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Victorian Travellers, Greek Hotels, and Uneasy Hospitalities

Abstract
At the end of the nineteenth century, Athens began to acquire the image of a European capital through architectural modernisation, urban planning, and investment in tourism. Its elegant new buildings included several first-class hotels, suggesting that the city had already started to define itself as a tourist destination. Attracted mainly but not solely by ancient monuments, late Victorian travellers to Greece represented a new lifestyle and mobility enabled by Britain's economic and political power, the rise of the tourist industry, and the advances in transportation. Yet, while seeking the comforts of cosmopolitan hotels, Victorians also lamented the encroachment of modernity upon ancient sites, as travellers witnessed modern hotels rising next to antiquities. At the same time, Victorians venturing to the countryside relied on the resources of their guides to find lodging, both dependent on and exposed to the (often-challenging) hospitality of their hosts. This essay examines representative travel accounts of the period that reveal the conflicting emotions of Victorian guests of Athenian hotels or country lodgings, reflecting on the uneasy hospitalities in accounts of Greece, which are split between an imperial fetishism for authenticity and a consumerist pursuit of service and comfort.

Keywords: hotels, travel, Greece, Victorian travellers, tourism, hospitality

An article entitled "From Corinth to the Parthenon" published in *The Cornhill Magazine* on 7th December 1886, vividly describes a British tourist's first impressions of Greece. The narrator's arrival at Corinth appears the opposite from the long-anticipated romantic encounter with a classical land:

> One lands at Corinth much as one lands at Oban or Yarmouth after a brief steam trip. The packet anchors a hundred yards from the shaky wooden piles which support the humble pier of this once-proud city. And no sooner is the anchor down than a troop of noisy Greeks deputed by the inns of Athens, sixty miles away, come along side in broad-bottomed boats . . . and in broken English plead and gesticulate on behalf of their respective establishments.
>
> "Hôtel d' Angleterre, sir? Fine hotel, where all fine gentlemen go. Four English signores there at the moment. Best hotel in Athens!"
>
> "Hôtel des Etrangers, monsieur? Every one go Hôtel des Etrangers; it so cheap and clean – warranted not a flea; close to Acropolis and palace. Best view in Athens! Such good to eat, too!"

> "Hôtel de la Grande Bretagne?"
>
> The last of these hotels is represented by an individual of superb carriage... The Hôtel de la Grande Bretagne is as superb as its representative it needs no advocate. (Anon 1886: 493)

This humorous vignette shows the fierce competition for clients among the different Athenian hotel delegates taking place even before the tourist sets foot in Greece; while still aboard, the narrator is hassled by various hotel agents, who seize travellers "baggage and all, [and] stowed them "in their different boats" (Anon 1886: 493). Tourists are thus compared to "victims" allowed to have a stroll in Corinth only after "they have set the baggage in a place from which it cannot possibly be abstracted by one of the other hotel delegates, procured their tickets for the ensuing railway journey to Athens, and telegraphed . . . to the home hotel that so many gentlemen of such and such nationality are to be met that evening and driven straightway to the hotel they have promised to patronise" (Anon 1886: 493). "He is a bold fly that will change his mind and try to escape from the toils of the web woven round him by one of these industrious spiders of modern Greece", the narrator concludes (Anon 1886: 493).

The hotels represented by these "industrious spiders" were among the best in Greece's capital at the end of the nineteenth century. By that time Athens had begun to acquire the image of a European capital through architectural modernisation, urban planning, and investment in tourism. Although the anonymous author of the *Cornhill* does not elaborate on his hotel, the city's elegant new buildings included, as Baedeker's guidebook on *Greece* pointed out in the 1880s, "several excellent hotels of the first class" affording "all the conveniences which most travellers find necessary for comfort" (Baedeker 1889: xvii).[1] Murray's 1900 edition listed four first-class hotels, three of which appear in the Cornhill article: the Grand Hôtel d'Angleterre, on the corner of Syntagma square with Stadiou Street, the Grande Bretagne, the only one which is still in operation, the largest one, the Hôtel des étrangers, and the newer Grand Hotel, which opened soon after the publication of this travel narrative (Murray 1900: 945–46).

