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Melidoni by Hermann von Maltzan (1843-1891): a German tragedy about the Cretan Question. (Initial Publication)

ABSTRACT

Between the years of 1879 and 1883, the German zoologist and litterateur Hermann von Maltzan (born in Rostock in 1843) embarked upon a zoological research journey that encompassed the Iberian Peninsula, French Senegambia, and eventually culminated in Crete and western Turkey. After his return, while situated in Berlin and influenced by the post-revolutionary situation in Crete (he visited the island four years after the revolution of '78), he authored and published the historical romantic drama *Melidoni*; a work set in Crete, during the 1821 Greek Revolution against the Ottomans. In this paper, I attempt an analysis of Maltzan's drama, a piece yet to be studied fully. Firstly, I examine the relationship between the drama and the long tradition of German philhellenism, a phenomenon rooted in the growing German interest in the descendants of the ancient inhabitants of Greece, combining a devotion to antiquity with the Christian reverence expressed by German nationalism. Secondly, I focus on examining the deeper political reasons behind Maltzan's choice to write a play based on the armed insurrection of the Greeks against the Ottoman Empire. These reasons are related to the German colonial plans drawn up by colonial organizations opposed to Bismarck's official policies. These plans concern both the small core of Asia and certain Middle Eastern provinces; a policy directly connected to the desire to see a rapid dismantling of the Ottoman Empire.

KEYWORDS: Berlin Conference 1884-1885, colonialism, "Eastern Question", German Colonial Association, Maltzan Hermann von, Melidonis Antonis, Bismarck Otto von, "Pact of Halepa", philhellenism, romanticism, Treaty of San Stefano

Hermann von Maltzan was born in 1843, in the city of Rostock, in the north German state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. In 1861, he began his studies at the University of Rostock and in 1864 undertook a scientific journey across France, Spain, Italy and Egypt in order to collect zoological specimens. In 1866, he founded the "Maltzaneum" natural history museum in Mecklenburg. Two years later, he moved to Frankfurt, where he founded the Senckenberg Natural History Museum. At the same time, he embarked on a major research mission in Portugal, conducting zoological research in the unexplored Algarve region (Maltzan 1880). After this, he traveled to the French Senegambia, before moving back to Frankfurt in 1882, where he became one of the founders of the German Colonial Association (Bückendorf 1997). He subsequently traveled to

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Crete, reaching as far as Western Turkey. In 1883, he returned to Germany, where he initially settled in Darmstadt, before moving to Berlin two years later. It was here he embarked upon his literary career (Hantzsch 1906, 165-167). In 1885, influenced by his journey to Crete and Turkey, he authored the five-act drama *Melidoni*, published by the Wilhelm Friedrich publishing house (Maltzan 1885).

The drama unfolds in Crete, during the 1821 Revolution against the Ottomans. Charista and her foster daughter Maria have fallen into the hands of Turkish forces after the Greeks are defeated in battle. Charista and Maria manage to escape their captors, however, finding refuge in the camp of the Sfakians. At that time, the Sfakians are engaged in a power struggle between their two commanders: Roussos and Grigorios. As a result of this internal conflict, Roussos decides to call for Melidoni, the son of Charista, an individual who has demonstrated his heroism in several different battles. Melidoni answers the call, arriving in Crete (his “homeland”, as he calls it) by boat. Seeking to release Crete from tyranny, he begins to prepare the Greeks for war. Very soon, he gains a notable victory for the Greeks and is subsequently awarded with leadership of the army. This new shift in the power dynamic turns his friend Roussos into a deadly enemy. Moreover, the mutual love between Melidoni and Maria provokes Grigorios’ hatred, as he is also in love with her. After a battle against the Turkish forces, Melidoni’s loyal companion, Manolis, denounces Roussos as a traitor. He contends that Roussos made a “devilish play” against them, as during the battle, the Turks managed to win strategic positions that could only have been achieved with Roussos’ help. However, Roussos flatly denies the accusation. Nevertheless, the Sfakians start to move against him. To counter this, Roussos claims that Melidoni is seeking to consolidate all power into his own hands. The Sfakians are persuaded by this argument and Grigorios urges them to declare Roussos their new leader. At the same time, Grigorios forcibly abducts Maria; but during his attempt to flee with her they fall into the hands of the Turks, who kill him. Melidoni rescues Maria from the Turks by infiltrating their camp and killing their Pasha. However, after this triumph, Roussos murders Melidoni behind the backs of the other Greeks. Melidoni dies while predicting the future liberation of Greece, and Maria commits suicide upon his dead body.

