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“Conversation is precisely the mode of interaction that is fast disappearing in our polarized world. It has been replaced by sermon, preached to an already converted choir and invective, no less unilateral in intention. The basic premise of a conversation is the acceptance and the desire to preserve a diversity of views and of opinions. Though it could lead to consensus, its purpose is to provide conditions for peaceful dissensus. I am particularly honored to be joining this Conversation on Rhodes and its past, which has too often been dragooned into the service of exclusivist metanarratives, be they colonial or nationalistic. A true conversation with the archipelago’s diverse cultural heritage may offer the gateway to more inclusive, and therefore more democratic stories.”

Alexis Rappas

Decolonial or National?

Greece’s Reactions to Italian Cultural Heritage Policies in Rhodes

Abstract

This paper examines the Greek cultural heritage policies implemented in the Dodecanese following their 1947 annexation to Greece, focusing particularly on the island of Rhodes. Framed as a historical correction, this integration was accompanied by efforts to reverse over three decades of Italian cultural influence and to assert a singular Hellenic identity. Central to this agenda was the Doxiadis Report—commissioned by the Greek Ministry for Reconstruction—which defined cultural policy as a process of restoring the islands’ “true” Greek essence, in deliberate opposition to the Fascist Italian vision that emphasized Roman, medieval, and Renaissance legacies to assert Italian sovereignty. While the Greek state’s critique of Italian heritage policy was not unfounded, its countermeasures were likewise rooted in a teleological narrative of Greek continuity, leaving little space for the archipelago’s Ottoman and Sephardic Jewish past.

Greek authorities pursued policies of re-Hellenization: purging Italian symbols, realigning education, and privileging ancient and Byzantine heritage. This was not only a reaction to Italian colonialism but also a strategic assertion of national sovereignty amid Cold War tensions and domestic instability. Over time, tourism necessitated a selective acknowledgment of Rhodes’ cosmopolitan past—particularly its Islamic heritage—culminating in the city’s 1988 UNESCO designation. However, Jewish memory remains marginalized, revealing the limits of this pluralist turn.

Ultimately, the paper argues that both Italian and Greek regimes instrumentalized heritage to construct legitimizing national narratives. A truly decolonial approach would embrace the Dodecanese’s layered, contingent history, advancing a more inclusive and democratic understanding of cultural identity.

On 31 March 1947, official ceremonies marked the transfer of power over the Dodecanese from the British to the Greek military administrations.¹ This was the first time the Eastern Mediterranean archipelago, long ruled by Italy (1912-1943) and then briefly by Germany during the latter phase of World War II (1943-1945), would ever integrate the modern Hellenic state. And yet that transition was broadly perceived as a *retrocession*, given that the great majority of the islands’ population was Hellenophone and Orthodox Christian. That very same year, as if to better enshrine this specific interpretation, the Greek Ministry for Reconstruction, published, under the direction of Konstantinos Doxiadis, a four-volume report identifying the urgent priorities and the perimeter and meaning of its action in the Dodecanese. Aside from the fact that the assumption of postwar reconstruction responsibilities is in itself an act of sovereignty, the Doxiadis report, from its opening lines, defines its mission as one of restoring the historical record about, and therefore genuine identity of, this

1 Robert Holland and Diana Markides, *The British and the Hellenes. Struggles for Mastery in the Eastern Mediterranean*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 210.

“new and yet so ancient Greek land.”¹ All of the information contained in this document, detailed, substantiated and even nuanced as it is, is therefore mobilized in support of the political intention to offset over thirty years of Italianization and dehellenization of the islands.

A thorough examination of all the topics -economic, legal, political- covered in the Doxiadis report would require an extended analysis. What is being proposed here instead, is to focus on how it informed Greek official reactions to Italian cultural heritage policies in the Dodecanese, as these were taken to be touching directly the history, and therefore identity, of the archipelago. Focusing specifically on the island of Rhodes, the capital of the archipelago, it will be argued that the Greek diagnosis of the purpose of these Italian policies is not, on the whole, incorrect. However, its firm rooting into a semantics of national restoration instead of one of decolonial intervention leaves little room for the articulation of more plural alternatives, inclusive, for example, of the Muslim and Jewish legacy of Rhodes.

