

# Venice – The City which Gave Birth to Modern Greek Literature

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**Abstract** Starting point of my paper are some influential studies related to the beginnings of modern Greek literature – namely those written by Savvidis, who emphasized the media shift from manuscripts to printed books, and Vagenas, who highlighted the importance of Greek consciousness as opposed to Romanness. In the context of early modern Greek books, printed in Venice in the first half of the sixteenth century, modern Greek identity is promoted. The distinction between Greekness and Romanness was not a new issue in the sixteenth century. Young educated Greeks in Venice took advantage of the new medium to promote modern Greekness in a concerted effort, which was new in its kind. This effort was, in the long run, the decisive turning point towards modern Greek literature.

**Keywords** Greekness. Romanness. Printed books. Vernacular Greek. Early modern Greek literature.

As a starting point, I would like to revisit what Giorgos Savvidis proposed 32 years ago at a conference held at the Instituto Ellenico, during almost the same dates as the IX Convegno Nazionale di Studi Neogreci, from 7-10 November 1991. Savvidis suggested considering the *Apokopos* published in 1509 – the first printed book in modern Greek language – as the first piece of Modern Greek literature (Savvidis 1993). The work, *Apokopos*, was written by a Cretan of Venetian origin and is likely a couple of decades older than the 1509 edition (Kaklamanis 2020; Vejleskov 2005). However, Savvidis's suggestion only partially relates to the characteristics of the work itself.

Before I start my paper, I would like to thank Caterina Carpinato for the great honour of the invitation to Venice and for the opportunity to deliver the *Lectio magistralis* at the Convegno Nazionale di Studi Neogreci in the historic ambiente of the Ateneo Veneto.

The content of the *Apokopos* is remote from Byzantine tradition, as many works of early Cretan literature are. Thus, it does not contain anything that would allow it to be considered a turning point. Rather, Savvidis's argument is directly linked to the shift in media from hand-written books to printed editions, which created the conditions for a much broader dissemination of texts. According to Savvidis, the first printed book in Modern Greek language, printed in 1509 in Venice, signifies the beginning of Modern Greek literature.

In the Modern Greek Studies courses at German universities, we have accepted this proposal. However, one would feel more comfortable if there were a criterion that does not refer to the medium through which texts are disseminated, but instead, if we could identify a criterion that derives from the texts themselves. What I aim to argue in the following pages is closely related to the question of whether we can name such a criterion. The argument that I will develop next leads us, as Savvidis's suggestion does, to the books in Early Modern Greek language and the texts they contained, which were printed in Venice in the first decades of the sixteenth century. In response to Savvidis's suggestion, Nasos Vagenas, in a series of major and minor publications, added that in order to label literature as modern Greek, a consciousness of Greek identity is a precondition (Vagenas 2005; 2007; 2008). I will further discuss this in the course of this paper. Vagenas refers to the consciousness of Roman identity as the genus proximum to Greek identity. I will follow his lead, hopefully adding some relevant aspects.

Modern scholarship usually divides Medieval and Modern Greek literatures into two major categories: Byzantine literature and Modern Greek literature. But what is considered defining for Byzantine literature throughout the Byzantine centuries, including the later ones? At first glance, one might argue that there cannot be Byzantine literature without Byzantium. It is common to think that the year 1453 marks the end of Byzantine literary production. However, considering works like the *Histories* of Kritobulos, it is clear that the author was educated in the Byzantine tradition and infused his work with a distinctly Byzantine character, even though it was composed during Ottoman times. Panagiotis Agapitos argues that Byzantine literature did not cease to be produced in 1453 but only a generation later (Agapitos 2020). This approach could bring the end of Byzantine literature closer to the beginnings of Modern Greek literature as suggested by Savvidis. However, I believe this explanation may be too simplistic. We have to bring to our mind that Byzantium had been in a process of shrinking for centuries earlier than 1453. There was a literary production in Greek, which often we label as Byzantine, but which was produced outside of the limits of the Byzantine Empire, e.g. in crusader states. A great part of this production was written in vernacular Greek. This – the fact that they are written in

vernacular language – is one of the reasons why we approach the relevant pieces of literature as early Modern Greek. But obviously none of these approaches is really satisfying. There are some texts, which neither seem to be Byzantine nor early Modern Greek.

