

2. The origins of Egyptiot Hellenism

Egyptiot Hellenism, with Alexandria and Cairo as its centres, developed during the 19th century and experienced its apogee during the first third of the 20th century. Later on, it started to decline, experiencing a demographic decline and a functional downgrading. Its historical evolution mirrored the establishment, flourishing, decline and collapse of the colonial system. The writer Stratis Tsirkas provides a good historical overview of Egyptiot Hellenism in his book *Cavafy and his Era*.⁸

The presence of the Greeks in modern Egypt becomes evident during the time of Muhammad Ali Pasha (1768-1849), the modernising ruler of Egypt. Muhammad Ali was born in Kavala, in what is now Northern Greece, and had a good knowledge of, and respect for, Greek culture. He rewarded his Egyptiot Greek friends with grants of property which was not included in the state land registry, as well as with privileges which were mainly economic in character. His attitude towards Greeks was highly favourable, and “His behaviour would seem ‘inexplicable’ if we are not aware of the fact that he was constructing a bourgeois state under very odd circumstances: in the absence of an indigenous middle class. This is why he needed the Greek merchants and protected them.”⁹

Given these conditions, some Greeks embraced Islam quite early on and were soon integrated into the upper strata of Egyptian society. An example of this is provided by the life of Ismail Ferik Pasha. Originally named Manolis, he was the son of Frangias Kambanis, a Greek Orthodox priest from Psychro, near Lasithi in Crete. When Hasan Pasha burned Lasithi in 1823, Manolis was taken captive. He later converted to Islam and advanced through the ranks of the Ottoman army. As Minister of War, he was sent to Crete in 1866 in order to quell the revolt then underway, and died there in the following year.¹⁰

Aimé Vingtrinier tells a similar story about “the beautiful Sidi Maria” from Methoni in the Peloponnese, and her relationship with

Soliman Pasha, an Egyptian officer of the Sixth Regiment. Shortly before the Battle of Navarino in 1827, Sidi Maria had been taken to Cairo where she embraced Islam and married Soliman Pasha, the former Colonel Sèves, a Frenchman who had converted to Islam. Their descendants occupied a distinguished place in Egyptian society. One daughter became the wife of Sherif Pasha, and her daughter in turn married Sabri Pasha.¹¹ Furthermore, Zulfikar Pasha, a native of Mesolongi who served as a minister during the reign of Tewfik Pasha, and the equally prominent Ishmael Pasha from Crete, Kasim Pasha, and Ahmet Talaat, were all of Greek origin.

A much later incident concerning the Benakis family of Alexandria focuses on the same issue, namely the danger of conversion and alienation from Greek national ideals. In Penelope Delta's autobiography, there are references to the efforts of the Roman Catholic Père Michel, a teacher at the Jesuit school in Alexandria, to convert her brother Antonios, and to the furious reaction of their father Emmanuel Benakis.¹²