*The incorporation of the Dodecanese in 1947 marked the end of a period during which, in less than forty years, the archipelago had experienced four different administrations: Ottoman until 1912, two different forms of Italian rule -liberal until 1923 and fascist until 1943- German until 1945 and British until 1947. The islands had by then suffered all the consequences of the Second World War, including destitution, famine, combat and reprisals on the part of the occupiers also directed against the Italian forces when the latter sided with the Allies after the armistice of Cassibile.² More tragically even, the entire Jewish community of the Dodecanese, located for the most part in the main island of Rhodes, with a few families in that of Kos, had been sent to the Nazi death camps.³ As for the country to which the Dodecanese was annexed, Greece, it had not only undergone a very comparable level of destruction but in addition found itself, in 1947, in the middle of a Civil War between nationalist and communist forces; it is indeed often argued that Britain’s cession of the Dodecanese to Greece was meant to boost the legitimacy of the former, in control of the government in Athens.⁴ The nationalist vigilance of the Greek authorities that took over the administration of the archipelago was thus particularly heightened, and inspired initiatives to both reverse the cultural policies of the former Italian rulers of the Dodecanese and prevent a potential communist infiltration. On a broader geopolitical scale, the display of national intransigence was also addressed to the Republic of Turkey. Indeed, the relations between the two neighbors, officially allies in the context of the Cold War, were being gradually strained over the Cyprus issue and competing sovereign claims in the Aegean Sea.

Several highly symbolic measures were immediately implemented to illustrate the priorities of the Greek state. The Italian families, including Greek Orthodox women who had married Italian men and converted to Catholicism, were forced to emigrate to Italy.⁵ Other local collaborators, or persons suspected to have colluded with the fascist occupiers, including the Archbishop of Rhodes, were purged from their positions.⁶ School curricula were once more aligned with the directives of the Greek Ministry of Religious Affairs and Education. Unperturbed by the enduring presence of a

small Muslim and Turkish-speaking community on the island of Rhodes, the Greek administration thus embarked on a large-scale effort to re-Hellenize the islands. This meant that it had to overturn Italian efforts at cultural assimilation, of which Greek authorities had been made amply aware, by their consul, members of the Dodecanesian diaspora, indeed by the raucous advertising of the archipelago by the Fascists themselves as the *Isole Italiane dell’Egeo*.

After a discussion with the commander of the Greek Military Mission in the Dodecanese, Brigadier Christodoulos Tsigantes, influential architect and urban planner Konstantinos Doxiadis, obtained from the Greek Ministry for Reconstruction, where he was serving as undersecretary, the setting up of a team tasked with offering a holistic assessment of the situation in the Dodecanese. Illustrating the sense of urgency motivating Greek authorities is the fact that the fifteen-member team disembarked in Rhodes on 5 November 1946, a whole five months before the official transfer of power and completed its study by January 1947. This haste was also meant to be a show of competence on the part of the Greek administration:

“a demonstration to the Dodecanesian people and a proof to the other peoples, that Greece is able to administer her own home and provide to her people the benefits of civilization, from which they had been denied by others for centuries.”⁷

Such displays of administrative competence are inseparable, of course, from claims to the legitimacy of territorial sovereignty, addressed both domestically and internationally. As mentioned before, the observations and recommendations of the scientific team were supposed to be holistic in nature, simultaneously addressing, that is, the economic, financial, administrative, urban as well as cultural challenges facing the Dodecanese. Yet one focal point of interest for the Greek administration, thus far rather neglected by historiography, was the question of cultural heritage.

From a cultural perspective, Doxiadis begins with a clear distinction between “the reputation of the Dodecanese,” which he opposes, in two sections bearing these very titles, to “the truth about the Dodecanese.” What does the reputation of the archipelago say, he asks rhetorically?

