RELIGIOSCAPES: ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACHES ON COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES AND OTHERNESS IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

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Thessaloniki, a city with a remarkable history of ethno-religious and cultural diversity, was chosen as an ideal location for this international and interdisciplinary seminar titled: 'Religioscapes: Anthropological approaches on collective identities and otherness in the public domain'. The seed grant recipients are grateful to the British Academy, for generously funding the event, and to the Department of History and Archaeology at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki for hosting and catering for the event. The organisers would like to extend their acknowledgements to Professor Eleni Manakidou, Chair of the School of History and Archaeology, and to Georgios Aggelopoulos, Associate Professor of Modern and Contemporary History, Folklore, and Social Anthropology, for their indispensable help in making this event possible.

The seminar took place at the Library of Folklore and Social Anthropology, School of History and Archaeology, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, on 22 October 2021. Due to Covid-19 related restrictions the event took a hybrid form, with most of the speakers, but no audience, at the

Library while the seminar was livestreamed on the School's website. We thank those who were able to attend and everyone at the School who contributed to the dissemination of the event and who assisted on the day.

Our aim with this seminar was to initiate a dialogue between the interdisciplinary team of the organisers, the academic community at the host university, and the wider public. The publication of the seminar acts is a further step towards enabling this dialogue and fostering an ongoing exchange. All papers included here were presented in the Religioscapes seminar in October 2021.

CONTAINED VISIBILITY: JEWISH PRESENCE AND ABSENCE IN THESSALONIKI'S MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS

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ABSTRACT

Taking as point of departure the mayoralty of Yannis Boutaris in Thessaloniki (2011-2019) and the political initiatives around the city's Jewish history, this paper explores whether such initiatives permeated museum exhibitions that took place during that period. It seeks to understand whether cultural spaces addressed to the general public dialogued with the (re)emergence of Jewishness in the public sphere and in official discourse. By looking into two exhibitions that took place in the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki and in the Folk Life and Ethnological Museum of Macedonia & Thrace, between 2011-2012 and 2017-2018 respectively, this paper will discuss the ways these exhibitions engaged or failed to engage with a changing approach towards the city's relation with its Jewish history.

THE (RE)EMERGENCE OF JEWISHNESS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

'You cannot build your future if you are not aware of your past. The extermination of the Jews of Salonica had for many years remained hidden. The Jewish community suffered a tremendous loss, and this is nearly unknown to the world. [...] Our aim is to bring to the fore the city's history'. With these words, Yannis Boutaris, at the time mayor of Thessaloniki, stressed the important place reflection on Jewish history held in the municipal and national agenda, on the occasion of the unveiling of the project for the creation of a Holocaust Museum and adjacent Educational Centre on Human Rights, in December 2016.

Taking as a starting point the increase of political initiatives around Jewish history and culture in Thessaloniki, my study seeks to examine the (re)emergence of Jewishness in the city's public sphere in recent years, focusing mainly, but not exclusively, on the period of Boutaris's mayoralty (2011-2019) and on what Vasiliki Yiakoumaki (2014: 152) has called the 'conditions of official management of otherness'. I am interested in the processes of lending visibility to Thessaloniki's Jewish past and presence and, in particular, in the ways Jewishness is presented or silenced in Thessaloniki's museums. This focus excludes cultural spaces with an intrinsically Jewish interest, such as the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki, exploring instead the presence and absence of Jewishness in cultural spaces of, what we may call, 'general interest'. It also goes beyond initiatives of memorialization, that generally centre around the Shoah.

Furthermore, I am interested in exploring the temporal dimension of the discussion around recognition, asking whether Jewishness in Greece is also envisioned as a present reality or whether it is exclusively attached to the past. In short, the following questions guide this paper: Did the general context of Boutaris's mayoralty foster a heightened interest in Thessaloniki's Jewry (in its historical and contemporary dimensions) and did it influence the ways Jewish history and memory are addressed in cultural and educational spaces? Is there growing public awareness of the city's historic and contemporary heterotopic religioscapes? In what follows, I will first briefly contextualize my discussion against the background of a history of silencing Jewish memory and presence in Greece in general, and in Thessaloniki in particular, and I will then discuss two museum exhibitions that took place during Boutaris's mayoralty.

DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS AND CITYSCAPE TRANSFORMATIONS

Often described, in academic studies and in public discourse, as a cosmopolitan city par excellence (Mazower 2004, Rodrigue and Abrevaya 2012), Salonica used to be a bustling and greatly diverse urban centre of the Ottoman empire where various ethno-religious populations co-existed spanning centuries: Turks, Jews, Greeks, Vlachs, Armenians, among others. This was to change dramatically from 1912-13 onward, when Salonica was incorporated into the Greek state and a strong nationalist agenda compelled minorities to supress linguistic, cultural, and religious expressions that diverged from those of the new majority.

Thessaloniki's location in a 'fragile' and contentious geo-political region, Macedonia, has been a dominant rationale behind the transformation of the city from a multi-cultural hub with a predominant Jewish presence to a bastion of Greek orthodoxy (Agelopoulos 1995). At the time of its 'hellenization' (Papamichos-Chronakis 2014: 376), the city had an important Jewish community, which was about half of its total population. The description historian Devin Naar (2007) gives of David Ben-Gurion's visit to Salonica in 1911 is revealing: 'he acknowledged the prominence of Jews in numerous segments of society, characterising Salonica as "a Hebrew labour town, the only in the world". He was impressed by the fact that the port of the city closed every Saturday in observance of the Jewish Sabbath' (2007: 442).

In August 1917, a fire broke out which destroyed an important part of the city and had a disproportionate impact on the Jewish population. While no human lives are registered as lost to the fire, approximately 14,200 households, 3,900 shops, 16 synagogues, 12 mosques, 3 churches and numerous schools and public buildings were destroyed. The fire left some

73,500 people homeless, about 52,000 of them Jews. Historian Rena Molho gives a dimension of the destruction for the Jewish community in the following terms: 'The community will never recover from this disaster: the Jewish physiognomy of the city, which spanned more than five centuries, was erased within 36 hours' (Molho 2003: 42).

The decision to redesign the city was taken just six days after the fire. Alongside major infrastructural interventions that transformed the city while reconstructing it, 'Greekness', as understood by the state, was visibly reinforced in the public sphere: from street names to statues of Macedonian figures, to a profusion of Greek-Orthodox churches doting the cityscape. Alexandros Papanastasiou, then Minister of Transportation, ordered the expropriation of the burnt area by the Greek state for the purposes of urban planning (Molho 2003: 43). It is perhaps worth noting, in passing, that a few years later, Papanastasiou, as Minister of Labour, would order the end of Shabbat observation in Thessaloniki.

As Devin Naar suggests: 'The Greek government's plan for the reconstruction of Salonika alienated many Jews, since it attempted to diminish their visibility and remove them from the centre of the city. The scheme ... prevented Jews from immediately rebuilding their homes and businesses in the city's centre. In the spirit of the Greek nationalist dream of the *Megali Idea*, the architects hired by the government redesigned the city with Byzantine architecture and the physical mark on the city left by the Jews and Muslims over the previous four centuries disappeared' (Naar 2007: 455). As modern Greece laid claims to the city and the region, and with the decisive impact of the 1923 Greek-Turkish population exchange and, later, the Shoah, Greek-Orthodox Christianity became ubiquitous while non-Hellenic and non-Byzantine elements were gradually vanishing from the public eye.

A great part of the Jewish population left homeless by the fire of 1917 was established in the Campbell quarter. In 1931, it was attacked by an antisemitic (proto)fascist organisation, the National Union of Greece (Ethniki Enosis Ellados, EEE), with the sizeable participation of recently arrived Christian refugees from Asia Minor (Naar 2018). In the aftermath of the Campbell pogrom, it is estimated that 10 thousand Jews left Thessaloniki, almost exclusively to Palestine. (Molho 2003) From numbering about half the population in early 20th-century, the Jewish community of Thessaloniki was reduced to about one-fifth after 1923, and shrunk to about one per cent after the second world war, losing more than 96 per cent of its people (Molho 2003).

