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The Tenses of the Greek Metamorphoses

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Abstract: Greece is a country of paradoxes: marvels and tragedies co-exist amid cultural tensions and contrasts, challenging every step and questioning the past, present, and future identity of its people. This article explores how the Greek library landscape has changed, following Tsimoglou's segmentation of the development of libraries in Greece, from the early isolationist years to 2000, when common sense led to collaboration; and the period from 2001, with critical oversight of the influential factors in understanding how Greek libraries can be fully functional and beneficial to society.

Keywords: Greek librarianship; changes 1990–2020; cultural contrasts; collaboration

Die Zeitformen der griechischen Metamorphosen

Zusammenfassung: Griechenland ist ein Land der Gegensätze: Wunder und Tragödien stehen nebeneinander, kulturelle Spannungen und Kontraste machen jeden Schritt zu einer Herausforderung und stellen die Identität der Nation in Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft infrage. Dieser Artikel untersucht anhand der Gliederung Tsimoglou's die Entwicklung der Bibliotheken in Griechenland von den frühen, isolationistischen Phase bis in die frühen 1980er-Jahre; bis 2000 rückte die Kooperation in den Vordergrund des allgemeinen Interesses. Für den Zeitabschnitt seit 2001 folgt eine kritische Darstellung der wichtigsten Konzepte, wie die griechischen Bibliotheken Funktionalität und Nutzen für die Gesellschaft erhöhen können.

Schlüsselwörter: Griechisches Bibliothekswesen; Veränderungen 1990–2020; kulturelle Kontraste; Kooperation

It is our efforts, of the unfortunate;
it is our efforts like of the Trojans.
Something we achieve, something to
get esteem and start
to be courageous and hopeful.

But always something comes up and stops us.
“Trojans” by C. P. Cavafy

1 Introduction

Greece is a country of contrasts and paradoxes, and the library field is no exception. One can highlight some exemplary cases, but these are always the result of bottom-up approaches and quite often they are not sustainable. There are many reasons to explain this, including the marginalization of libraries from research communities, the self-propelled retreat of libraries into comfort zones, the complete absence of national policies about libraries, and many others. If one adds a lack of coherence in implementing policies or the numerous and ever-changing laws that govern research and education in Greece, it can be understood that these matters often take the form of a Gordian Knot. In this article, I explore how the Greek research libraries' landscape has changed over the last twenty years. To reach that point, one must view and understand the years that preceded which my generation did not personally experience, but which it is essential to know about, since we are basing our own actions on these. I shall, therefore, follow Tsimoglou's segmentation of the historical development of libraries in Greece and I will elaborate on what has followed since 2001, with a critical oversight of the parameters that have been influential.

2 The (Not So) Perfect Past

The situation of Greek research – mostly academic – libraries has been recorded by many in the past.¹ Among them, Filippou Tsimoglou, an emblematic personality of the

Note: The use of 'tenses' in the title denotes the transformations (past, present, and future) of the Greek Metamorphoses as reflected in research libraries in Greece over this period.

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¹ Krikelas (1984), Zachos and Papaioannou (1991), Papazoglou and Semertzaki (2001) and Katsirikou (2016).

Greek library field and late National Librarian, has identified five periods of development in Greek libraries.²

The first, from the mid-1960s until the early 1980s, was the period of isolation. It was dedicated to the re-organization of the Greek State, after the Second World War and the Civil War. Using financial instruments to restructure the Greek research field, new universities and research centres were established during this period, even during the seven years of the Military Junta. While there were noble efforts to transfer knowledge from abroad, including visits by Greek research librarians to UK university libraries, largely without any specific training, the growing numbers of libraries were not connected, and each one operated independently. The US influence was strong, as many American librarians travelled to the country to advise the new libraries, while the few Greek librarians in American schools and colleges and were more advanced, provided consultancy to these new establishments. Yet, as Krikelas commented a few years later: “Changes in academic libraries are most likely to come only after changes in the general structure of Greek higher education. It would be tempting to export Western-style academic librarianship to the country, but the particular needs of Greece are best determined from within”,³ meant that even though there were ‘influences’, the entropy of culture, habits, and behaviour affected the true practices of the profession. Therefore, the adjustment became distortion.

