

The Pitfalls of Postcolonialism: Hellenist Graffiti in Cyprus

Introduction

In this paper, I explore the British presence in Cyprus and the diverse responses of Cypriots by investigating Greek nationalist graffiti through the lens of postcolonial theory. First, I present a brief historical context and argue that a more inclusive Cypriot historiography is urgently necessary. Next, I argue that British rule in Cyprus encompasses both colonization, Orientalism, and exoticism on the one hand and the recognition of something reassuringly Greek, European, and even British on the other. Finally, I present two Cypriot graffiti as my contribution to the creation of more inclusive narratives. By demonstrating this multiplicity of diverse voices through the material record, I subvert the hegemonic historiography. At the same time, I indicate that the discursive space in which these narratives are contested is structured by both the postcolonial legacy and the material world.

Historical context

Cyprus is an island in the Mediterranean with a long documented history, including Mycenaean settlement in the second millennium BCE and a Greek presence since.¹ In the past four thousand years, the island has been governed by many major powers, including – in chronological order – Egyptians, Romans, Venetians, Ottomans, and the British. In July 1878, the British Empire

¹ Mallinson, *Cyprus: A Modern History*, 9. For a more nuanced discussion of Mycenaean colonization and subsequent developments see Hardy, “Interrogating Archaeological Ethics in Conflict Zones,” 57–58. I also appreciate Andrew Dufton’s input on this point.

assumed control of the island by landing a military contingent in Larnaca Bay.² The country they encountered was largely rural and undeveloped – not to mention mountainous, hot, and dry. Over the next 82 years, the British undertook ‘modernizing’ projects. These included a census in 1881, which found that the island’s population was 74 percent Greek Cypriot and 24 percent Turkish Cypriot.³ In this period, there were significant tensions between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. These were complicated by the numerous changes in the island’s legal and administrative status, including official annexation by the Crown in 1914.⁴ In the following decades, Greek Cypriots called for *enosis* (union) with Greece. Increasing demands of Greek nationalists, along with economic woes,⁵ culminated in an abortive uprising in 1931. The subsequent period of repressive colonial rule became known as *Palmerokratia* (‘Palmerocracy’) after the governor of Cyprus, Herbert Palmer.⁶ Nationalist claims were thereby suppressed through the end of World War II. It is the events of the subsequent decades that figure most prominently in the rest of this paper.

Tracing the evolution of the ‘Cyprus problem’ is fraught with historiographical issues and involves many deeply interconnected events, organizations, and people. I will therefore concentrate on what is most relevant to my subsequent analysis.⁷ On 1 April 1955, the *Ethniki Organosis Kypriou Agoniston* (National Organisation of Cypriot Fighters, or EOKA for short) declared that it would begin a military campaign with the goal of “the liberation of Cyprus from the British yoke.”⁸ This organization was led by Georgios Grivas – known by his *nom de guerre* ‘Digenis’ – and Makarios

² Morgan, *Sweet and Bitter Island*, 2.

³ Verropoulou, “The Demography of Cyprus, 1881–1982,” 179. Hardy, “Interrogating Archaeological Ethics in Conflict Zones,” 66, discusses how these categories suppress significant ethnoreligious diversity.

⁴ Orr, *Cyprus under British Rule*, 172–74.

⁵ McLean, “Review of *Cyprus and the Governorship of Sir Ronald Storrs: The Causes of the 1931 Crisis*.”

⁶ Kazamias, “Review of *Cyprus in the 1930s*.”

⁷ A more comprehensive history that nonetheless remains remarkably concise is given by Hardy, “Interrogating Archaeological Ethics in Conflict Zones,” 74–77.

⁸ Durrell, *Bitter Lemons*, 183.