“that the monuments [therein] are all from the Medieval Ages and the Renaissance, Italian monuments that is, illustrative of the Italian spirit, which created civilization and brought it to the Mediterranean. How easily one perceives here the infamous Nazi-Fascist claim, characteristic of domineering nations that purport to be civilizing everything and everyone.”⁸

In contrast to this reputation, the truth, Doxiadis proceeds to explain, is that in the Dodecanese one will find monuments from all the civilizations, which have ruled over the archipelago in the last two thousand and five hundred years, and that most of these testify to the Greek essence of these islands, from the “Classical and Pagan” to the “Byzantine” times. However, there is, writes Doxiadis, the real danger that the countless restorations to which the Italians proceeded may have altered the original meaning and purpose of most ancient and medieval monuments.⁹ So what is to be done? Doxiadis’ reply is straightforward: “We will do exactly the opposite of what the Italians did.”¹⁰

1 K. A. Doxiadis (ed.), *Δωδεκάνησος. Τετράτομος μελέτη του υπουργείου ανοικοδομήσεως και συνεργατών του*, Greek Ministry for Reconstruction, Athens, 1947, p. 1.
2 Ettore Vittorini, *Isole dimenticate. Il Dodecaneso da Giolitti al massacro del 1943*, Florence, Le Lettere, 2002, pp. 71-72.
3 Anthony McElligott, *The Last Transport. The Holocaust in the Eastern Mediterranean*, London, Bloomsbury, 2024.
4 Holland and Markides, *The British and the Hellenes*, p. 201.
5 Despina-Georgia Konstantinakou, “The Expulsion of the Italian Community of Greece and the Politics of Resettlement, 1944-1952,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 55(2), 2018, pp. 316-338.
6 Holland and Markides, *The British and the Hellenes*, p. 206.

7 Doxiadis, *Δωδεκάνησος*, p. 5.
8 Doxiadis, *Δωδεκάνησος*, p. 11.
9 Doxiadis, *Δωδεκάνησος*, p. 12.
10 Doxiadis, *Δωδεκάνησος*, p. 15.

In June 1947, soon after the Greek authorities took over the administration of the Dodecanese, Ioannis Kondos, succeeding to Luigi Morricone, assumed the duties of “ephor” of Antiquities. Ever since, the *ephoreia* of Antiquities has successfully pursued its own excavations and excavations undertaken before its establishment, notably that in the Classical and Hellenistic city of Rhodes, the sanctuary of Demeter, the Parthenon, the Asklepion, the Ptolemaion and the temple of Isis (Iseion).¹¹ Expectedly, most of the work of the *ephoreia* focused on ancient and medieval Greek, or Byzantine, vestiges. Illustrating this orientation is the fact that one of the very first reports published by the *ephoreia* was that on the Hippodamian plan of Rhodes, a telling testimony to the Hellenic *foundations* of that ancient city. To this day, it is hard to find on the *ephoreia*’s website explicit references to a past that is not in some sense Greek.¹²

The concern to reassert the archipelago’s Greek past against decades of Italian dehellenization policies is echoed in much of the historiography on the Dodecanese. Most authors will acknowledge the significant work done by Italian archaeologists, credited among other things with excavating and developing the sites of the triad of the ancient city-states of Lindos, Kameiros and Rhodes.¹³ But they also point out that such Italian archaeologists and historians, and especially their popularizers, advertised the idea that the Dodecanese lived its brightest times when it was under some form of “Italian” rule: of the Romans, the Maritime Republics or of the Knights of St. John.¹⁴ Hence the predilection of Italian scientists for that latter period (1309-1522), during which the imposing Palace of the Grand Master of the Knights and the Medieval City of Rhodes were constructed. Indeed, the very name of the first Italian Historical and Archaeological Institute created in the archipelago in 1928 included the acronym “FERT,” the motto of the House of Savoy, sometimes translated as ‘Fortitudo Eius Rhodum Tenuit’ -His Strength Conquered Rhodes.¹⁵ This was a reference to Amadeus V, Count of Savoy, who in 1315 successfully held Rhodes against the Turks. According to Italian governor Mario Lago, the mission of the Institute was first and foremost to promote studies relative to the “history of Italian expansion in the Levant.”¹⁶ Equally noted by Greek historiography is the Italians’ interest for Muslim monuments as their promotion was designed, it is argued, to further challenge the Hellenic identity of the islands. “How intentionally,” Doxiadis writes, “were the Turkish monuments and minarets, etc. preserved to give the impression that a considerable proportion of the local population is Turkish, when the latter never amounted to more than a twentieth of the Greek inhabitants.”¹⁷ Such would not be the priority of the newly established *ephoreia* of Antiquities.