Melidoni is a historical romantic drama based on real events and actual historical figures. In particular, its basis was the revolutionary activity in Crete that began in Sfakia in April 1821. After the great massacre of Heraklion on 24th June (known as the “the great ravage”), the Turks attempted to take the villages of Sfakia (Detorakis 1986, 323). The Sfakian chieftain, Antonis Melidonis, distinguished himself in the attack that took place on the village of Roustika in Rethymno in June, against the army of Latif Pasha of Chania. Moreover, Melidonis, along with Roussos Vourdoumbas (who was the leader of the Sfakians) and other chieftains, repulsed a Turkish attack against the province of Amari in Rethymno, in the foothills of the Psiloritis range (*Ιστορία του Ελληνικού Έθνους*, Vol. 12, 2000, 166.). However, the Turks, led by Osman Pasha of Rethymno, penetrated Sfakia on the 29th of August. In September and October 1821, the revolutionaries rallied their forces and repulsed the Turks from the provinces of Apokoronas and Kydonia in Chania. Nevertheless, it soon became clear that the lack of a united military

and civilian administration meant that the revolution could not be successful in the long term (Kordatos 1957, 280).

Maltzan's play deals with the issue of the polyarchy: the personal ambitions and the struggles between the chieftains; something that hindered the united and methodical action of the revolutionaries. From the moment that Michail Komneinos Afentoulief was appointed by Dimitrios Ypsilantis to take up leadership of the revolution in Crete, internal conflicts began. Afentoulief arrived at Sfakia in November 1821 and convened a general assembly consisting of the local military and political leadership. To prevent any one Sfakian from having complete control, he awarded titles to chieftains, promoting different local war leaders from different areas. One such individual was Melidonis. This appointment led to personal rivalries and enmities, and very soon Afentoulief began to be viewed with mistrust. In early 1822, the Turks attacked western Crete. In response, Afentoulief mobilized two thousand rebels, including Melidonis, and appointed Roussos Vourdoumbas as the leader of the campaign against the Turks. Vourdoumbas led the rebels to the Amari valley where they fortified the villages of Meronas, Monastiraki and Amari. On February 10th, the hostilities between the Greeks and the Turks began. After four days, Melidonis chose a group of eighty men, and without informing Vourdoumbas, they went together to the mosque in the village of Vathiako, in Rethymno, where the Turks kept their ammunition and food. Melidonis and his men overpowered the guards and, on February 15th, loaded with supplies, returned to Monastiraki where their victory was a cause for celebration. This provoked a great deal of envy throughout the rest of the leadership. The chieftains asked Melidonis to explain his violation of the rules and Roussos Vourdoumbas criticized him strongly for not informing them beforehand. Melidonis ignored Vourdoumbas' overall authority, responding that he would inform Afentoulief of his successful venture. This angered Vourdoumbas, who drew his sword and killed him (Kritovoulidis 1859, 87-88, Trikoupis 1888, 235).

What influenced Maltzan in the creation of this play was the post-revolutionary situation in Crete, since he visited the island four years after the rising of 1878. The rising was a consequence of the crisis of the «Eastern Question» and spread throughout the island. In July 1878, the Consuls of the Great Powers in Crete imposed an armistice, assuring that the Cretan Question would be discussed at the Congress of Berlin, which would revise the Treaty of San Stefano that had been signed between Russia and the Ottoman Empire in March 1878 and had forced the latter to precisely implement the Organic Law granted in 1868 to Crete. The General Convention of the Cretans elected two delegates to the Congress of Berlin, but the Greek government, fearing that the Cretan representatives would accept the solution of proclaiming Crete an autonomous hegemony, rejected the Convention's request and banned the transition of the representatives to Berlin. The decision of the Great Powers at the Congress of Berlin in July 1878 did not differ substantially from that of the Treaty of San Stefano. Nevertheless, the threat of the continuation of the rebellion forced Turkey to accept England's proposal for new concessions, resulting in the "the Pact of Halepa" (known as the "Halepa Charter") signed in October 1878, which then created the status of a semi-autonomous province; upsetting local Christians to a certain extent. Up to

that point, the Governor-General of the island could be a Christian, while the General Assembly had to have forty-nine Christian deputies and thirty-one Muslim deputies (Senisik 2011, 79).

