philosophy of Diogenes, who was expelled from Sinop and went to Athens, is transformed into a common narrative shared by the two nations of Greece and Turkey. The Turks reproduce his narratives, create and adapt stories to the present, and live a kind of social life that accepts the cultural heritage related to Diogenes as part of the modern cultural identity of the city. Greek visitors, who know the words of Diogenes from written sources, recall them and maintain the historical identity that connects them with Diogenes.

Through the narratives of the two nations, and with qualitative research methods, the relationship of this cultural memory with the city of Sinop is detected, as well as emblematic points in the city that testify to its heritage, statues, naming of hotels, restaurants, etc. The theoretical approach of this paper is based on a folklore analysis of society, extending to a post folklore situation as observed in the social practices of the city today. The interpretive approach combines both folklore and semiotic methods.

Keywords: monuments, semiotics of culture, post folklore, cultural memory, Diogenes

Introduction

This paper is part of my postdoctoral research project entitled “Myths, Legends and Historical Figures in Pontus: Common Perceptions of Greeks and Turks,” The Greek traveller to today's Pontus, along with the effort to transmit family narratives,

and search for their cultural identity, knows and researches data in the place, such as the cape called Argo (“Jason’s cape”), the place of the Amazons (“Thermodon river”), and the plateau of the “Myrioi” of Xenophon (“Thichis”). Similarly, travellers recall historical figures of Pontus, such as Diogenes and Strabo. There is also a parallel quest by the current inhabitants of Pontus, confirming the transnational dimensions of the myth. Through a comparative research of the reception of the legends, in combination with qualitative methods, the preservation of the above data in the present is examined as a living narrative. Thus, the innate attraction for the distant past is symbolized in everyday practices, creating literary works that adapt common myths and legends of the Greeks and the Turks.

Travel to the geographical area of historic Pontus has been massive over the last two decades. It is characterized mainly by pilgrimages, with a strong element of nostalgia being the trigger and the main purpose. It is a journey with a strong memory connection and an emotional weight. The traveller is looking for “answers,” and is trying to integrate their individual identity with the place, to fill in the gaps of family narratives, and to create new and authentic experiences.

At the same time, the recollection of important historical figures, such as Diogenes and Strabo, create mythical aspects for both travellers and the local community. Visitors are aware of such figures from their sayings, works, and literature, while today's Pontic society has a general understanding of these origins. This can be observed through the integration of these historical figures into local history and tourism industry (many hotels, restaurants, and other businesses, but also products of the tourism industry are related to local legends).

This paper presents data that emerged from a field research about Diogenes' presence in Sinop¹ today, compared to folklore and semiotic references.

Cultural Tourism and Collective Memory

The tour of Greek travellers to the geographical area of Pontus, now called Karadeniz Bölgesi in Turkey, takes place mainly as a form of cultural tourism or nostalgia tourism, which is a key component of other types of tourism (pilgrimage,

¹ I chose “Sinop” instead of the historical name “Sinope,” as my research concerns the current society of the city.

religious, cultural). It also contains a mnemonic aspect as a situation or place of nostalgia.

“Collective nostalgia” is also defined historically, enabling people to capture collective emotion with individual creations (Merakles 2008, 178). Nostalgia is a basic cohesive bond of the group, substituting faces, situations, and even the place itself. Nostalgic references create coherence in the group, confirm common experiences, and consolidate collective memory.

The coherence of the group is reflected in a general tourist context, which Kathleen Newland and Carylanna call “heritage tourism” and which focuses on history and culture (Newland & Taylor 2010, 6-7). However, it does not exclude other forms of heritage, such as places of historical interest, or events and actions related to nature (as mentioned above). In the term “heritage,” Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett encloses living and inanimate elements, giving special value to the present (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995, 370).

Nostalgia tourism is also occasionally referred to in international literature as “dark tourism.” The term describes a tourist attraction phenomenon, with a visibly melancholy dimension in places of historical interest (Deutsch 2014, 3). The term was introduced by John Lennon and Malcolm Foley, extending its use to destinations linked to death and earthly disasters, which are events that have always attracted the curiosity of human nature.