The operation of and rivalry among these first-class hotels portrayed in the *Cornhill* article also suggest that by the end of the nineteenth century Athens did not solely depend on its ancient monuments to attract visitors. Hotels, some of which were impressive neoclassical buildings drawing together the city's fashionable crowd and social life, were part of the city's modernisation project, and despite the bankruptcy of 1895, Athens was able to successfully host the first Olympic Games of modern times. Athenian hotels were broadly divided into two categories, hotels for the common people, especially Greeks from the provinces that were located

[1] This is the first English edition of Baedeker's *Greece*, published in 1889, which was based on the second German edition of the guidebook.

around Omonia Square, and luxury hotels situated around Syntagma Square, hosting a foreign clientele. The latter often figure in British travel accounts of Greece: for example, Agnes Smith, the well-known Scottish Orientalist scholar and Isabel Armstrong, a travel writer, describe in detail their comfortable stay in the Grand Hôtel d'Angleterre, while George Gissing was taken to the Grand Hôtel when he visited Athens in 1889, also using Athenian hotels as setting in his 1895 novella *Sleeping Fires*.

Victorian travellers to Greece represented a new lifestyle and mobility enabled by Britain's economic and political power, the rise of the tourist industry, and the advances in transportation. Travel and the new forms of organized tourism introduced by Thomas Cook, who opened a branch in Athens in 1883, became a significant part of a leisure industry addressing both men and women; the arrival of groups or individual tourists through travel agencies that organized fixed itineraries required the construction of hotels.[2] Yet, while seeking the comforts of cosmopolitan hotels, Victorians also lamented the encroachment of modernity upon ancient sites, like the modern hotel rising next to ancient Olympia in the early 1890s. At the same time, Victorians venturing to the countryside relied on the resources of their guides to find lodging, both dependent on and exposed to the (often-challenging) hospitality of their hosts. By exploring representative travel accounts of the period, this essay focuses on the emotions of Victorian guests in Athenian hotels, seen as heterotopias that offer refuge but also intensify the sense of displacement triggered by the conflict between the timelessness of the archaeological sites and the temporariness of hotel living. It also reflects on the uneasy hospitalities experienced by Victorians in the Greek countryside, as represented in travel accounts of Greece that are often split between an imperial fetishism for authenticity and a consumerist pursuit of service and comfort.

The first modern hotels appeared in Athens just as it became the Greek capital in 1834, gradually replacing the old traditional khans. The very first hotel, called Neon, or Albergo Nuovo, a name later changed to Hôtel d'Europe opened in the beginning of the 1830s by an Italian couple, the Kazalis.[3] By the time Mary Georgiana Dawson Damer visited the city in October 1839 during her Mediterranean

[2] Thomas Cook's office was located at Syntagma Square, in the building of the Hôtel d'Angleterre, where it remained until the early 1960s, when the hotel was demolished. Yet Thomas Cook had included tours to Greece since 1869, when he organized individual and group trips to Egypt on the opening of the Suez Canal. On the first package tours to the region in 1869 see Polat and Arslan. On information on accommodation in nineteenth-century tourist guides of Greece (see Dritsas 2006: 38–39).

[3] On the history of Athenian hotels from 1830 to 1940 see the website of the Greek Literary and Historical Archive of the National Bank of Greece Cultural Foundation (ELIA-MIET) "The Old Hotels of Athens from 1830 to 1940" [in Greek],http://www.elia.org.gr/research-tools/hotels/. On information on accommodation in nineteenth-century tourist guides of Greece (see Dritsas 2006: 38–39).