We see therefore that a series of conditions in place at a critical conjuncture, contributed, directly and indirectly, to the effacement and consolidation of silence around the Jewish presence and memory in Greece (Agelopoulos 2000, 2008). Among those, we can distinguish three sets of overarching factors, namely: natural disasters -such as the fire of 1917; antisemitism -which includes the tragic events of WWII but also local and national ones, before and after the war (see, e.g., Antoniou et al. 2020); and Greek nationalism -especially under the government of Eleftherios Venizelos (Kallis 2006). These factors shaped, and were being shaped by, local, national, and international political events, as well as by transformations in the cityscape, processes of heritage-making, and historiography. I will now briefly turn to the latter, before moving to the discussion of the two exhibitions.

GREEKNESS AND JEWISHNESS IN HISTORIOGRAPHY

From the first works of Salonican Jewish scholars, of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, to the proliferation of works on Greek Jewish populations in

the last three decades, a solid body of literature on Jewish studies in Greece comes from historiography. A great number of works focuses on the Ottoman Jewry and its transition into the Greek state (Pierron 1996), considering an ample array of their contribution to the city, from commerce and economy (Molho 1988, 2001; Rozen 1993) to literary and cultural production (Fleming 2007), to industrial innovation and the introduction of press (Sánchez Pérez 2014). An important focal point has been the Shoah, the years right before, its aftermath (Bowman 2009, Droumpouki 2016, Plaut 1996) and survivals' accounts (Ampatzopoulou 2007).

However, Jewishness was for a long time, and for the vast majority of historiographic production in Greece, left out of Greek history. As historian Spyros Markétos argues: The Jews were stereotypically presented as either neutral or apathetic to Greek issues, or as 'cosmopolitan', and sometimes clearly as 'enemies of the nation' (1994: 61). Jewishness was largely perceived as external to Greekness and was therefore omitted from Greek history. Markétos notes that George Mavrogordatos was probably the first Greek historian to naturally incorporate, in his work, the presence of Jews in Thessaloniki, as well as that of other communities, within a model of Greek political life, with mentions to internal divisions and explaining its political behaviour in logical terms, overcoming preconceived stereotypes (1994: 61). This approach, which begins to be adopted by others in the late 1980s, finally begins to expand, in the words of historian Efi Avdelá, the 'procrustean and one-dimensional definition of a national self' (1994).

The works by Rika Benveniste, Odette Varon-Vassard, Nikos Stavroulakis, among several others, as well as collective initiatives, such as the foundation of the Society for the Study of Greek Jewry in 1991, have contributed to the creation of a rich body of work on Greek Judaism and

the presence of Jews in what is today modern Greece -one that goes beyond the confines of the community (as was commonly the case with earlier works) and is addressed to the broad public.

In her seminal text for the study of the emergence of Jewishness in Greek public life, Yiakoumaki (2014) traces key moments of the genesis and development of official discourse and action of 'restorative' character in the public sphere, which aim at establishing diversity as a value. Such political initiatives, which for the most part revolve around memorialization, such as the establishment of memorial days and the erection of monuments, are inserted in a broader context of reworking questions of Jewish history and memory in Europe and internationally (2014: 151).

And while such discourse and action centre around diversity, they are oftentimes anchored in the past, failing to consider the present. For the case under consideration, it is important to acknowledge that Thessaloniki's Jewish community, despite its small number, is also a contemporary part of the urban population and not a relic of its past. As Leon Nar (2018) shows in his study of the return of Greek Jews in Thessaloniki after the war, ever since its reorganisation, the Jewish community was determined to resist marginalisation and start a 'new life' in the city, despite the unfavourable circumstances.

Boutaris's mayoralty built on past and ongoing processes of revisiting Greek national history and expand its self-image to include ethnic and religious 'others' whose presence had historically been neglected. That is to say, such 'restorative' initiatives did not start with the former mayor, nor was he alone in his efforts to reckon with Thessaloniki's Jewish community which counted on the active, direct and indirect, engagement of hundreds of people at the local, regional, national, and international

levels. Boutaris's mayoralty was, nonetheless, a motor that importantly fostered such actions and gave them greater visibility. To what extent did political initiatives around Jewish memory and history during Boutaris's mayoralty influence the themes and approaches to the Jewish 'other' in Thessaloniki's museums? I now turn to this question.