Graham M.S. Dann draws attention to the constructed and focused images created by the nostalgia tourism industry (Dann 1994, 65). Catherine Vesey and Frederic Dimanche observe the capitalization of monuments, historical destinations, even important events, through images intended for tourist guides and also through pre-planned activities for tourists (Vesey & Dimanche 2003, 54-55). Kellee Caton and Carla Santos identify the issue of capitalization by viewing history itself, through tourists, as “existing” in the present (Caton & Santos 2007, 372). Contrary to the above points, Anabel López Salinas, Rachel Elizabeth Buckley, and Rafael Gabriel Reyes Morales mention that nostalgia tourism has not yet taken advantage of its economic potential through the promotion of local cuisine and souvenirs with nostalgic content (López Salinas, Buckley & Reyes Morales 2016).

The tradition and legends of Pontian Greeks have passed through generations. They have created a “mythic” image of the Pontus region within its associated history, landscape, and monuments. According to Maurice Halbwachs, there is not any collective memory which does not occur in a certain place (Halbwachs 1992, 28-30). Collective memory holds common points of reference within memory in general (Halbwachs 1992, 85-87). Consequently, this journey is also a journey into “time” (Anderson 2006, 50-51). It is also obvious that the “place” affects the visitor directly and indirectly (Halbwachs 1992, 130-132).

Monuments also symbolize the power of each city (Tsilenis 2002, 114). Cultural tourism is directly linked to monuments, as it traces the locations and history of the place (Avgerinou 2002, 105). The land of Pontus is an example of the combination of history and culture (Tsilenis 2002, 112). The influence of history on the place and the collective memory that derives from it is evident (Rossi 1982, 112), and the monuments testify to collective memory (Mavragani 1999, 180-181). Memory could also be part of historical sources (Passerini 1998, 37), and this is also confirmed by travellers’ interviews. Cities such as Trabzon, Giresun and Sinop are the “places of memory,” characterizing society and the history of the past (Katerinopoulos 2012, 345).

Both monuments and the general traveling experience help to connect historical events and figures with individual and collective memory. Rica Benveniste stresses that, “Through the travel narrative, history can be transformed into a collective memory” (Benveniste 1999, 128). The journey to the place is symbolically identified with a journey through time, as the place recalls history in the present. Benveniste points out that, “Cities, monuments, tombs, martyrdoms, become exhortations to unfold not only 'stories', but above all, perceptions of history, explicit relations with the past” (Benveniste 1999, 128).

While searching for places infused with myths and legends, as they are known from bibliographical references and oral traditions, Greek travellers experience intensely emotional reactions. The Argonautical campaign and the Golden Fleece, the Amazons, the Kilikon island, the island of Aretias, and the “Thichis” mountain described from Xenophon, are related to myths and are easily detected in today's Greek and Turkish narratives.

Myths, being a living narrative of the past in the present, adapt to modern needs and quests and are traced in the literature, rituals, and traditions of each place. Anthony. P. Cohen points out that it cognitively maps the past, giving “correctness to a course of action” and “the sanctity covered by tradition” (Cohen 1985, 100) while Otto Rank notes that myths separate what is merged into fiction (Rank 2008, 29). The multiple lives of the myth, along with its transnational dimension and interpretation, relate to the charm of the “hidden dialectic that unites the (current) unlikely and absurd with the (other) possible and logical” in Greek and Turkish narratives (Merakles 2007, 205).

Apart from the building blocks of myths and the literary elements they sometimes take, this study falls within the field of Social Folklore, as a modern folklore theme that studies “sets of people [...] which unite common values, standards, symbols” (Lydaki 2012, 125).