This is valid for Cyprus and Crete, to mention just two of the most important regions and societies that were no longer Byzantine but not yet modern either. Geopolitical circumstances obviously play a role in this distinction. Literature produced in Constantinople in the latter half of the fourteenth century obviously cannot be perceived but as Byzantine, since Byzantine society produced it. But literature composed in the Greek language during the same period or earlier, but outside the Byzantine borders, hardly can be perceived as Byzantine. Therefore, it would be difficult to categorize works such as the *Chronicle* of Machairas from the fifteenth century or any early Cretan literature from Sachlikis onwards as Byzantine literature. Sachlikis, who lived in the fourteenth century, and Machairas wrote in regions that once were part of the Byzantine Empire but were under Frankish or Venetian rule when their respective works were created. Referring to Crete, one might find signs of Greek consciousness already in the fifteenth century (cf. Kaklamanis 2005b). Referring to Cyprus, it is not easy to claim Modern Greek identity significantly earlier than the sixteenth century (cf. Nikolaou-Konnari 2018).

To be more specific about the works I have in mind, I will provide some examples of works that were written in the Greek language in regions that were previously part of the Byzantine Empire, continued to use Greek but were no longer Byzantine when these works were created, and this occurred prior to 1453, the year of the capture of the Byzantine capital:

- Works written in the thirteenth century in the Principality of Achaëa, such as the Πόλεμος της Τρωάδος and the Chronicle of the Morea, which were likely more supportive of the Villehardouins than of the Byzantine Empire (Shawcross 2009; Jeffreys 2016; 2018; Carpinato 2022).
- Works produced in the Kingdom of Cyprus, such as the *Chronicle* of Machairas (fifteenth century), refer to the circumstances of the Lusignian regime (Nikolaou-Konnari 2018).
- Works composed in the Cretan dialect in Venetian-dominated Crete, such as those by Stefanos Sachlikis, Leonardo Dellaportas, or Marinos Falieros (fourteenth and fifteenth centuries), as well as the *Apokopos* authored by Bergadis (fifteenth century) (van Gemert 1991; Kaklamanis 2020).

It is not easy, therefore, to delineate what is still Byzantine and what is no longer Byzantine. How then can we approach the question of what is Modern Greek and what is not yet? Over time, various criteria

have been utilized, with the most enduring being the differentiation between learned language and vernacular, i.e., spoken language. The spoken Greek language has closely resembled what has evolved into modern Greek as it is spoken today. The influential paradigm of ‘literature in the vernacular’ (δημώδης λογοτεχνία in Greek) has been significant. However, some histories of modern Greek literature, begin with *Digenes Akrites* – much too early, as I and many others would argue. The ‘literature in the vernacular’ paradigm initially (but no longer) overlooked the fact that a diverse range of social environments and societies produced the relevant texts.

It is commonly agreed that literary texts reflect the society that created them, or at least a portion of it. Following the capture of Constantinople in 1204, the geopolitical fragmentation of Byzantium accelerated, leading to the emergence of several states with a significant Greek Orthodox population and a Greek-speaking society, and this well before 1453. Cyprus and Crete are prominent examples. Some of these societies began producing works of literature in the vernacular that do not reflect a Byzantine society but rather societies that maintained ties to Greek Orthodoxy and Constantinople within a context of domination by Roman Catholic powers. These were societies where Latin culture held more sway and where Western literature was embraced more fervently than in the late Byzantine Constantinople. I am hesitant to categorize these works as either Byzantine or Modern Greek because I am seeking, according to Vagenas’s suggestion, the consciousness expressed within a piece of literature.

Considering the Byzantine consciousness, a significant aspect was its claim to be the Roman Empire (Kaldellis 2007; 2015; 2019). All subsequent Byzantine rulers after Constantine, who rebuilt Byzantium and named it Constantinople, maintained the title of Roman Emperor and the identity of Βασιλεὺς Ῥωμαίων (Emperor of the Romans). The term ‘Romans’ was synonymous with Orthodox Christians and persisted even after the fall of the Byzantine Empire (for Cyprus see Nikolaou-Konnari 2018). Byzantine texts often emphasized their Roman identity rather than Greekness. The claim to Greekness emerged as a minority assertion in the late Byzantine era,<sup>1</sup> distinct from the predominant identity.

Without any doubt the perception of Greekness *vis-à-vis* Romanness existed long before 1453, yet when did it stop being a minority assertion and when did it become integrated into the identity in modern times referred to as Greek?

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**1** See Kaplanis 2009, 351-2, for the opinion «that the main ideological currents that exist even today in modern Greek society originate from and were originally formed in the period from the twelfth c. onwards»).