The second period shows the “early cracks” in this wall of isolation. This period lasted until 1987 and saw the first discussions among research libraries about addressing common problems. Now close to a very active research community, libraries rapidly learned to absorb any new ideas and technological advances that appeared. One can say that this was the ‘growing’ period for all exploring minds in Greek librarianship, which led in to the third period. At this time, the first integrated library systems, Ptolemaios and ABEKT, were developed to automate processes and digitize catalogues, using USMARC and UNIMARC standards respectively. The first attempts at developing interlibrary loan services took place, based on the central intermediating role of the National Documentation Centre (NDC),⁴ and the development of the Union Catalogue of Periodicals. These proved successful in the third period, partly because of the advancement of technologies and the affordability of connection devices. With the reform of the education system in 1983, the training of librarians began formally with two Departments in Athens and Thessaloniki (even if these had

been established at the end of the previous decade, it was considered an important upgrade).

The third period can be termed “preparatory” and set the “periphery” for collaboration. This lasted from the end of the 1980s until the mid-1990s, when research libraries showed resilience to the many great challenges on the international and national political scene. The Fall of the Berlin Wall left research libraries in Greece unaffected for many reasons, including the fact that the entire research system was directed to European and US paradigms, while Greek libraries did not have any dependency on the former Soviet Union and the library network there. As was mentioned, the effects of US/UK paradigms were marked, since the main tools in many Greek libraries had these origins. Furthermore, while there was an immigration wave of Greek-speaking citizens from former USSR countries, there was no substantial injection of this (wo)manpower into the library network. Broadly, of course, one can observe the secondary effects of these remarkable events, such as the unification of Germany and the consequent empowerment of European institutions, but it is safe to conclude that the turn of historic events in 1989 had little or no immediate effects on Greek libraries. Indeed, European prospects were viewed as full of hope, even in addressing the national political turmoil of the years 1989–1990, to the point that Birk and Karageorgiou mentioned that “political and economic changes will continue to plague Greek academic libraries. Perhaps with the changes in the European Economic Community, in 1992 some stability might soon be possible.”⁵

Greek librarians continued to partner with their European colleagues and to travel abroad to gather and transfer best practices. These trips established the notions of collaboration, of the economy of scale, of capacity building, etc. to many of the key people in the field, which still had no formal library training. This was an area of exciting experimentation, as the whole country was investing in information technologies. As early as 1993, Greek libraries had the option of connecting with the infrastructures of the Greek Research and Academic Network to develop a Greek network of libraries (GOAL, Greek Openly Accessed Libraries).⁶ The operation of the HELLASPAC network and the connection of the NDC which at that time was instrumental in all information technology matters as a hub that gave access to certain databases, was proof that libraries were eager to adopt technologies to provide access to research information. Automation had become a top priority, despite the problems, including the small market size (both for purchasing and support), the encoding of

² Τσιμπογλου (2008).

³ Krikelas (1984).

⁴ <https://www.ekt.gr/en/index>.

⁵ Birk and Karageorgiou (1993).

⁶ Karanassios (1993).

records, and the logistics; all requiring a lot of effort from all stakeholders.⁷ Finally, the first translations of manuals and standards including AACR2 and UNIMARC, as well as the publishing of a catalogue of Greek subject headings by the National Library were considered landmarks of professionalism.

The final period covered the second half of the 1990s until roughly 2001. As the tectonic plates were shifting, it is a period of experimentation to find the best models for collaboration. Many models were tested, from the intermediated (mainly with NDC) to the grassroots, primarily in the areas of ILL and automation, service development, and common infrastructures. The main instruments were financial with activities running in both dimensions, widely known in the domestic environment as “horizontal” and “vertical”. The funding from the EPEAK framework was targeted at the development of horizontal activities that covered the needs of all libraries, while each university had substantial funding to develop services, collections, and infrastructure which to a great degree were identical. This period signaled the birth of HEAL-Link⁸, the Consortium of Greek Academic Libraries with the primary goal of deciding co-operatively on the development of collecting electronic journals on an economy-of-scale basis. Based on the knowledge that certain people had gained, they offered a well justified and documented proposal for the collective management of journal collections across the country. HEAL-Link secured government funding, thus centralizing journal subscriptions and providing equal access to the entire research and academic population. To facilitate this, the Council of Rectors formally established the Consortium through a Memorandum of Co-operation (MoC). Through its statutes, the Consortium undertook provision for research centres as well.

I would venture to attribute these developments to several factors. First, the enlargement of the education system in line with the Bologna Process led to the development of numerous graduate and post-graduate courses and departments. Second, developments in electronic resources intensified the research process and brought awareness that new skills and services were needed. Third, and perhaps most crucial, was the presence and work of many visionary professionals, as they were the ones that delivered the actual work. Their work was the result of the lessons learned during the previous periods and in a very strict assessment; these professionals were the exception to the Greek rule that there is no consistency in the country.