III, current archbishop and future first president of Cyprus. In December 1959, EOKA agreed to a ceasefire. Through negotiations in London and Zurich over the following year, “a compromise was found that nobody had wished for: independence.”⁹ After 1960, ethnic tensions continued to plague the Republic. Many Turkish Cypriots called for *taksim* (partition) and some joined the *Türk Mukavemet Teşkilatı* (Turkish Resistance Organization, TMT). Digenis, frustrated by the disavowal of *enosis* by President Makarios, formed EOKA B, a far-right paramilitary organization.¹⁰ On 15 July 1974, Makarios was ousted by a coup d’état supported by EOKA B and the Greek military junta – a group of colonels who ruled Greece from 1967 to 1974. Five days later, Turkey invaded Cyprus and occupied the northern third of the island. This *de facto* partition of Cyprus persists to the present day.

What I have attempted to present in this section is the ‘undisputed history.’ Yet subjectivity is inherent in historiography, a phenomenon that is accentuated in contexts fraught with sectarianism and ethnic tensions. The intractability of the ‘Cyprus problem’ means that histories of the island are particularly susceptible to the imposition of teleology and the fetishization of particular narratives. In the words of Mete Hatay and Yiannis Papadakis, Cypriot historiography “may say more about the (desired) future than the past.”¹¹ In particular, the version of events outlined above emphasizes official actions by leaders on all sides. Indeed, the hegemonic historiography mostly draws on documents from institutions like the UK Foreign Office, the Parliament of Cyprus, and other state archives. Even when incorporating more diverse sources, historiography still silences the subaltern because of its bias towards those who had the ability and means to write and be published. In Cypriot history, these ‘people with a voice’ included colonial administrators, clerics,

⁹ Faustmann and Peristianis, “Introduction.”

¹⁰ The ‘B,’ read as ‘beta,’ is the Greek numeral for the number two.

¹¹ Hatay and Papadakis, “A Critical Comparison, Official Historiographies,” 46.

and wealthy Greeks of the diaspora or the urban elite.¹² Besides an evident class bias, relying on these sources is inherently sexist: almost all these ‘people with a voice’ are male. Another obstacle I face is that personal and institutional factors constrain my historiography to largely English-language sources. Acknowledging these limitations is the first step to creating a more inclusive historiography. Nowhere is the need for this approach more clearly articulated than in the body of work that is known as postcolonial theory.

A postcolonial approach

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said argues that British and French study of the Orient creates a discourse that “is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the power political (as with a colonial or imperial establishment) [and] power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics or anatomy).”¹³ In other words, the classic postcolonial critique of colonial power hinges on the construction and representation of the Orient. In particular, Said identifies the process of Orientalism with the ‘discovery’ of languages like Sanskrit and Arabic, shaping ‘modern’ disciplines like linguistics, anthropology, and archaeology. These new systems of knowledge create ‘rewritings’ of the Orient that are inextricable from imperialism and colonialism. If this kind of Orientalism is the enabling characteristic of colonialism, in what sense is Cyprus a colonial subject?

My tentative answer is that British rule in Cyprus encompasses both colonization, Orientalism, and exoticism on the one hand and the recognition of something reassuringly Greek, European, and even British on the other. The colonists often saw Cyprus in terms of its Hellenic heritage. In

¹² A persuasive analysis of “the functioning of hegemony in relation to historiography and public discourse in Cyprus” is presented in Panayiotou, “Hegemony, Permissible Public Discourse and Lower Class Political Culture.”

¹³ Said, *Orientalism*, 12.

the words of Tabitha Morgan, the British found “their new territory, particularly its geography and its archaeological and linguistic connections with ancient Greece, reassuringly familiar.”¹⁴ Indeed, a 1918 book entitled *Cyprus under British Rule* begins with quotations from Horace, Euripides, and Tennyson, all describing Aphrodite of Cyprus. In a similar vein, Liddell and Scott – the Greek lexicon that was celebrated and profoundly influential in Britain and beyond – defined “Κυπρος” (*sic*) simply as “a Greek island.”¹⁵ The colony is thus firmly situated within the same Classical history that ‘Western civilization’ claims as its inheritance. At the same time, the British rulers created a discourse within which they could continue to justify colonial practices by distancing Cyprus ‘today’ from its Classical heritage. For example, Cyprus in antiquity had been famed for its vast forests. Therefore, British officials who arrived in the 1880s “were aghast at the scenes of desolation and wastefulness that they found in the scrublands that had once been forest.”¹⁶ How could an island described so beautifully in Classical texts be reconciled with the vision of Cyprus today? The answer was plain: the observed deterioration is the inevitable result of “oriental despotism.”¹⁷ Another example of this “political and cultural ‘schizophrenia’”¹⁸ lies in the 1918 book *Cyprus under British Rule*. As mentioned above, the author – Charles Orr, a British military officer¹⁹ – begins by citing Classical texts. Yet Orr also describes “the place of Cyprus in history” as being “a misty and romantic past.”²⁰ He firmly separates the Cyprus of yore (described in