This extensive digression is necessary in order to come to the main topic of my paper: according to our modern perception the Greekness promoted in the books written in vernacular Greek and printed in Venice in the first half of the sixteenth century is anything but striking. Opposed, though, to the dominant consciousness of Romanness, is comes as something new, even revolutionary.

In the following sections, I will view this collection of printed literature as a corpus, and pose questions such as: What were the selection criteria? Did all the texts, like the *Apokoπος*, exist before being printed? Can we assume that they were previously successful and thus, in a manner of speaking, selected according to readers' preferences? Or were they chosen based on the publishers' and editors' preferences? Were the texts printed as originally written, or were they modified? Were some texts specifically composed for printing? Lastly, and relevant to the argument of my paper, do these texts address themes of Greekness, and, albeit less likely, Romanness? (Source for the bibliographical data: Kaklamanis 2005a).

Which were the texts which preexisted?

<b>Title and author</b>	<b>First edition and subsequent editions in the sixteenth century</b>
Bergadis, <i>Απόκοπος</i>	1509, 1534, 1543 [and many younger editions]
Justos Glykis, <i>Πένθος θανάτου, ζωής μάταιον και προς Θεόν επιστροφή</i>	1524, 1528, 1543, 1564
Gavriil Akontianos, <i>Απολλώνιος</i>	1524, 1534, 1553 [and many younger editions]
<i>Διήγησις εις τας πράξεις του περιβοήτου στρατηγού των Ρωμαίων μεγάλου Βελισαρίου</i>	1525/6, 1548, 1554 [and some younger editions]
<i>Ο Αλέξανδρος ο Μακεδών</i>	1529, 1553 [and many younger editions]
<i>Άνθος Χαρίτων</i>	1529, 1537, 1546 [and many younger editions]
<i>Θησέος και γάμοι της Εμίλιας</i>	1529 [no second edition]
<i>Εξήγησις του θαυμαστού Ημπερίου</i>	1543, 1553 [and many younger editions]
Marinos Falieros, <i>Θρήνος εις τα Πάθη και την Σταύρωσιν του Κυρίου ημών Ιησού Χριστού</i>	1544 [no second edition]

All of these texts were most likely revised before being printed. The publisher's editor(s) aimed for uniformity in verse and rhyme (van Gemert 2015), with revisions sometimes approaching a form of 'rewriting'.

I would distinguish the earlier texts from the subsequent ones in the sense that the latter can be seen as new compositions in their own right, while also utilizing pre-existing textual material.

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Nikolaos Lukanis, <i>Ομήρου Ιλιάς. Μεταβληθείσα πάλοι εις κοινήν γλώσσαν, νυν δε διορθωθείσα</i>	1526, 1603, 1640
<i>Γαδάρου Λύκου Κιαλουπούς, διήγησις ωραία</i>	1539 [and many younger editions]
<i>Σπανός</i>	1542, 1553 [and many younger editions]
Markos Defaranas, <i>Λόγοι διδακτικοί του πατρός προς τον υιόν</i>	1543, reprinted in 1644 and 1683

This category likely requires further explanation. Regarding Lukanis's work, my understanding is drawn from publications by Caterina Carpinato. Lukanis utilized pre-existing texts from various sources, all related to the Trojan War (Carpinato 2019a). Currently, I am researching the *Γαδάρου, Λύκου κιαλουπούς, διήγησις ωραία*, which, in my opinion, represents a new piece of literature compared to the late-Byzantine *Συναξάριον του τιμημένου Γαδάρου* on which it is based, incorporating and transforming material. The extent of revision is significant, and the literary quality of the resulting work is such that I confidently consider it a standalone piece of literature. The unknown author, of Cretan origin, lived and wrote in Venice, where he likely encountered the early stages of *commedia dell'arte*. The Spanos text adheres more closely to the structure of the Greek Orthodox liturgical form than the two older versions preserved in manuscripts (edition: Eideneier 1990). Eirini Papadaki expressed the suggestion that the text was rewritten for printing («all'effetto della censura libraria», 2009, 659). The *Λόγοι διδακτικοί του πατρός προς τον υιόν* reads like a cento, utilizing pre-existing material, including a similar poem by Marinos Falieros.

Van Gemert's study (2015) is based on the assumption that Venetian publishing houses essentially selected from existing texts, provided that they met certain criteria. I see more the intention to influence reading preferences, thus a selection more according to the principle of 'top down' and less according to the principle of 'bottom up'.