cruise, there were already a few modern hotels, mostly operated by foreigners. In her two-volume *Diary of a Tour in Greece, Turkey, Egypt, and the Holy Land*, published in 1841, Dawson Damer describes "Bruno's" hotel, where she stayed, as "small but comfortable" (1841: 14),[4] suggesting that hotels were part – and symbol – of the city's slow development from the small town of Ottoman Greece to the cosmopolitan capital of a European nation. Dawson Damer's description of the travellers' arrival at Piraeus and immediate transport to the hotel recalls the *Cornhill Magazine* article and is echoed more 40 years later in Smith's account, when she, her twin sister Margaret, and another female friend embark from the steamer on a small boat entrusting themselves to a hotel delegate carrying the ancient name of Dionysius: "A crowd rushes into the boat, we hear a Babel of sounds, and the few words which fall upon our ears are classic. We commit ourselves and our baggage into the hands of Dionysius, a commissionaire from the Hôtel d'Angleterre, and then find ourselves in a boat, gliding along the moonlit water. Dionysius tells us to sit still, and banish care, "comme si vous étiez chez vous" (Damer 1841: 16). Taken directly from the boat via carriage to the Hôtel d'Angleterre appears in Smith's words as a passage from the strange to the familiar –the safety of the private hotel room: "We had a glimpse of white houses, with closed shutters, and then alighted in the vestibule of the hotel. We found three nice rooms allotted to our use, and Edith had the supreme pleasure of ordering tea in Greek. It was brought up nice and hot" (Damer 1841: 17). The sameness of hotel rooms and nice cups of tea area relief from the exertion of travel and the hassled arrival to a dark, unknown city. Although hotels bring cultures and individuals together across nation, language and class, they also seem to lock travellers in fixed social and cultural roles and habits (see Despotopoulou, Kolocotroni and Mitsi, 2023: 2, 4).

Similarly, Joseph L. Thomas, a British student visiting Greece in the winter of 1880–1881, is whisked to another of these luxury hotels as soon as he arrives at Piraeus with an Austrian-Loyd from Corfu: "A drive of half a mile through the leading thoroughfare of the city – Hermes Street – brings me to a handsome, spacious square in front of the Royal Palace, and there at the Hotel des Etrangers [sic] or rather Xenodocheion ton Xenon" (1881: 160). Thomas distinguishes himself from the typical Athenian hotel dweller by pottering around the modern city rather than rushing to the monuments, and makes fun of the hotel guests who

> buckle themselves to the work [visiting the sights] with the greatest alacrity, that they may be able to render a good account of themselves, if possible, at the very evening's table d'hôtel, and pronounce a matured opinion upon a famous work of art that they only saw for the first time an hour ago. (1881: 160)

[4] This hotel was owned by Mme Brunot and was later renamed to "Italy" operating from 1836 to 1904.

More memorable than the Athenian antiquities in Thomas' account are hotel prices, complaining that "Everything in Athens [is] on a miniature scale, except the Acropolis and hotel prices" (1881: 183). Not only Thomas' hotel stay but Greek journey in general are examples of the fixed itineraries, tickets and arrangements enabled by Cook's travel agency. Although Thomas is surprised about the scarcity of tourists in Athens (he arrived there during the Greek Christmas holiday) and complains about hotel prices, he is full of praise for Thomas Cook and the English company operating the Athens and Peiraeus Railway, concluding his account of Greece with his "humble testimony to the efficiency of Messrs. Thomas Cook and Son's arrangements, by availing ourselves of which we obviate much of the bother inseparable from independent travel" (1881: 203).