Despite this, the «Cretan Question» remained unresolved. Maltzan's interest in writing a play where the action takes place during the Revolution of 1821 and promoting the liberation of Crete is part of the long tradition of German philhellenism, rooted in the growing German interest in the descendants of the ancient inhabitants of Greece by combining the devotion to antiquity with the Christian reverence expressed by German nationalism. The spirit of ancient Greece had penetrated the academic world by contributing to the construction of the German national identity. Ernst Curtius had highlighted the importance of ancient Greek civilization in his University lectures in Berlin and Halle. The appealing feature of Curtius' lectures for the general public was that he combined the worship of ancient Greece with the religious reverence expressed by German nationalism. For Curtius the Germans combined, in their own culture, the values of Christianity and those of the ancient Greeks (Fuhrmann 2006, 85-87). The term national state ("Nationalstaat") had become prevalent, as used by Johann Gottfried Herder in his work *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1784-91), which married German idealism with the political theoretical construction of the Romantic Movement's right of self-determination of the nations. Therefore, the issue of the Greek rebellion was an event of great importance, with an impact on intellectuals, writers, journalists and students. The desire for political freedom, together with the regime's censorship of literary production, added to German philhellenism a second, hidden dimension: behind the liberation of the Greeks was the desire of the rising bourgeoisie for freedom and democracy. Because of this, the Greek Revolution became their exemplary model up until the 1848 March Revolution that took place in the states of the German Confederation (Vormärz). The concepts of freedom against tyranny, civilization against barbarism, democracy against despotism were fueled by the contrast between Europe and Asia, and the feeling of Christian unity against the ancient enemy of the Faith. This perception was strengthened during periods of expansion of the Ottoman Empire, its zenith being the Siege of Vienna. Thus, the identification with the uprooted Greeks constituted in turn the defending of the ideal of Athenian democracy against those who fought against "freedom", and this was connected with the hope of democratization, while the terms "fatherland", "freedom", "murder of the tyrants" dominated the literary field. Karl Sonderhausen wrote the dramatic plays *Larissa oder der Schwur* and *Die Befreiung Griechenlands* and Joseph Freiherr von Auffenberg *Das Opfer des Themistokles*. Friedrich Thiersch wrote the play *Das Fest im Gebirge*, which is "dedicated to the Greeks" and was staged in Munich in 1826. Most of the philhellenic theatrical plays are based on historical events from specific moments during the Greek Revolution, but also incorporate romantic dramas with fictional characters and events. These are: *Gertha von Stalimene* by Ehrenfried Blochmann, *Das Mädchen aus Zante* by Joannides, which is "dedicated to the Greek brothers", as well as *Die Amazonen auf Lemnos* and *Das Mädchen aus Andros* by Kunz Klarwasser. The motif of the heroic Greek female is found in the tragedy *Rosa Velasko oder die beiden Canaris* by Graf von Pappenheim. The dramatic play by Friedrich von Bülow, *Die Scioten*, was influenced by *The Massacre at Chios*. The play *Die Kirchweihe oder die Rückkehr aus Griechenland* by C. Friedrich presents the return of the survivors to their homeland after their defeat and destruction in the Battle of Peta in 1822. The play *Der Sturm*

von Missolonghi is by an unknown author, who self-designates as “a friend of the heroic Greeks” (Puchner 1996, 85-127).

German philhellenism, as portrayed in the literature of the time, was a complex phenomenon; one that automatically identified the modern Greeks with their ancient forebears and expressed open hostility towards the Turks (Furneri 2009, 119-131). According to this model, in Maltzan’s play, the Turks articulate their desire to win the war by declaring a blind faith in Allah. For example, the first scene of the first act takes place during Ramadan, and the Pasha is portrayed as a comical character who talks in his sleep while dreaming about things considered sinful in Islam. He mutters that “the lamb was tender, the chicken well cooked” and asks to be brought honey, pistachios, bread and cheese; all while dreaming about young, beautiful Greek women (Maltzan 1885, 1-3). At the same time, the Dervish of the Turkish camp has a dialogue with a soldier named Mustafa, telling him that: “It is necessary to know whatever the Koran contains, and what it does not is unworthy of our knowledge” (Maltzan 1885, 10). When Mustafa asks him if “the spiritual work should be forbidden?” (Maltzan 1885, 10), the Dervish answers that “the prophet has thought about everything, it is forbidden to know, think or believe whatever is not written in the Koran” (Maltzan 1885, 10). Maria is the first to call the Turks “barbarians” (Maltzan 1885, 24). On the opposite side, the Greek Christians are portrayed by the Turks throughout the play as courageous. Moreover, when Melidoni encourages and prepares the Greeks for the fight, the Greeks cry out in unity: “Whoever wants to deprive us of our freedom must die” (Maltzan 1885, 32) a slogan symbolizing their determination to continue the struggle against tyranny and oppression.