A TALE OF TWO EXHIBITIONS

As important cultural spaces in the city, museums invite visitors to engage with the tangible and intangible elements of their exhibitions and reflect on their themes and presentation thereof. The first exhibition I will briefly discuss, titled 'The Jews of Thessaloniki: Indelible marks in space', took place at the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki from September 2011 to September 2012, at the beginning of Boutaris's mayoralty. Its organising committee involved members of the Archaeological Museum and the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki, while the Museum of Byzantine Culture, the 9th Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities and the Folklife and Ethnological Museum of Macedonia & Thrace cooperated in its organisation.

As its title indicates, the exhibition revolved around the long history of the Jewish community of Thessaloniki through an examination of material traces found in the cityscape. Starting from the Hellenistic era and ending with the Second World War, the long-standing and multi-dimensional Jewish presence in the city takes centre stage. Specific objects, such as tombstones and religious costumes, were chosen to illustrate the historical and continuing Jewish presence. Special emphasis is given on the fact that the city centre used to be dotted by predominantly Jewish neighbourhoods until the fire of 1917. Indeed, the 'indelible marks' explored by the exhibition are mostly found around the axis of Aristotelous street, 'the historic uterus of the Salonikan Jews' (AMTH 2012: 8), as Evanghelos

Hekimoglou, Ephor of the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki put it in his text for the exhibition's catalogue.

In the catalogue's foreword, David Saltiel, President of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki, expresses his contentment with the initiative: 'It is the first time that the idea for an exhibition was born and materialised outside the boundaries of our Community. We are especially pleased by the fact that the vehicle of this initiative is the most important Museum of the city' (AMTH 2012: 5). Leafing through the exhibition's catalogue, we note that several of its contributing authors, emphasize the continuing presence of the Jewish community in the city, while discussing its important contribution throughout the centuries. For example, in his text, Wolfgand Hoelscher-Obermaier, Consul General of the Federal Republic of Germany in Thessaloniki, made several allusions to the community's presence in the city today as well as to its future. Referring, for instance, to 'a small group' that 'manage[d] to survive', to its 'power and perseverance', to its 'contribution to the development of the city' (AMTH 2012: 6), and to its continuing influence on the city's image. In the same vein, Evangelia Stefani, Head of the Exhibitions Department of the Archaeological Museum, emphasizes that 'the Jewish community is still a living part of the city and thus cannot be dealt as a reminiscence or a cause for emotional flare' (AMTH 2012: 9), while Hekimoglou stresses that 'Jews lived and still live in their city' (AMTH 2012: 8).

This double emphasis on the long history and continuing presence of Jewish people in Thessaloniki is showcased in the timeline which accompanies the exhibition and stretches from the first Jewish settlements in 145 BC to this day. The exhibition and its catalogue make recurrent connections between the past and the present, linking contemporary key areas in the city (such as the Aristotle University) with landmarks of the

old city centre. Trying to shed light on both the everyday life and organisation of the old Jewish neighbourhoods and on their destruction and transformation, the exhibition makes an ambitious effort to present a history of Jewish presence in Thessaloniki spanning centuries. Drawing on historical archives, photographic material, and architectonic perspectives, the exhibition weaves together collective and individual trajectories that engage with a little-known historical 'other' in critical and non-essentialist ways, offering the possibility to bring the 'other' closer to the 'self' and to the city's collective past and present.

The second exhibition I will refer to in this presentation, titled 'The soundscape of the fire: echoes from Thessaloniki of 1917', took place at the Folk Life and Ethnological Museum of Macedonia & Thrace, from December 2017 to December 2018, towards the end of Boutaris's mayoralty. In their introduction to the exhibition's catalogue, curators Zissis Skampalis and Eleni Bintsi, state that the exhibition's aim is not to detail 'yet again the historical facts of the event', but to depict 'the era through a soundscape composition, immersing the spectator in the period, permitting an emotional experience of the human drama, the agony, the pain'. (FEMM-Th 2018: 11). While the exhibition revolves around the fire, it 'ends with the replanning and rebuilding of the city, the new city that emerged from the ashes of the old and marked its transition to the modern age' (FEMM-Th 2018: 17).