Indeed, until the beginning of the new Millennium the future for research libraries looked bright to the extent that

a new Department for Library and Archive Studies was set up in the Ionian University. It was bright for the whole country, and that is why Papazoglou and Semertzaki confidently concluded that “Greek society will be in a better position to face the technological, market and occupational change with the help and support of well-organized libraries.”⁹ It is not narcissistic to say that libraries at that point of time were ahead of the rest of their institutions, showing remarkable agility and adaptability. For example, HEAL-Link operated the first unit for collecting statistical data and producing reports and indicators in its branch in the library of the University of Ioannina.¹⁰ Of course, there was still scope for improved results, but at that time all decisions seemed correct and well-founded.

3 A Continuous Present

In the years after 2001, which Tsimpoglou identified as the fifth stage of collaboration and inter-dependence, Greek research libraries lived in their own continuous present, which despite the large – mainly economic – shock remains intact as today. Having solved one of the key assignments, which was access to journals, this period reflects an intense exchange of information, mainly in the local environment, as well as the exploration of further collaborative schemes for service and infrastructure development. Interconnections with foreign institutions declined, possibly because of a focus on service development and a sense of overconfidence. The first half of the 2000s is also a period when through their own individual projects (vertical ones), libraries recruited many librarians and information professionals to develop and deliver new services and infrastructures.

Next to HEAL-Link, the first decade of the Millennium saw the systematic organization of the Annual Conference of Greek Academic Libraries, a gathering that helped the network stay close, exchange ideas and progress, even on a basis of gentle competition. While the conference had started in the 1990s, in the 2000s it propelled information exchange, largely because of the mix of a young and enthusiastic workforce and a mature and experienced leadership.

A second important point was the upgrading of university libraries through legislation and Law 3404/2005. This Law stated that all academic libraries were to be independent units at directorate level, reporting directly to the rector. The new legislation improved upon the provisions of Law 1404/1983, which allowed for departmental librar-

⁷ Kreyche (1993).

⁸ <https://www.heal-link.gr/>.

⁹ Papazoglou and Semertzaki (2001).

¹⁰ <https://mopab.seab.gr/?q=en>.

ies and strengthened the position of libraries within their universities, even though they were not allowed to propose their own organization. The 2005 Law gave the necessary powers to coordinate all departmental libraries by one authority and to place the library at the service of the strategic mission of the University. It must be noted that this has not been achieved in all universities, as there is still – nearly twenty years later – resistance from deans and heads of faculties. This is evidence of conservative approaches as they act possessively and consider the libraries as their property, which directly leads to the alienation of libraries from academic life.

The provision of access to journals led libraries to shrink their operations and to become less visible. Academic libraries still had to provide access to the physical space, especially for the student population, but researchers were able to work without visiting their buildings. This was particularly influential on research institutes, which in the absence to a connecting hub, were inclined to introspection. However, all these factors combined – a centralized journals collection management, government funding for textbooks, a lack of centralizing their activities, etc. – gradually withdrew them from the centre of attention. In 1996, Raptis and Sitas describe a vicious circle: “An endless loop was created: the faculty were not satisfied with the library’s Services; this led the faculty to ignore libraries; the ignored libraries did not develop; the underdeveloped libraries could not offer any Services; and so on.” While in their paper in the middle of 1990s, Raptis and Sitas were optimistic that there was a breeze of change, but the reality proved them wrong.

The shock of the austerity years from 2009 to 2015 is difficult to describe and for those outside Greece to understand. Library budgets were reduced and even Government funding for electronic journals was at risk. To avoid the potential downsizing of this collection, research libraries organized petitions and tried to make the research community aware. It should not be forgotten that in 2013 approximately a hundred librarian posts were terminated by Government, as part of the restructuring of the public sector. This further weakened the workforce which had already been undermined by the termination of many project-funded contracts. Thankfully, because of extensive and strong protest from the entire academic community, this decision was rescinded.