11 Melina Filimonos-Tsopotou and Toulia Marketou, “Les fouilles grecques,” in Anne Coulié and Melina Filimonos-Tsipotou (eds.), *Rhodes : une île grecque aux portes de l’Orient, XV^e-V^e siècle avant J.-C.*, Paris, musée du Louvre, 2014, pp. 184-185.

12 The website of the *ephoreia* can be found at: <https://efadod.gr/>

13 Ch. I. Papachristodoulou, *Ιστορία της Ρόδου. Από τους Προϊστορικούς χρόνους έως την ενσωμάτωση της Δωδεκανήσου* (1948), Athens, Municipality of Rhodes-Stegi Grammaton kai technon Dodekanisou, 1994, p. 561.

14 Zacharis N. Tsirpanlis, *Ιταλοκρατία στα Δωδεκάνησα, 1912-1943. Αλλοτρίωση του ανθρώπου και του περιβάλλοντος*, Rhodes, Zete Publications, 1998, p. 82.

15 Luca Orlandi, “Searching for ‘Italianità’ in the Dodecanese Islands (1912-1943). Some Considerations on Art, Architecture and Archaeology through the Works of Hermes Balducci,” in Beatrice Falcucci, Emanuele Giusti and Davide Trentacoste (eds), *Rereading Travellers to the East. Shaping Identities and Building the Nation in Post-Unification Italy*, Florence, Firenze University Press, 2022, p. 130.

16 Filippo Marco Espinoza, ‘Fare gli Italiani dell’Egeo: Il Dodecaneso dall’Impero ottomano all’Impero del fascismo’, Trento, Università degli Studi di Trento, unpublished PhD dissertation, 2017, p. 173, footnote 122.

17 Doxiadis, *Δωδεκάνησος*, P. 14.

One Italian legacy Greek authorities would not seek to erase however, is tourism development. As part of its project of using the Dodecanese as an instrument of cultural hegemony in the Levant -or “soft power,” one might anachronistically venture-, the fascist administration, particularly under the rule of Governor Mario Lago (1923-1936), had gone at great lengths to make the archipelago attractive for international tourists.¹⁸ This effort, positively acknowledged by Greek historians and pursued from the late 1940s onwards by an administration in financial straits, would eventually lead the *ephoreia*, once it became sensitized to the commercial merits of ‘exoticizing’ the Dodecanese, to nuance the purely ‘Hellenic’ orientation of its cultural management policy.¹⁹ Indeed, as Pierre Sintès argues, from the 1970s onwards, the promotion of the island’s layered cultural past, particularly visible in the island of Rhodes, combining Greek Antiquities, Frankish castles and Ottoman mosques, became more overtly assumed. This proclivity, illustrated by the renovation of the Süleymaniye mosque in the 1990s, was consolidated after the Old Town of Rhodes was officially declared a UNESCO world heritage city in 1988. The investment seems to have paid off: by the early 2000s: “the entire Dodecanese [was] welcom[ing] 20% of [Greece’s] room nights every year, Lindos became the country’s second most visited site after the Parthenon and the Old Town of Rhodes attracted 1250000 tourists every year.”²⁰

This cosmopolitan turn, in the official cultural heritage management, remains however partial and selective. If the great mosques of Rhodes have been rehabilitated, they were also decommissioned and can now only be visited as museums. Smaller edifices, including fourteen byzantine churches repurposed as mosques under the Ottomans, are now officially designated by their original Christian names.²¹ If, despite this, sporadic references are made to the islands’ Islamic past, this is not the case for the rich Jewish legacy in Rhodes, and to a lesser extent Kos. Jewish monuments, such as the Kahal Shalom Synagogue in Rhodes, the oldest in Greece built in 1577, receive no government funding and depend on private patronage and European Union funding for their maintenance.²² References to other constructions remain incomplete: hence while the Medieval origins of the Hospice of St. Catherine are properly evoked, nothing is said of the fact that in the 1920s and 1930s it hosted a regionally influential Rabbinical College.²³ This silence over the Old Town’s Jewish past has to do, as Pierre Sintès has shown, with the seizure by local Greeks of the houses and property left by the Sephardim who were almost all murdered in the Nazi death camps. This appropriation was legalized on account of the rule according to which only Greek nationals can own property in areas bordering foreign -Turkish in this instance- areas; and, of course, the few Rhodian (Rodesli) Holocaust survivors never had been Greek citizens.²⁴ But the mere evocation of that past ownership is perceived as potentially de-legitimizing the current one.