Field Research in Sinop: Research Questions

My research was held on two research trips to Sinop in 2019. It focused on the oral tradition that reflects peoples' beliefs about historical figures. The main method is field research with participatory observation, one of the most basic methods of qualitative research as “people’s daily, spontaneous speech is very important” (Lydaki 2012, 256). Interviews were the main building material of my research. On the first research trip I conducted 35 interviews of Greek travellers in Sinop, 12 men and 23 women, two aged 18-30, seven aged 31-50, 22 aged 51-70, and four over 70.

In Sinop I conducted interviews with 15 people, 11 men and 4 women, aged 21-30 years (7 people), 31-40 years old (3 people), 41-50 years old (2 people) and 51-60 years old (3 people). I retrieved further information about the society of Sinop via the internet, as my research was suspended and it was not possible to go back to Sinop due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Black Sea region is a cultural area that has been poorly researched academically. Understanding the “Other” in the relations between the two nations, as well as issues of memory and identity, have not been adequately studied in folklore studies.

A focus of my research was the way Greek travellers recall in memory the philosopher Diogenes in Sinop, a person who has taken on multiple mythical aspects. Greek travellers know his sayings bibliographically, while today's society of Sinop has a general knowledge of his origin, incorporating its impact on local history.

Some of my research questions to local people were the following: what do they know about Diogenes? Where did they get the information? Do they feel the cultural continuity of the philosopher in the place? How is Diogenes' cultural heritage reflected in everyday life? How do they take advantage of him in the field of tourism?

Greek Travellers' Narratives

Cultural continuity, highlighted mainly by Nikolaos Politis is traced in the narratives of some travellers, who consider the present generation and themselves to be a continuation of a cultural oral tradition. Manolis G. Varvounis observes that tourists immediately “understand the 'unbroken continuity' of Greek culture over the centuries” (Varvounis 2013, 30), which is confirmed by the interviews of the informers, concerning Diogenes:

I.P. Diogenes's sayings go through my story and my story passes to me. So, I can tell the same stories, too!

E.P. There is a continuation of Greek history here, because Diogenes connects Sinop with Athens!

K.Z. Diogenes has the classical philosophical spirit of the ancient Greeks. It's no coincidence that he was born here (in Sinop). It's an open sea, so he certainly had contacts with cultural thoughts of his time.

K.A. The sea connects us with Sinop. Diogenes criticized his fellow citizens, so they kicked him out. I'm sure if he was alive, he'd criticize today's people, too.

When asked if they know Diogenes' sayings and which ones, the answers vary. As a summary, it could be said that the most mentioned fact is Diogenes' meeting with Alexander the Great (19 people), next his exile from Sinop (11), and, finally, his thoughts about women (7), with everyone knowing that Diogenes with the lantern in his hand was “looking for people.” As an observation I would point out that, although

they speak of his exile, no one mentioned or knew why he was exiled.² Nor is there any reference to negative elements of his character, but, selectively, to the clever sayings he left as a legacy. The general feeling of Greek travellers about Diogenes' personality is positive with a strong element of humorous mood. Indicative are the following comments:

K.O. Seeing Sinop, I remembered Diogenes' meeting with Alexander the Great³. It's very important to see the city where the two great men met.

Z.H. When in front of power (he means in front of Alexander the Great) you are not afraid, you have nothing else to fear in your life. You're free!

M.E. They banished him because they couldn't bear him to criticize them.

X.P. I use some of his sayings to criticize today's society.

The Turkish Narratives of Sinop

References to Diogenes and his philosophy can be found even in 19th century texts, such as that of the traveller Minas P. Bijişkyan, who makes reference to his personality, cynical philosophy, and well-known quotes (Bijişkyan 1819, 69). From 1869 to 1873 the satirical magazine *Diogenes* was published in Istanbul. The editor of the magazine was Theodoros Kasapidis, who used as a logo Diogenes in the “pithari” [lantern] while the language of the magazine was Greek, with articles in French and Ottoman language. Articles and cartoons of the magazine are reproduced today, while, at the same time, there are numerous cartoons, in newspapers and online with Diogenes' sayings adapted to the present (Figure 1, where Diogenes searches with the lantern for a "democratic country," a cartoon by İbrahim Özdabak).