¹⁴ Morgan, *Sweet and Bitter Island*, 1.

¹⁵ Markides, “Cyprus 1878-1925: Ambiguities and Uncertainties,” 19, quoting “Henry Lydell [*sic*] and George Scott, *A Greek English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1893).”

¹⁶ Given, *The Archaeology of the Colonized*, 74.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁸ Hajimichael, “Revisiting Thomson – The Colonial Eye and Cyprus,” 70.

¹⁹ From 1911–17, Orr served as the Chief Secretary of Cyprus and was later appointed Governor of the Bahamas. See Rappas, *Cyprus in the 1930s*, 202 (58n2).

²⁰ Orr, *Cyprus under British Rule*, 14.

familiar Greek texts) from the contemporary island (subject to Oriental misrule and therefore open to British colonization).

At first blush, Cyprus does not seem subject to the same kind of Orientalist discourse that Said describes. Yet the colonization of Cyprus requires the creation of just such an episteme. The Romantic, mysterious, and otherworldly aspects of Cyprus were invoked to a greater or lesser degree by the colonizers, depending on the time, context, and even whether the Englishman in question was a Liberal or a Tory. Yet the collective result is precisely the creation of a kind of “reconstituted theology” that Said argues played a major role in the “spiritual and intellectual project of the late eighteenth century.”²¹ In sum, then, the British saw Cyprus as both Greek, Western, and European on the one hand and exotic, Oriental, and colonizable on the other.

A postcolonial analysis must place equal if not greater weight on the reactions of the Cypriots to British rule. The nature of colonialism means that the discourse it creates dominates its spatiotemporal context. In the case of Cyprus, this means that all manifestations of nationalism and anti-colonialism – including EOKA and TMT – must exist within the colonial dynamics sketched above. This extends to the material record, a point to which I will return when I analyze the graffiti given below.

Finally, in my analysis I must bear in mind the problematic history of archaeology itself. As a discipline, it has long had uncomfortable associations with the Western colonial project. In particular, when considering Cyprus as a site for study we must be wary not to engage in ‘colonization of the mind.’ In its focus on antiquity in countries like Greece and Cyprus, archaeology often engages in what Yannis Hamilakis usefully terms “allochronization:” adopting

²¹ Said, *Orientalism*, 114.

a “refracted image” of the nation through “the imposition of external, idealized narratives.”²² Allochronization in practice is also illustrated by many elements of the Greek Cypriot educational system. For example, many Greek Cypriot teachers – and textbooks – uncritically adopt a *longue durée* approach to local identity by asserting that they and the “ancient Cypriots [are] members of the same community of the Greek nation.”²³ In so doing, they refract the image of Cyprus by imposing the narrative of Hellenism, which is characterized by the synchronic and diachronic unity of the “Hellenic-Christian” Greek national identity.²⁴ Another example of Hellenism, this time in its synchronic form, is the 1968 assertion by the Cypriot minister of education that “Cyprus does not belong to the Cypriots ... Cyprus belongs to the whole of Hellenism.”²⁵ These statements capture the essence of allochronization. They also reflect the kind of imposed teleology that makes the historiography of Cyprus so fraught. Indeed, anyone engaged in any kind of knowledge production can become ensnared in these hazards. The solution is for us – whether ‘we’ are Greek, Turkish, or ‘Other,’ scholar or layman – to recognize these dynamics and remain vigilant to them at all times. In my subsequent analysis of the material record, I hope to implement these recommendations by crafting more nuanced and inclusive narratives.