Unlike Thomas' view on hotel prices, when Armstong arrives at the Hôtel d'Angleterre after her adventures in the Peloponnese, she finds it "very comfortable and inexpensive" (1893: 90), also noting that it was the only place in the country where they paid in francs, rather than drachmas. However, the estimation of hotel prices is relative: for Gissing, who reached Athens on 19 November 1889 and "was taken" as he writes in his diary "to the Grand Hotel, Place de la Constitution [Syntagma]", the hotel bill was "absurdly dear" (1978: 175, 178). Travelling to Greece was already very expensive for him and his finances did not allow him to visit any other place besides Athens and Attica. Although the author finds the Grand very comfortable, he realises that it was not the hotel that he had chosen, due to Baedeker's not keeping up with the rapid changes in Athenian hotels; thus, he moves three days later to the much more modest Stemma, running away from the English and German tourists frequenting the Grand. With the cost being "10 fr. a day (gold)" at the Grand (Gissing 1978: 175), the author admits that "the accommodation is luxurious"; it does have electric light but seems garish, with little sitting rooms on the staircase landings furnished "curiously" with mirrors and casts of antiquities (ibid.). In the large dining room, Gissing sits with twenty other people, including three Englishwomen, two Englishmen, and a German man whom he finds detestable, emphasising his alienation from fellow tourists. When he finds a room in Stemma, situated at Loudovikou square, for just 3 fr., he settles there on 22 November, his birthday, which he "celebrates by taking flight from the Grand Hotel where I ought never to have gone" (Gissing 1978: 177). He also complains about having to pay the Grand's bill in gold because only gold foreign coins circulated freely in the Greek market as silver foreign coins were banned in 1875 after the Latin Monetary Union had abandoned bimetallism. The daily cost of a hotel like the Grand seems expensive in comparison to the average wages of the time in Greece, which were around 2-3 drachmas.[5]

[5] On Gissing's stay in Athens and how it informed his novel *Sleeping Fires*, published in 1895 (see Mitsi 2024).

Gissing's hotel experience from Athens appears in the short novel *Sleeping Fires*, published in 1895, a few years after his visit to Greece, revealing how the hotel nuances the notions of mobility in terms of nation and class. In the novel, the protagonist Edmund Langley stays at a simple, second-class hotel, which was completely unknown to British tourists, while his friend Worboys and Louis, the young man who turns out to be Langley's lost son, stay at one of the luxury hotels at Syntagma. For Louis, the expensive hotel that accommodates the affluent tourists has nothing to do with the Greece of that time; instead, it removes and shields them from city life, which remains outside the hotel, just like the dust that the waiter brushes off their clothes as soon as they enter the premises. Louis urges his tutor to move to Langley's cheap hotel catering to Greek visitors, arguing that "Living like this, what can we get to know of the life of the country?" (Gissing 1896: 26). The luxury hotel, as the novel emphasises, is not only recommended by tourist guides but also enacts the propriety and customs of the British travellers who must change outfits for lunch and dinner.

The Victorians' mobility and accommodation in Greece depend on economic and social relations and practices between hosts and guests. Considering the high rates and the ensuing profits, the rivalry among hotels witnessed by the author of the *Cornhill* article is neither surprising nor restricted to Athens. When Armstrong visits the Peloponnese in the early 1890s, she and her friend, Edith Payne, are pursued by hotel agents both in Pyrgos and Olympia:

> We were told there was a very good hotel at Pyrgos, and certainly the agent did his very best to persuade us to give up our idea of staying at Olympia. In the first place our Gladstones were seized, and he tried to compel us to come in; but finding that that method aroused our British ire, it was then explained to us how it was not possible for English people to go to a Greek inn. "And ladies, too! Why, there will be nothing fit for you to eat; you will starve! But if you prefer all these discomforts, as you say you do, then you must go to the new inn, the 'Hotel d'Olympie.'" To all of which we listened with great attention, but it made no alteration in our determination to go to the old "Xenodochion"[6] (Armstrong 1893: 17).

The competition among these keen hotel representatives continues all the way to Olympia, as the two women are hassled both in the train and while walking into town:

> when the train slackened its very moderate speed there sprang to the window a third man, who informed us we were coming to the "Hotel d'Olympie"; that

[6] Xenodocheion [ξενοδοχείον] is the Greek word for hotel, deriving from Ancient Greek (lodging for strangers, guests).

> there we should find civilization and the French language . . . This man refused to be shaken off, and when we alighted at the temporary station at Olympia he walked on one hand; our Greeks, who had pounced on our luggage, on the other; and thus escorted we approached the little rise on which stood the rival inns, facing each other on opposite sides of the road (Armstrong 1893: 19).