It is important to note that while the exhibition attempts to reconstruct a soundscape that may transmit something of the moments lived in 1917 to the contemporary visitor, it does not have a specific focus on the Jewish community and the fire's impact on it. However, a special mention is given to the latter in the 'Political ramifications' section of the catalogue, where it is explicitly mentioned that 'the Jewish community was by far the hardest

hit by the disaster, in both human and material terms' FEMM-Th 2018: 33). In this section we also read that the city's replanning 'prevented the poor from returning to the [city's] centre', without, however, specifying the different ways in which this decision affected the different communities.

The mentions to the Jewish community in the exhibition's catalogue do not indicate a homogeneous approach, perhaps reflecting the diversity of the authors who contributed texts, some privileging the 'Greek element' over others; some placing more emphasis on issues of 'cosmopolitanism', and yet others on the historic presence of the Jewish community and the disproportionate impact the fire had on its members. On one account, we even read about a theory suggesting political motivations and financial opportunism behind the fire of 1917. In general, the exhibition and its catalogue, offer a careful assessment of the events of 1917 and of the urban reconstruction that followed it. There is an explicit and recurrent acknowledgement of processes of silencing the Muslim and Jewish communities in the public space, also associated with the influx of refugees from Asia Minor in 1923.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Political and cultural initiatives around Jewish memory in Greece, attempt an ex post facto 'recognition' of Jewish presence and history, which are retrieved from historical exclusion and public oblivion and restored, or introduced, as part of Greek history. Their proclaimed aim is to enrich historical narratives and to 'restore' collective memory not only for the Jewish citizens –who today comprise less than one percent of the city's population and number about 5,000 people in the country– but for all Greeks, and global historical memory. Thessaloniki offers an excellent case-study for a critical analysis of this political 'turn', as, especially during the years of

Boutaris's mayoralty, local authorities took an active role in public debates around Jewish memory and heritage, and in the monumentalisation of the historical Jewish presence in the city. Through such official initiatives, Jewishness is gaining increasing visibility in the Greek public sphere.

Have these efforts had a measurable effect on the themes selected for exhibition by the city's museums and on their approaches to Jewishness? My preliminary findings indicate that, to a certain extent, they have. Drawing on material from ten exhibitions that took place during that period, it becomes evident that there is a growing interest, in recent years, in Jewishness not only as an exhibition theme in itself but in its inclusion in broader themes that grapple with the history and cultural and religious life in the city. Indeed, a tendency to focus exclusively on Thessaloniki's Jews that is mostly observed in the early years of Boutaris's administration, was gradually succeeded by an inclusion of Jewish history and presence in broader themes covered by museum exhibitions. In other words, an initial 'familiarisation' of the visitor with an ethno-religious 'other' was largely followed by a more discursive approach that blended Jewish and Hellenic histories, seen as constitutive elements of the city's long and diverse history.

This growing inclusion notwithstanding, the discussion of the Jewish community of Salonica in museum exhibitions tends to follow a pattern found in the literature, that is, a tendency to inscribe Jewishness in a narrative of loss, disaster, pain and human suffering. References to Jewish memory and especially to the Jewish presence today although increased, remain rather circumscribed by pre-construed approaches. The identification of the Jew with the suffering subject (Robbins 2013) is frequent, and this narrative is often presented as a common denominator of the universal human experience of suffering –especially with regards to the experience of forced displacement and 'uprooting', that provide a narrative

for understanding and explaining the radical demographic changes that took place in Thessaloniki.

A further observation speaks to an ambivalent relation to Jewish otherness in relation to historical time: the Jewish community is often presented as a fragment of the city's past, but rarely as a segment of its present. On many occasions, the community is seen as having entirely disappeared as a result of the Shoah. Another ambivalence is observed in relation to Greekness. Jewish history is sometimes presented as part of Greek history and at other times as distinct. This ambivalence regarding the Greekness of Jews is particularly evident in relation to the management of the Greekness of other historical communities, and especially in relation to the Orthodox Christian population from Asia Minor, generally considered closer to identity than to alterity.

As a way of conclusion, it can be suggested that Boutaris's mayoralty did have an impact on the themes of Thessaloniki's museum exhibitions and on their approaches to Jewishness. However, these often remained constrained by specific ways of representation, as discussed above. While important first steps towards a more inclusive and diverse approach to the city's history and memory have been made, it is essential that these continue to advance and expand our perception of the 'Other', in all their complex and multiple dimensions.

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