The material record

In this section, I discuss two graffiti. The first was found in the village of Apesia (Απαισιά, occasionally transliterated as Apaisia), approximately 25 kilometers from Limassol, and the second in Palaiomylos (Παλαιόμυλος),²⁶ a village in the Troodos Mountains (see Figure 1). I will first

²² Hamilakis, “Double Colonization.”

²³ Bryant and Papadakis, “Introduction,” 9.

²⁴ For a thorough discussion of Hellenism, see Papadakis, “Greek Cypriot Narratives of History and Collective Identity,” 154–55.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

²⁶ This village is also known by various other spellings and their corresponding transliterations, including Παλιόμυλος and Παληόμυλος.

examine the location and characteristics of these graffiti and then contextualize them in the broader historical and theoretical framework I outlined above.



Figure 1. A map of Cyprus indicating the location of the two graffiti.

An effective analysis of graffiti should bear in mind insights from both archaeology and related disciplines such as semiotics, history, and linguistics. For archaeologists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the chief promise of graffiti was “unmediated contact with the writer” – especially a writer who might be a member of “the lower classes.”²⁷ Today, the archaeology of graffiti recognizes greater heterogeneity of authorship, purpose, and context. Specifically, graffiti are valued not only as a form of communication with the reader but also as writing in dialog with itself and its immediate surroundings. Indeed, one of graffiti’s most compelling characteristics for archaeology is that it is “one of the few forms of writing ... which preserve the material context

²⁷ Baird and Taylor, *Ancient Graffiti in Context*, 2.

of their production.”²⁸ This material context is what makes analysis of Cypriot graffiti so promising for better understanding broader dynamics of nationalism and colonialism on the island.



Figure 2. EOKA graffiti in Apesia, with a terebinth tree in the upper left, south of the utility pole.

The first graffiti I examine is shown in Figure 2. The graffiti appears mundane: white paint on a utility pole by the side of a village street. This picture was taken immediately outside the most built-up and oldest area of Apesia, on the main road leading through the village. This area is heavily frequented and therefore particularly well-suited to discursive and contested uses of space.²⁹ Opposite the utility pole is a 1500-year-old terebinth tree at the center of a small plaza.³⁰ A side

²⁸ Ibid., 3.

²⁹ I thank Andrew Dufton for bringing this point to my attention.

³⁰ See “Terebinth” under “Places of Interest” on the Apesia village website: <http://www.thevillageexpress.com/cyprusvillage/profile/174>, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20170418172641/www.thevillageexpress.com/cyprusvillage/profile/174>.

road to the southwest of the plaza leads to the Εθνικόφρων Σωματείο Απαισιάς «Ευριπίδης Νούρος» (*Ethnikofron Somateio Apeias 'Evrupidis Nouros'*) – the ‘Euripides Nourous’ Nationalist³¹ Association of Apeasia. This same organization affixed a flyer immediately above the graffito, advertising their “ετήσια χοροεσπερίδα” – their annual party/dance. These Nationalist Associations are common throughout Cyprus, where they form part of the “jigsaw puzzle” of the Cypriot Right, the picture of Greek nationalism.³² In this case, the sympathies of the *Ethnikofron Somateio* are made obvious by the large Greek flag erected next to the terebinth (see Figure 3). As Yiannis Papadakis argues, the “decorative symbolism” of the Right – the graffiti and the flag – intertwines the material with broader political issues.³³