Moving on to another category are texts that were entirely original compositions:

Iakovos Trivolis, <i>Ανδραγαθίες Ταγιαπιέρα</i>	1523, 1528, 1544 [and many younger editions]
Ioannikios Kartanos, <i>Το παρόν βιβλίον είναι η Παλαιά τε και Νέα Διαθήκη</i>	1536, 1539-40, 1544, 1549, 1567, 1697 [sic]
Dimitrios Zinos (transl.), <i>Βατραχομουμαχία</i>	1539 [no second edition]
Ανδρόνικος Νούκιος (transl.), <i>Αισώπου μύθοι</i>	1543 [many younger editions from 1603 and later]
Iakovos Trivolis, <i>Ιστορία του Ρε της Σκότζιας</i>	1543
Nikolaos Sofianos (transl.), <i>Πλουτάρχου Φιλοσόφου Παιδαγωγός</i>	1544 [no second edition]
Tzanes Ventramos, <i>Ιστορία των γυναικών, των καλών, και των κακών</i>	1549 [no second edition]

If we analyse these texts not based on their origins (which we could do), but rather on whether they emphasize Romanness or Greekness, we will observe that many remain neutral regarding any collective identity they may represent.

The Διήγησις εις τας πράξεις του περιβοήτου στρατηγού των Ρωμαίων μεγάλου Βελισαρίου is the only text in the entire corpus that explicitly refers to Byzantium. Originally written in the late fourteenth century, it aligns with the historical context of the Byzantine Empire's decline: Belisarius was portrayed as being destroyed by malice, and the Byzantines lost their sovereignty due to malice. Following the fall of Constantinople in 1453, there was an enduring discourse attributing the empire's downfall to the sins of the Romans; Moscow even claimed to be the Third Rome based on this narrative. Instead of losing relevance with the empire's collapse, the text (and its revised versions) may have actually gained in relevance over time (edition and analysis: Bakker, van Gemert 2007). On the other hand, the Σπανός is the only text in the corpus that strongly references Greek Orthodoxy. It is essential to have knowledge of Orthodox liturgy to fully grasp its context. While the other texts contain references to Christian faith, they often remain vague regarding specific denominations. For instance, the depiction of the underworld in the *Apokopos* resembles a pagan realm rather than a place where deceased Christians await the Second Coming of the Lord. The katabasis motif in the *Apokopos* is intertextually connected to the *Life of Barlaam and Ioasaph*, a significant Christian text in both the Greek and Latin churches (van Gemert 1991). In the Σταύρωσις του κυρίου ημών Ιησού Χριστού, a description of a Crucifixion painting is notably Catholic rather than Orthodox (edition and analysis: Bakker, van Gemert 2002; Carpinato 2005). The issue of confessional awareness emerges as an additional topic; in this case, the contrast is between Roman Catholicism and Greek Orthodoxy.

However, when considering Greekness as a consciousness of descent from the ancient Greeks, how does it factor into these texts?

In her article titled «From Greek to the Greeks: Homer (and Pseudo-Homer) in the Greco-Venetian Context between the Late Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Century», Caterina Carpinato (2019a, 175) explores «the use and re-use of the Homeric legacy by Greeks who had settled in Venice», examining both texts composed in the vernacular and those written in Ancient Greek. Among the texts she analyzes are the *Iliad* by Nikolaos Lukanis and the Βατραχομουμαχία, translated by Demetrios Zenos (ed. Carpinato 2006). Carpinato asserts:

Greek antiquity was a new world for the western humanists but also a hidden heritage for too many Greek-speaking men and women. This treasure needed to be revealed. (Carpinato 2019a, 177)

In the course of her paper, she also discusses the translation of Plutarch's *Περὶ παιδῶν ἀγωγῆς* into vernacular Greek by Nikolaos Sofianos. Sofianos is a significant figure highlighted also by Vagenas for embodying a consciousness of Greek identity (2005; 2008). Mario Vititi (1993, 52) writes about Sofianos and Nukios, that they both transfer the vernacular “into literary genres, in which the *dimotiki* assumes literary dignity equal to that reserved exclusively to Classical Greek up to that time” (“generi letterari, nei quale la *dimotiki* assume dignità letteraria pari a quella riservata fino ad allora esclusivamente al greco classico”).

One more clue, I would argue, that this group of young educated persons consciously uses the new medium of printed books in order to promote modern Greekness.