Whereas the tourists arriving by steamer present accounts of depleted agency, giving themselves over to the care of hotel delegates, Armstrong uses accommodations as sites in which women travellers may re-imagine their gender identities, resisting the enforced hospitality of male agents. Rather than being "rendered helpless" by the hotel experience (see Walsh 2015: 146), "British ire" asserts itself against the Hotel d'Olympie with its "pink-washed, tea-caddy architecture" (Armstrong 1893: 19). Although Armstrong and her friend insist on choosing their own hotel in Olympia and elsewhere in Greece, Victorians often depend on the hospitality of villagers as hotels are rare in the Greek countryside. As Armstong writes, guidebooks recommend staying in homes since Khans were considered too dirty and primitive: In Volos "Edith and I agreed to try the hospitality of one of the residents to whom we had a letter of introduction. In the old days, travellers never thought of going to the Khans, but always put up at the houses of private individuals" (Armstrong 1893: 165). Yet, despite staying in the best house in Andritsaina, a village in the Peloponnese, the author admits that their hostess' ideas of cleanliness are quite different from their own, and the same goes for privacy:

> Our Greek hostess had her own ideas of cleanliness. She had been very much shocked in the morning to find that we had splashed most of the water out of the tin pie-dish on to the floor, and shook her head over such dirty ways, and now she thought it exceedingly disgusting of us to keep on our boots, but as we likewise had our own ideas regarding the floor, we stuck to our boots and persuaded her to lay the beds. This was accomplished before an audience of three children … we had the pleasure of seeing one small child, with very dirty feet, careering all over our beds – that, however, was quite according to their rules of cleanliness, and they forgave us our dirty habits for the sake of our crimson dressing gowns (Armstrong 1893: 77).

The humorous description of the filth in their host's house in Andritsaina, is informed, as Ludmilla Kostova has argued in her analysis of British women travellers in the Balkans, "by a consistent privileging of Englishness/Britishness: a conviction that their own form of government, monetary system, form of Christian worship or, for that matter, *hygienic habits* are *ipso facto* superior to those of most continental Europeans" (2003: 26). In addition to their dirt, villagers are so intrusive that in order to fend them off their room, travellers have to block doors and windows

with furniture; yet, despite their efforts, Armstrong and Payne are unable to deter the locals' curiosity, as there are always a few children left behind to observe and report on any novelty presented by the guests, such as dressing gowns, hair- and toothbrushes. Even as they try to wash in a stream in the most isolated spot, "as sure as the dressing-gown came into play a Greek appeared a few feet in advance, staring with great round eyes" (Armstrong 1893: 68).

If hotels are traditionally defined by impersonality and anonymity (Short 2019: 2), the Victorians' sojourn in Greece often proves the exact opposite. In Argos, Smith emphasises the "intelligent curiosity [of the locals] with regard to our morning toilette" and seeks a woman's help to close the shutters from outside (1884: 118). The most curious objects have to do with personal hygiene and washing apparatuses, thus in a village near Eurotas,

> Alexandros [Smith's guide] informed us that the women of the family, having visited our room while we were out, crossed themselves piously on seeing so many strange things. . . Our room being approached directly from the head of the stairs, and there being consequently no door, we had to hang our waterproofs over the bannisters, so as to put an obstacle in the way of those curious females who wanted to be perpetually observing us. (Smith 1884: 115)

Still, travellers prefer this uneasy hospitality and unceasing surveillance to Khans and even provincial hotels, where they are forced to fight against bedbugs all night. Differences between country inns and what Victorians define as shanties are fluid; in Olympia, Smith calls the place where they lunched a "shantie" though our local guide persisted in honouring it with the title of ξενοδοχείον or hotel, the proprietor himself naming it "magazzino" (1884: 226), and in Thebes she informs readers that Dr Schliemann, the famous amateur archaeologist whom she met during her travels in Greece, "says that he would rather sleep on the most miserable heap of chaff than in what they call a hotel" (1884: 320).