At least one part of the graffito is clear: the word ‘EOKA.’ As mentioned earlier, this is the name of two distinct but related organizations, both of which had as their aim *enosis* (union) with Greece. The first – usually referred to as simply ‘EOKA’ – is still held in high regard by most Greek Cypriots as an organization of anti-colonial ‘freedom fighters.’ As Andreas Panayiotou persuasively argues, this widespread approbation of EOKA as the champion of *enosis* delineates the “rigidly defined boundaries for permissible public discussion” in the Republic of Cyprus.³⁴ The second organization, designated as ‘EOKA B,’ is significantly more controversial. In particular, the Right praises it for continuing the ‘struggle’ for *enosis*, while the Left largely castigates it as an instrument of the Greek military junta and a terrorist organization that provoked the Turkish invasion of 1974. Under close inspection, the swatch of white paint below ‘EOKA’ in this graffito appears to contain the distinctive shape of a ‘B,’ with the lower curve remaining particularly

³¹ *Ethnikofron* could also be translated, more generously, as ‘patriotic;’ Papadakis, “Greek Cypriot Narratives of History and Collective Identity,” 158 translates it as “adhering to the national ideals.”

³² Protopapas, “The Rise of a Bi-Polar Party System,” 274.

³³ Papadakis, “Greek Cypriot Narratives of History and Collective Identity,” 158.

³⁴ Panayiotou, “Hegemony, Permissible Public Discourse and Lower Class Political Culture,” 71.

visible. The indistinctness of the letter suggests that it was later erased or painted over. The easiest conclusion is that some actor wished to disrupt the symbolic link between the village – including the *Ethnikofron Somateio* – and EOKA B. This interpretation is problematized by the fact that at least two other graffiti in the area consist only of the word ‘EOKA’ (see, for example, the road sign in Figure 3). In addition, none of the graffiti seem very old; both the wood of the utility pole and the metal of the sign indicate little wear. Perhaps, then, the ‘B’ is original and even intentionally indistinct.



Figure 3. The view opposite the previous graffito, including the terebinth. Note the Greek flag in the far left and the EOKA graffito on the sign in lower center.

The second graffito presents many contrasts with the graffiti in Apesia. This graffito (Figure 4), found on a wall in the small village of Palaiomylos, reads “ΖΗΤΩ Ο ΕΘΝΑΡΧΗΣ ΜΑΚΑΡΙΟΣ”

– “hooray for the ethnarch Makarios.” This statement indicates unambiguous support for Makarios III, the archbishop of Cyprus from 1950 to 1977 and president of the Republic of Cyprus from 1960 to 1977. Partly due to the lasting influence of Ottoman political structures, the archbishop of the Church of Cyprus was traditionally the ethnarch – in other words, the leader of the Greek Cypriot nation (*ethnos*).³⁵ The symbolic significance of this office partially explains why public adulation is so potent. The graffito uses pale yellow paint to display its message on a wall on the main street of Palaioomylos, easily catching the eyes of passersby. The state of the paint as well as the wear of the wall indicate a fairly old artifact, perhaps dating back to the Makarios government. Traditionally, Palaioomylos – formerly a working-class mining village – was dominated by AKEL (for ‘Ανορθωτικό Κόμμα Εργαζόμενου Λαού’ or ‘Progressive Party of Working People’), the most popular communist party in Cyprus.³⁶ Because the graffito is integrated into the material fabric of the village, it both indicates and influences a Leftist political ideology associated with support for Makarios.

Indeed, this is the dominant function of all material culture: in the words of Claire Lyons and John Papadopoulos, objects “are not simply residues of social interaction but are active agents in shaping identities and communities.”³⁷ This is certainly the case in Cyprus. Here, material culture is created from a social milieu, but these objects themselves shape their surrounding community and environment. For example, supporters of AKEL (the Left) use the Cypriot flag, while supporters of DISY (the Right) “exclusively use the Greek flag.”³⁸ Each movement draws its symbolic capital from its relation to material culture. In the case of Palaioomylos, the very walls of

³⁵ Roudometof, “Orthodoxy and Modernity in Cyprus,” 191.

³⁶ Aigli Pittaka (Palaioomylos resident), email to author, May 1, 2017. See also the 2016 election results for the Palaioomylos precinct on the website of the Ministry of Interior: http://results.elections.moi.gov.cy/English/PARLIAMENTARY_ELECTIONS_2016.