18 Valerie McGuire, *Italy’s Sea: Empire and Nation in the Mediterranean, 1895-1945*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2020, pp. 96-109.

19 For the acknowledgment in Greek historiography of the merits of Italian tourism development, see Papachristodoulou, *Ιστορία της Ρόδου*, pp. 560-561.

20 Pierre Sintès, “A qui Rhodes? Discours d’appropriation et mise en valeur touristique dans la vieille ville de Rhodes (Grèce),” in Maria Gravari-Barbas, Laurent Bourdeau and Mike Robinson (eds), *Tourisme et patrimoine mondial*, Québec, Presses de l’Université de Laval, 2012, p. 186.

21 Sintès, “A qui Rhodes?” p. 188. See also Georgios Karatzas, “On the Physical and Discursive Articulation of the Heritage Space of the City of Rhodes (1912-1967),” *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 28(1), 2019, p. 41.

22 Pierre Sintès, “Retrouver Rhodes,” *Teoros*, 29(1), 2010, p. 49.

23 Sintès, “A qui Rhodes?” p. 189.

24 Sintès, “A qui Rhodes?” p. 189.

In tracing their official cultural heritage management policy, opposed as it was meant to be to Italian falsifications of history, Greek authorities may have overcorrected. Indeed, their exclusive promotion of the islands’ Hellenic legacy, judiciously sprinkled with “Oriental” exotica, has, as a result, occulted the rich layering of cultures that made the archipelago such a unique place, one of the very last enclaves -with its enduring Muslim community- of the Mediterranean’s cosmopolitan, pre-national, past. This overcorrection may be the result, and this is the issue we now have to turn to, of a misapprehension of the conception and use of history that motivated Italian cultural heritage management. The heritage policy implemented by Greek authorities once they took over the administration of the Dodecanese was driven by a rather teleological understanding of history whereby the current Hellenic identity of the islands was already manifest in their distant past. This was a purposefully linear narrative, which they believed they were opposing to an equally unidirectional representation of the archipelago as having always been, in some sense, “Italian.” The reality of the fascist “politics of time,” or *chronopolitics* may have been, however, more complex.

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Indeed, Italian officials did not content themselves with restoring such medieval vestiges that would allegedly confer a degree of venerability to their sovereign claims over the islands. Rather, they incorporated these ruins into an ambitious modern urban planning with a view to not just evoking the past but conjuring it in the present and in the process obliterating the distance between old and new. The implication of this fascist chronopolitics -inspired as it was by a characteristically Nietzschean conception of ‘monumental’ history- was simple: the Italian presence in the Dodecanese should not simply be considered as ancient; it was eternal.²⁵ In addition, such high-handed handling of the past and its fragments was not meant to crudely legitimize Italy’s sovereign claims against those of Greek irredentists; interlocked with an energetic touristic policy, it was to serve as a display, for the whole world to see, of the technological feats and cultural dynamism of fascism. Hence, in terms interestingly similar to the ones later used by Doxiadis and cited earlier in this paper, Italian Governor Lago, prefacing a tourist guide for the Dodecanese, shared his intention to show that “modern Italy knows how to organize a country and generate wealth just like all the great Western powers.”²⁶

It is undeniable that Italian authorities, especially under Fascism, were obsessively seeking to assert the Italian identity of the islands, which they officially rechristened *Isole Italiane dell’Egeo*. But this they did with a complete disregard for conventional chronology, indeed by creatively embracing anachronism. Surely, and as mentioned before, Italian archaeologists conducted work compatible with conventional scientific protocols. But in the ‘official mind’ of their administration, the anastylosis of ancient and medieval monuments was never simply meant to unearth, preserve and document the past, Italian as they may have believed it to have been. Blended with the erection of new buildings purposefully reminiscent in their style of the maritime republics, it became part of a concerted effort to establish a coevalness between past and present; the scale of the islands’ Italianness was eternity. The indefatigable Governor Mario Lago (1923-1936) had his architects, chief among whom Florestano di Fausto, oversee the construction of buildings meant to seamlessly blend with the medieval edifices of the Old Town.²⁷ Exemplary in this vein was the Palazzo del Governo -the Governor’s residence and offices-, the style of which was an unambiguous reference