The name of Diogenes in Sinop is popular. His statue, which was erected at the entrance of the city in 2006, welcomes visitors. This statue is about six meters tall and depicts Diogenes with a lantern in his hand and with his dog. It was constructed by a 25-member team, led by Turan Baş, a member of the faculty of the Fine Arts department of Ondokuz Mayıs University. In many other parts of Sinop we find jars

² According to the prevailing version, Diogenes was exiled due to counterfeiting of coins of Sinop, together with his father, Ikesias.

³ The meeting of the two men did not take place in Sinop, but in Corinth. However, in the informants' narratives the emphasis is on the fact, and not on the place.

with Diogenes in meditation or holding the lantern (Figure 2). Apart from many cartoons that were created specifically for him, Diogenes has a name associated with cartoons in general. Consequently, a cartoon festival in Sinop (2012)⁴ took place (Figure 3).

Diogenes' name is also found in tourism industry with statuettes (souvenirs)⁵ and hotels having his name. When I spoke with residents of Sinop, I found out that everyone had something to say about Diogenes. Some of them recount his sayings and others identify his lantern with a barrel containing wine. Today's inhabitants of Sinop and the innumerable websites that refer to Diogenes's philosophy converge on the creation of a society less limited than other cities of the Karadeniz Region. The Professor of Literature (Department of Philosophy) of University of Erzurum, Alper Bilgehan Yardımcı in a related article claims that Diogenes belongs to the cultural heritage of today's Sinop, as his philosophical tradition can be adapted to today's values (Yardımcı 2008, 385-397). After all, the concept of "myth" in Turkey now focuses on those of Greek origin, with the focus on raising awareness of "cultural heritage and diversity" (Çelik 363). A teacher (E.K.) also referred to Diogenes syndrome (Diyojen Sendromu)⁶, a mental illness, which concerns people with insufficient self-confidence, behavioural disorders, and disorganization.

Semiotic Remarks Related to Diogenes

If we look at the statue of Diogenes located at the entrance of the city from a semiotic approach, some important observations arise as all monuments are intended to be "dynamic sites of means" (Osborne 1998, 453). From the point of view of the optical semiotics, we observe the materials of use on a symbolic level, too (Thürlemann 1982, 108): the statue, in terms of form, is marble (an indication of imposition and strong presence, perhaps a characteristic that identifies with ancient objects) and quite imposing, as its height reaches six meters (Figure 4)⁷. The intention of the municipal authority, which entrusted its construction, as mentioned above, to a group of the University of Samsun, was to link the ultimate history of the place with both the tourist exploitation and the consciousness of the local people themselves.

⁴ <http://cizgiromanokurlaripatformu.blogspot.com/2012/09/diyojen-karikatur-festivali-basladi.html>

⁵ About the signification of manufactured articles, see also: Economou 64-68.

⁶ More information: <https://eksisozluk.com/diyojen-sendromu--4559364>.

⁷ <https://www.haberler.com/sinop-sinop-a-filozof-diogenes-in-heykeli-dikildi-haberi/>

However, there are cases where a monument is interpreted with different approaches, and so the intentions of the creators are different from the thought of the people,⁸ like the intentions of the authors from the interpretation of the readers (Belentani & Panico 2016, 32).

After the construction of the statue, there were immediate reactions (perhaps motivated by political aspects contrary to the municipal authority), which reminded the general public, through relevant publications, of the fact that Diogenes' personality and philosophy was linked to Greek philosophy. Therefore, knowing the differences between the Greeks and the Turks as well as the tense climate that occasionally exists, they claimed that it is a bad choice to build an emblematic monument of a historical person of Greek origin. The same reactions are observed in other cities in Turkey after the construction of similar monuments.⁹ Thus, we observe “aberrant decoding” (Fabbri & Eco 1981, 7-12) as the expected interpretation was different. On the other hand, monuments are open to multiple interpretations, different from textual considerations (Belentani & Panico 2016, 33). Perhaps the interpretation of a monument is shaped by the passing of time, as it constitutes a transitional phase of people's interaction and acquaintance with the monument, something which involves critical thinking, interpretation, and understanding. After all, the initial creation of monuments does not always characterize acceptance as it can be modified (Belentani & Panico 2016, 35).