Humour also disguises unpleasant encounters with the insect life of Greece. In a fancy-looking hotel in Karditsa, Armstong finds that "Savage life is interesting enough in its own place, but when introduced under a pretentious roof it ceases to amuse" (Armstrong 1893: 166). This upmarket but apparently unsanitary establishment could be the same hotel defined by the composer Ethel Smyth 30 years later in *A Three-Legged Tour of Greece* as the filthiest among all the dirty hotels in which she stayed (1927: 29–30). Margaret Elizabeth Fountaine, a Victorian lepidopterist, natural history illustrator, diarist, and traveller, who visited Greece in 1900, in the company of Henry John Elwes, a scientific traveller and natural history collector, found the struggle with bed bugs and fleas particularly unpleasant since her vocation inhibited her from exterminating them. She confesses in her diaries that while the days she spent butterfly hunting in the Peloponnese were very pleasant,

the flea-infested nights, when she could not sleep outdoors, were terrible: "The days were delightful but bugs did not add to the charms of the nights", the entomologist concludes (Fountaine 1980: 117). Similarly, in Crete where she travelled in 1902, Fountaine again alludes to her vocation, as she is obliged to spend nights as a guest in monasteries when it is not possible to sleep outdoors in the mountainous region:

> I never pass a night in a Greek monastery without having good cause to regret that I am not literally a bug hunter. The kindness and hospitality of these monks is delightful, and their natural grace and simplicity of manner, but it is generally with feelings of relief that one rides away in the fresh early morning, vainly hoping for better luck next time (1980: 147).

For Victorian women travellers who, as Sara Suleri has shown in her analysis of the "feminine picturesque", were usually expected to limit their observations to the domestic or the picturesque (1992: 75–76), the description of accommodation contributed to the creation of a "ladylike" narrative persona as prescribed in the etiquette manuals. Yet, as this is the time in which British women often travelled to Greece alone, their writing also reflects a growing confidence in the ability of women to bear the hardships of travel and assume complex textual identities. As experts, they can advise other women where to stay, what to wear, and especially how to behave when travelling in Greece since guidebooks to the country assume all travellers are men. Armstrong's description of her (mis)adventures, is typical of women travellers revelling in the reconstruction of mishaps while being constantly reminded of their eccentricity as unaccompanied females. As Anne-Florence Quaireau argues, travel writing is "a gendering activity" and Victorian women were supposed "to perform gender in a similar fashion to what was expected" at home, while "performing travel in an *almost* identical manner to their male predecessors". Accommodation becomes a permeable threshold between public and private "founded upon unmistakably patriarchal notions of feminine respectability and behaviour" (Short 2019: 118). The surveillance of the "great round eyes" (Armstrong 1893: 68) uncovers the pervasive mechanisms of controlling female bodies and behaviours and connects the vexing native voyeurs with the readers at home.

Nonetheless, in the quest for an authentic Greece, many Victorians end up preferring the dirty and primitive rustic accommodations to the invasion of tourists and modern hotels. In the era when the physical practice of tourism was becoming increasingly commercial, as the references to Cook and Gaze in accounts such as Thomas's and Armstrong's attest, Victorian travel writers are anxious to find the picturesque sight and the unique experience. Such anxieties emerge in women's travel accounts, who fashion themselves as adventurous travellers to avoid the label of the "lady traveller" (see Mahn 2012: 111–137). Armstrong's disapproval of the new hotel being built in Olympia hides nostalgia for the unmediated, awkward and

invasive hospitality soon to be supplanted by institutional models of tourism serving the customer of the future, the omnivorous tourist:

> . . . on that hill above the Museum, the foundations of a hotel were being marked out. An hotel which would overshadow the Museum, an hotel from whose unblushing windows "the principal objects of interest among the ruins" would be pointed out to, and viewed through a telescope by, the visitor who did not care for the trouble of walking down to the sacred precinct. How will those thousands of glittering fragments be preserved from the omnivorous tourist? With the railway at its gates, the hotel on its hills, and the globe-trotter descending from above, the last days of Olympia are at hand. (1893: 35)

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