25 Scott Jenkins, “Nietzsche’s Use of Monumental History,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 45(2), 2014, pp. 169-181.
26 Mario Lago, “Prefazione,” in Touring Club Milano, *Rodi e le minori isole italiane dell’Egeo*, Milano, 1930, p. 3.
27 Karatzas, “On the Physical and Discursive Articulation,” p. 35.

to the Palazzo Ducale in Venice, signifying “Italy’s return as a thalassocracy or a maritime empire.”²⁸ Perhaps even more illustrative of the chronopolitics at play in this fascist combination of cultural heritage management and urban planning was the restoration, overseen in 1937-1940, by Vittorino Mesturino, of the Palace of the Grand Master of the Knights of Rhodes, where Governor Cesare Maria de Vecchi di Val Cismon, Lago’s successor, had relocated his headquarters. This restoration presented a creative, and very political, conflation of time as Roman vestiges, such as mosaics from the island of Kos, were brought in to decorate a Gothic medieval structure in Rhodes.²⁹ The same plastic irreverence can be seen in the -very intrusive and since then much decried- restoration of the acropolis of Lindos in 1937, a true palimpsest of the traces left by all of the successive rulers of the island of Rhodes.³⁰

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The past is invoked to justify the present. In that sense, it is an undertaking that cannot but be political, particularly, one might add, when it hides that intention behind scientific language and protocols. Remembered, celebrated, reinterpreted or willfully ignored and neglected, the rich cultural heritage of the Dodecanese is no exception to that rule and has served in recent times to legitimize competing, yet chronologically successive, sovereign claims in the Eastern Mediterranean. Noteworthy in this confrontation between the Italian and Greek handling of that past is the difference not only in the meaning each ascribe to it but in the manner in which they invoke it; it is a difference of both ‘truth and method’ to paraphrase Gadamer. On the Italian side, the past is “malleable material at one’s disposal for the present”³¹; on the Greek side, the past is the “origin” of a teleology leading seamlessly to the Hellenic present.³² Neither, not the “creative,” nor the “scholarly,” are concerned with nuance, and for that reason both are, intentionally if not overtly, partial. The alternative could be to simply forgo coherence, in its esthetic (Italian) or narrative (Greek) forms, and consider the contingency at work in the writing of the Dodecanesian palimpsest. This would entail not only properly indexing the archipelago’s heritage in the full diversity of its material manifestations, but also referencing the multiple, chronologically successive, meanings ascribed to the latter. The work required for this would be decolonial, that is, a work not only critical of the Italian colonial legacy, but attentive to the Western colonial lineages of Greek nationalism and its handling of the Dodecanesian past.³³ This more inclusive consideration of the archipelago’s cultural legacy would be both scientifically heuristic and politically more democratic for the islands’ minorities, past, present and future.

28 Alexis Rappas, “The Fascist Temptation: British and Italian Imperial Entanglements in the Eastern Mediterranean,” *Contemporary European History*, 33(2), 2024, p. 663.
29 Karatzas, “On the Physical and Discursive Articulation,” pp. 38-39.
30 Matteo d’Agunto and Melina Filimonos-Tsopotou, “Les fouilles italiennes à Rhodes,” in Anne Coulié and Melina Filimonos-Tsipotou (eds.), *Rhodes : une île grecque aux portes de l’Orient, XV^e-V^e siècle avant J.-C.*, Paris, musée du Louvre, 2014, p. 54.
31 Fernando Esposito and Svein Reichardt, “Revolution and Eternity. Introductory Remarks on Fascist Temporalities,” *Journal of Modern European History*, 13(1), 2015, pp. 39-40.
32 For the “origin” as “beginning which is a complete explanation,” see Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*, New York, Vintage Books, 1953 (translation of a French posthumous publication, 1949), p. 30.
33 This last thought is inspired by the collective Decolonize Hellas, see: <https://decolonizehellas.org/en/out-thinking/>