Interpreting the reaction of a part of the society of Sinop regarding the erection of the statue of Diogenes and a related “dialogue” with relevant theories, while taking into account the designation of monuments as “warm” (causing conflicts) and “cold” (which are commonly accepted), it could be noted that this statue is partly an “uncomfortable” place of heritage (MacDonald 2006, 9-28) or even a “dissonant heritage” according to John E. Tunbridge and Gregory John Ashworth (1996), as there are different meanings of the value of the past in the present.

A different approach that emphasizes the value of cultural heritage is that of journalist and writer Asli Perker, who refers to the misplaced transfer to society of Diogenes' well-known saying “I am looking for people.” Some locals found it

⁸ See also: <https://www.esgundem26.com/yerel/sinoplulardan-buyukersene-diyojen-heykeli-h10527.html>

⁹ <https://arkeofili.com/sinopta-yunanli-diye-diyojen-heykelinin-kaldirilmasi-isteniyor/>

offensive, as the saying implied that there are no “good” people in Sinop today. Others were reminded of the fact that he said these words in Athens, so it is not about them. Aslı Perker also observes Diogenes's lantern, pointing that his philosophy and his reflection should be an inspiration for “the whole nation to go and stand there and think.”¹⁰

Finally, in Diogenes' cartoons on the internet, we often notice paraphrases of his sayings. Instead of seeking people, Diogenes seeks “a democratic country” or “justice,” criticizing today's society. This metaphor coincides conceptually with the study of the anti-proverbs of folklore, where well-known proverbs are converted and adapted to today's needs (Alexiades 2012, 83-124).

Conclusion: Folklore Approaches to Diogenes

In conclusion, we could say that Greek visitors identify the city of Sinop and know about Diogenes, without including his name in their daily life. Their reactions are summed up in feelings of joy, a strong sense of history in the place, but also indifference as the main purpose of the journey is the ancestral place and not historical figures.

Today's residents of Sinop seek further clues to Diogenes' philosophy by adapting and adding it to everyday practices. The “present” finds the means to the past, (Antoniou 1999, 115) and the objects of popular material culture related to the past attract visitors and act as souvenirs of an entire past, which symbolically represent it (Efstathiadou 2018, 337).

For Greek visitors, myths and historical figures remain as texts, while for today's Turks of Sinop, all these myths and figures are a living present narrative with which they seek elements of connection. These old histories are held dear among children and adolescents in Greece, while among the Turks they are the subject of adult searches, as they are exploited in tourism, society and culture.

The transnational dimensions of the myth exist with variations and multiple points of view (Avdikos 2017, 43). The charming reflection exerted by mythical elements is reflected in the present, especially in their use by tourism. However, in Sinop there

¹⁰ More details: <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/yazarlar/asli-perker/sinoplu-diyojen-heykeli-neler-soyler-1671924>.

are some indications that Diogenes' philosophy creates a modern “life variation” that inspires certain practices of everyday society. It tends to create a new folklore phenomenon triggered by the historical face of Diogenes. In this way, the people of Sinop ensure their participation in the local cultural heritage, and gives them the opportunity to derive pleasure from the narrative itself (Avdikos 2017, 330) as they can escape from the prohibitions of their contemporary society by using the excuse of a “myth”.

List of Figures

1. Cartoon starring Diogenes by İbrahim Özdabak, adapted to contemporary issues (source: internet).
2. One of the statues of Diogenes in Sinop.
3. The Cartoon Festival in Sinop (2012).
4. The main statue of Diogenes at the entrance of the city of Sinop.

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