Additionally, Maltzan tries to highlight the values of Western culture and the role the prominent personality plays in the guidance of the masses, as well as its contribution to success by adding to Melodoni’s personality the characteristics of magnanimity and a sense of justice. The Turks captured by the Greeks are portrayed as cowards who beg for their lives; while Melidoni declares that “he does not want to expel them from their place, what he wants to expel is slavery and Turkish tyranny” (Maltzan 1885, 36-37). For this reason, he releases the Turkish prisoners. He also declares that he “protects human rights” (Maltzan 1885, 36-37). Furthermore, when Grigorios says that he wants to marry Maria even though she does not want him, Melidoni states that “freedom is a human right” (Maltzan 1885, 45). He is presented as a bearer of the ideas of the Enlightenment, who considers the concept of “individual freedom” to be one’s ability to own oneself and not live as a slave or under someone else’s ownership. Moreover, unlike Roussos, who states that his aristocratic origin should automatically make the leader of the Cretans, Melidoni declares that he knows “the privileges of Greek descent, but the feeling of grandeur and gentle acts are those that highlight the distinct personality” (Maltzan 1885, 36-37).

By doing such things, Melidoni expresses the basic views of the Ideological Movement known as the “century of lights”, where the development of critical thinking based the sense of collectivity on national identity, but also highlighted rationally identified factors that ensured the respect of the “personality”, which was not ideologically determined by the terms of “origin”, but by its “attitude” that should become socially acceptable. Besides, in the play, the enemy is not capable of courageously defeating the “prominent personality”. It has to be defeated

sneakily by the jingoistic rival, and thus the perception of division and political empathy as pathogenic to Hellenism is highlighted.

At the end of the play, when Melidoni is dying, he refers to places belonging to the Greek kingdom at the time that Maltzan wrote the play: Sparta and Taygetos, areas of Crete, such as Ida, but also Constantinople and Smyrna, which Melidoni longed to see liberated (Maltzan 1885, 103-104). Thus, he puts forward the idea of incorporating the historical Greek regions that at that time belonged to the Ottoman Empire. In addition to the “noble” feeling of philhellenism, which was no longer at its peak, there is a deeper political reason behind Maltzan’s decision to write a play based on the armed insurrection of the Greeks against the Ottoman Empire. As I already mentioned, he was one of the founders of the German Colonial Association established in Frankfurt in 1882. This association was formed of politicians, industrialists, merchants and bankers, with the purpose of intervening in the political and economic life of Germany by expanding colonial politics. Chancellor Bismarck had no colonial orientation, but after the unification in 1871, various pressure groups, such as the Western Colony and Exports Corporation (1881) and the Central Union for Commercial Geography and the Promotion of German Interests Abroad (1878) urged the government to develop a more active policy for colonial acquisition.

After the dispute between Austria and Prussia, which ended in 1866 in favor of Prussia and resulted in the collapse of the German Confederation, the establishment of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1867 and the political separation of the Austrian Empire, the German Empire became the “natural” and “legitimate” inheritor of the Ottoman Empire’s bankruptcy. Instead of working towards a strong aggressive colonial policy, the Chancellor of the German Empire, Otto von Bismarck, promoted a moderate free trade imperialism and attacked with his public statements the rhetoric of the colonial movement (Fuhrmann 2006, 47-64). The reason for this was that he wanted to maintain his friendship with the Sultan, considering the Ottoman Empire as a counterweight to Russia. After the Russo-Turkish war and the resulting Treaty of San Stefano, which required the secession of additional sections of European Turkey in Bulgaria, and the Treaty of Berlin in 1878, Ottoman lands were distributed to several neighboring countries, while the Great Powers were also interested in the Balkans, especially Russia, as well as other native national movements, and claimed parts of the Ottoman territory.

After the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, Germany acquired parts of Africa; however, the interest of the colonial movements then began to shift its focus to Anatolia, which continued to appear as a tabula rasa, and their aspirations were encouraged by German families active in that period in commerce and rail construction (Lothar and Scherer 2001, 374-376). As the colonial plans concerned the small core of Asia and the Middle Eastern provinces, Maltzan’s drama propounds, as a request, through the liberation of Crete and the anticipation of Melidoni for the liberation of the historic Greek regions belonging to the Ottoman Empire, the dismantling of the latter. In his rhetoric, the German Colonial Association directly set imperialism as an indispensable socio-economic basis and a key element of foreign policy, so that Germany could overcome the influence of England and France over other non-European parts of the world. The aim was to establish exclusive transactions on foreign territories that were not controlled

by other European forces, and thus the creation of commercial centers (Fitzpatrick 2008, 108). Maltzan argued that Germany would benefit from the labor force of migrants, and the colonies would provide agricultural products and the necessary raw materials for German industry, so it would no longer be dependent on imports from other European powers (Fitzpatrick 2008, 108-111). The colonial organizations understood the importance of Crete for their plans. Due to its geographic location, it held a dominant strategic position and was a hub on the sea route to the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean. Its acquisition would also accelerate the desired weakening of the “Sick Man of Europe”, the Ottoman Empire.

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