³⁷ Lyons and Papadopoulos, *The Archaeology of Colonialism*, 8.

³⁸ Papadakis, “Greek Cypriot Narratives of History and Collective Identity,” 155.

the village are imbued with a political and ideological aspect.³⁹ This affect is all the more powerful because the graffiti has been allowed to remain for so many years, despite many ‘beautification’ projects elsewhere in the village. This graffiti is another clear example that “social relations in Cyprus are characterized by an intense politicization of private life.”⁴⁰



Figure 4. Graffiti in support of Makarios in Palaiomylos.

Both graffiti use paint as their medium; both are situated on their village’s main thoroughfare; and both refer to broadly Greek nationalist themes. Above all, both graffiti use their highly visible location to contest narratives within a shared discursive space dominated by – and, at least partly, created through – the postcolonial legacy. Both the physical space (of the villages’ thoroughfares)

³⁹ Panayiotou, “Hegemony, Permissible Public Discourse and Lower Class Political Culture.”

⁴⁰ Papadakis, “Greek Cypriot Narratives of History and Collective Identity,” 160.

and the conceptual space (of Cypriot politics and ideologies) are structured by the forces of colonialism and anti-colonialism. Through its ‘modernizing’ projects (including the construction of many thoroughfares) and through its powerful and violent aftermath (including the rise of Hellenism), British colonialism has left an indelible mark on the island.

However, the graffiti’s differences still outweigh their similarities. For one, the graffiti in Palaioomylos and Apaisia represent two poles of Cypriot politics. The graffiti in Apesia expresses support for Georgios Grivas and EOKA B and more broadly the nationalist Right. The graffiti in Palaioomylos backs Makarios III, who EOKA B helped overthrow, and more broadly the communist Left. At the same time, these graffiti do not represent isolated viewpoints; like all material culture, they engage their surroundings and each other to fashion a greater sociocultural community. The graffiti are thus more than just a signifier for a signified. Rather, the indexicality of each graffiti involves complex dynamics between the (assumed) author and the viewer. Both graffiti thus actively shape identities and communities. Because of these traits, the graffiti rebuff attempts to confine the material record to a single function. Instead of serving a hegemonic narrative, they are a powerful force for bringing to light competing narratives in a shared discursive space.

Conclusions

I have undertaken this project in the spirit of postcolonial theory. It is true that the British in Cyprus did not impose the same kind of straightforward Orientalism that was created elsewhere. This does not mean, though, that British colonial discourse recognized the hybridity and diversity of Cypriots. Rather, it admitted multiple views of Cyprus only by enforcing a dichotomy between the Greek (Western) past and the Oriental present. In later historiography, the view of Cyprus as

Oriental was displaced by the ardent Hellenism espoused by Greek Cypriots themselves. Yet this shift away from the metropole succumbed to the same pitfalls of allochronization, imposed teleology, and fetishization of particular narratives. In these ways, the shared discursive space in which the graffiti contend is still dominated by the legacy of colonialism.

The examples presented here are but two of the many diverse and evolving graffiti of Cyprus. Nevertheless, even this sample presents a significant heterogeneity of purpose and context. The graffiti in Apesia is intertwined with Greek nationalism and the fabric of the Cypriot Right; the graffiti in Palaiomylos influences and indicates support for Makarios and the Left. These examples of material culture interact with themselves and their surroundings, thus bridging the gap between the private and the political, the audience and the author, and the material and the ideal. In analyzing these graffiti, I have demonstrated a heterogeneity and diversity of perspectives that the hegemonic historiography continues to suppress.

By presenting two examples of postcolonial graffiti in Cyprus, I have subverted the dominant narrative by demonstrating a multiplicity of diverse voices. The analysis of material culture is a uniquely powerful tool to reveal hidden forms of inequality and craft more inclusive narratives, especially in situations as riven by sectarianism as Cyprus. The archaeology of graffiti is an invaluable means to both critique the status quo and offer alternative interpretations.

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