In the second half of the 2010s, however, the hosting of several international conferences demonstrated that Greek research libraries were committed to reversing the powers of decline and to start networking. Among these were the

KohaCon 2016,¹¹ organized by the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH) Library, LIBER 2017,¹² organized by the University of Patras Library, and IFLA 2019,¹³ organized by the Association of Greek Librarians and Information Professionals with the support of many academic/research libraries. The KohaCon saw the first sign that Greek libraries were looking at the open-source market for their ILSs; and in that same year, three libraries from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, the University of Patras, and the University of Macedonia pioneered the use of Koha. Libraries also took advantage of EU Mobility tools, such as Erasmus, either to visit overseas libraries or to organize Mobility Weeks for themselves.

A few notable developments were recorded during this period. First, academic libraries formed the ILSaS project,¹⁴ a cloud-based integrated library system for all libraries wishing to participate. This common infrastructure was designed to secure economies-of-scale in terms of annual maintenance fees and a common cataloguing policy. This is an apt example of interdependent collaboration that some libraries, namely those in the Koha ILS,¹⁵ University of Crete and a few others, did not embrace. Some academic libraries still prefer their own systems, which is why this shared infrastructure is not available across the country. Time has passed and nowadays libraries in the ILSaS consortium are turning to Koha as well, for reasons of economy and independence.

The second initiative is the development of the Kalippos project¹⁶ which is run by the National Technical University of Athens Library and is responsible for the publication of Greek academic textbooks. In two stages, the Kalippos project has delivered more than 1000 electronic textbooks making it a very successful publishing programme for open educational resources. Finally, the creation of AMELib (Accessible Multi-Modal Electronic Library),¹⁷ the digital library for the provision of accessible educational resources, supported the needs of disabled students and faculty. Based on this digital infrastructure, AMELib (coordinated by Panteion University Library) developed services for cataloguing, global indexing, and the provision of authorized access to eligible users.

Within Greece, refined research library networks have been organized. It is now realized that specific communities

11 <http://kohacon2016.lib.auth.gr>.

12 <https://libereurope.eu/article/conference-highlights-from-liber-2017-in-patras-greece/>.

13 <https://2019.ifla.org>.

14 https://www.heal-link.gr/en/ilsas_en/.

15 <https://www.biblioblog.com/en/blog/20-greek-universities-join-koha/>.

16 <https://kallipos.gr/en/homepage/>.

17 <https://amelib.seab.gr/>.

and collections require specific expertise and consequently specific space and channels for their work. These networks on economic, marine and shipping, geographical, music and theological information have formalized their structure: they host regular public events, internal training sessions and many other activities to build strong capacity through the exchange of knowledge.

As I recall this period, two more serious events must be recorded. First, the university mergers of 2019 challenged academic libraries to manage multiple locations and adapt to a new operating model without the necessary organizational structure. With the very low budget that was available most had to merge their systems, integrate communities, reshape their policies, in a period that was distinctly bleak. Second, in 2020, Greek research libraries, like all other libraries worldwide, had to demonstrate their agility and adaptability and implement immediate bottom-up coordination in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a testament to their foresight, the Kalippos' electronic textbooks proved to be a very useful resource when physical spaces were closed, while at the same time the problems with the printed versions were highlighted.

With the revision of the MoC in 2020, new branches of HEAL-Link were formed, including those on scholarly communication¹⁸ and information literacy. The Consortium decided that certain libraries had exhibited the expertise required to lead the coordination of these activities. The transformative agreements signed by the Consortium and its membership in open access publishing initiatives necessitated the delivery of services addressed directly to researchers, while the development of two research data repositories, HARDMIN¹⁹ for academics and HELIX²⁰ for research institutions, is a combined infrastructure that upgrades and aligns the work of the Greek community to EU standards.

4 The Tenses of the Future

The next twenty years will be crucial for the country as it will have to meet all expectations of growth and development and achieve all the milestones missed after years of fiscal control. This must be done in a socially coherent way, and it must ensure that the future is accessible to all. Any development without research as a supporting pillar is unthinkable and, as a result, the non-existence of academic

libraries. I should like to envisage a future dependent on three key agents that stand on an outward spiral: the libraries themselves, their institutions, and the state.

Today, research libraries have numerous tools that enable collaboration in key areas. Among these, one can find a good-sized collection of electronic resources, a common backbone infrastructure for cataloguing, a common research data repository, an advanced service and collection of open educational textbooks, a monitoring and supporting service for open access, a statistics service, a network for the support of disabled users, etc. But, like many things in Greece, these are imperfect; something is still missing. There are important factors that inhibit this. The most significant is that even if the country has exited from all fiscal oversight institutional budgets remain very low, and libraries suffer from dispersed resources and uncertain funds that do not allow them to plan. There has hardly been any new recruitment for the last fifteen years, which means that current staff are ageing and decreasing. Therefore, while as a community we like to consider that we can provide current services equivalent to those overseas, we lack the necessary investment of resources and funds.