In addition to the texts mentioned by Carpinato, I would like to include the following texts in the list of those that promote Greekness:

Θησέος και γάμοι της Εμίλιας	1529 [no second edition]
Andronikos Nukios (transl.), <i>Αισώπου μύθοι</i>	1543

With a question mark, I would add the Γαδάρου Λύκου κι Αλουπούς, *διήγησις ωραία*, published in 1539 (because it is intertextually linked to Lucian's *Metamorphoses of the Ass*; Vasileiou 1996) and, with a significant question mark, Gavriil Akontianos's *Απολλώνιος*, initially published in 1524 (assuming there was an awareness of the late antique origin of the text and its genre). Furthermore, with an even bigger question mark, I would include the *Εξήγησις του θαυμαστού Ημπερίου* (edition: Yiavis 2019), which, in terms of genre features, mirrors the *Απολλώνιος*.

Greekness is indeed a central theme in the corpus of literary texts written in the vernacular and printed in Venice in the first half of



the sixteenth century. To the best of my judgment, the discussion about Greekness through literary texts in the vernacular, which commenced in 1526 with the publication of Lukanis's *Iliad* and concluded in 1544 with the *Περί παίδων αγωγής* or *Παιδαγωγός*, was groundbreaking.

Returning to my previous point, the endeavor to promote Greekness through literature written in the vernacular and disseminated through printed books – essential for broad distribution – was, to the best of my knowledge, unprecedented.

Another question arises: Were the texts that promoted Greekness successful? *Θησεός και γάμοι της Εμίλιας*, commonly known as the *Theseid* (and produced in Athens when the region was ruled by the Acciaiuoli; Kaklamanis 1998; Carpinato 2019b), was not reprinted, which suggests a lackluster reception, although numerous copies have been preserved. Numerous copies have been preserved of Lukanis's *Iliad* as well. Many of these copies were preserved, especially in Latin European lands (and libraries), and this at first glance may imply an initial success. However, this success most likely was not among the 'intended readers' but among Western European scholars, supposedly members of the Repubblica delle Lettere. It took 80 years after its first edition until the *Iliad* was reprinted, implying that the book was not a success. The *Βατραχομυομαχία* was also not reprinted in Venice, although it was reprinted several times in the German, more precisely Lutheran, branches of the Repubblica delle Lettere (Carpinato 2023; early modern humanist editions: Crusius 1584; Lange 1707; current edition: Carpinato 2006).

The only text promoting Greekness that was consistently reprinted was *Ο Αλέξανδρος ο Μακεδών* (Holton 1974; Carpinato 2014). This text is often compared to the so-called *Phyllada of Alexander*, another text which tells the story of Alexander's life and deeds. Interestingly, the *Phyllada* was first printed much later, in 1750 (with speculations about an earlier edition in 1699). The world portrayed in the 1529 edition of *Ο Αλέξανδρος ο Μακεδών* reflects an ancient realm, while the *Phyllada* portrays a Christian world, in keeping with the orthodox consciousness of Romanness.

In the preceding, I focused on the texts and only relatively less on the individuals who created, selected, rewrote, and edited them for publication. In her 2017 article, Carpinato relates the prints from the first half of the sixteenth century to the entire publishing program of the Nicolini da Sabbio printing house, where most of the mentioned prints were published, and to the network of da Sabbio, as well as in an analogy to the discourse on an Italian literary language and its protagonist Pietro Bembo (Carpinato 2017).

To sum up: the terms 'Byzantine literature' and 'Modern Greek literature' are on the one hand complementary, but on the other hand, there are texts for which neither term seems entirely suitable. In

the first part of my article, I deliberately delved extensively into the Roman self-perception of the Byzantines. If we accept a Greek self-perception of the Byzantines, then the awareness of Greekness expressed in some texts printed in Venice in the first half of the sixteenth century does not come as something remarkable. Long before the sixteenth century, there were individual expressions of Greek consciousness. In Venetian prints, there is, for the first time, a concerted attempt of promoting modern Greekness. If one measures the success or failure of these editions based on whether they were reprinted or not, the conclusion would be that the initiatives of the Venetian editors were at least not immediately successful, indicating that Modern Greek *Graecitas* was discussed and promoted in Venice in the first half of the sixteenth century, but not yet majoritarian. In the long term, however, they prevailed, and this is certainly one of the reasons why we today pay so much attention to these texts. The names associated with these printed editions are Nikolaos Lukanis, Dimitrios Zinos, Nikolaos Sophianos, and Andronikos Nukios and the publishers Nicolini da Sabbio. The title of this article is «Venice – the City which Gave Birth to Modern Greek Literature». If one connects Savvidis' argument of media transition with the visible propagation of a new Greek identity in these printed editions, the result leads to the conclusion that what happened in Venice in the first half of the sixteenth century is the decisive turning point towards modern Greek literature.

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