The small research library community allows for a good level of collaboration. This is happening within Greece, but quite often, because of cultural differences and long-term institutional traditions, it does not lead to intense and productive networking. For instance, there is still a lot to do in the field of national cataloguing policy. The re-activation of the National Library for the coordination of the technical parts of the profession, including the provision of access to modern tools and the development of new skills, is a change of direction that we all welcome. The same must follow in LIS Departments which must revise their curricula and collaborate more with libraries to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Research libraries are keen to know more about the newest developments, but these hardly reach their own communities. This is a personal observation and therefore subjective, but the capacity-building efforts have not yet been translated to upgraded activities. It might be that the rate of changing the culture of the profession is low; that the needs of researchers have changed; and that research libraries are either not visible, or they do not appear reliable (or both, of course). As much as I want to assess the shortcomings of my professional community in terms of fair and rounded criticism, one must acknowledge that the structure in which they operate has never fully appreciated their role or understood their innovations, and itself has not the experience to assign them the tasks that other European libraries have. Clapsopoulos's words still echo when he wrote, "There is a problem in the current administrative

¹⁸ <https://scholarly.heal-link.gr/en/>.

¹⁹ <https://hardmin.heal-link.gr/>.

²⁰ <https://hellenicdataservice.gr/main/>.

relations between the institutions of tertiary education and their libraries” and he proposed that the solution should include the formation of alliances within institutions and the development of a single stance from all academic libraries.²¹

The Greek state must understand the potential of research libraries. A national library policy is imperative; it should be independent but linked to the national book policy. In Greece, it is not clear that a library policy does not serve the same purpose as a book policy, the latter being for books, literature, and production, and the former for information, growth, and cohesion. This is rather tortuously repeating one of the key findings by Zachos, who highlighted the lack of a national plan and policy for library development stating that, “The lack of such policies and strategic plans for library development has prevented library services in Greece from developing in accordance with any coherent and comprehensively considered plan”.²² Obviously, any policy will require investment in personnel and technologies.

Demands for environmental restructuring and better conditions should always be linked to certain expectations. What should we consider to be the aspirations that research libraries can and should fulfil? I should like to think that research libraries are central to the information flow from and to any stakeholder that has a mandate and a curiosity to study and innovate; that they facilitate the needs of the productive forces in the country; and that they remain connected to communities and respond instantly upon the calls of the time. They can still be transparent, as any infrastructure, but not invisible. One very illustrative example is the introduction of open access services, such as transformative agreements, which might look trivial to many, but these are a development that has transparently upgraded the research environment. Researchers can publish openly now and increase their visibility with services that are equivalent to their overseas colleagues. Upgrading the research environment in ways like this can impede the phenomenon of research migration, the infamous brain drains from which Greece and other Southern European countries have suffered. Most research libraries remain the largest in their regions, but they are not always the most active or well connected to society. Given the fact that many regions of Greece are underdeveloped, with high rates of unemployment and low rates of digital transformation, research libraries and their institutions can provide the leverage for growth.

The next few years will show if and how Greek research libraries remain relevant to the key missions of their com-

munities and assist their parent institutions to connect with society. For their own part, they should act on data, information, and intelligence and they should perform through actively partnering within networks. Furthermore, it is important to review and revise the narratives of their mission to the community. Their institutions should assign them duties that are related to and underline their central role, exploiting the qualities of preservation and sustainability that they inherently offer. Finally, the Greek state should understand that it must create the conditions for libraries to be embedded in the social and economic processes of the country.

5 Conclusions

Greece is a country of paradoxes; very few exemplary cases brighten the field and show remarkable achievements; they are still not able to move other stakeholders to adopt changes or at least they do so slowly. In this part of the world, conservatism is strong everywhere and is exacerbated by the entropy of the system due to the ageing of the working population, minimal budgets, the exclusion of libraries from the core activities of their parent organizations, etc. At the same time, the last twenty years have been marked by extraordinary resilience and determination on the part of libraries: and the critical factor is the schemes of interdependence, either formal where infrastructures operate, or informal where services are delivered. Through many lurches, at the end of the first quarter of the 21st century we are faced with the greatest paradox of all: a “silent metamorphosis”.

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²¹ Clapsopoulos (1997).

²² Zachos (1999).

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