Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies 49 (1) 88–97

Greek light, Greek photography

Eleni Papargyriou
University of Patras
epapargy@upatras.gr

This article investigates indigenous light as an element in the conceptualization of photography as a 'Greek' art from the mid-nineteenth to the first decades of the twentieth century. Key moments linking photography, writing through light, with the light of Greece will be discussed: from the mid-nineteenth-century debate about the alleged 'Greek' origins of photography to the thematization of light and gazing at the Greek landscape in the writings of Periklis Yannopoulos and, eventually, to interwar photographic projects bringing together contemporary scenery with antique material relics.

The synergies between photography and literature originate in the mid-nineteenth century. The advent of photography in 1839 shifted the terms in defining realism and created new expectations of its premises, expectations which came to have a significant impact in the literary field. Studying photography in tandem with the literary text helps us understand historical and aesthetic developments in recording mechanisms and the workings of memory, which preoccupy writing as much as other methods of documenting the world. In this article I aim to explore the Greek reception of a fundamental photographic premise, writing through light, examining to what extent it was tinged by the idealization of light as indigenously Greek. The thought harks back to an appraisal of Greek light by John Fowles, concluding the essay 'Behind the Magus', in which he relates his Greek experience in the early 1950s:

> Some thirty years or more later my translator into Modern Greek, Phaidon Tamvakakis, very kindly gave me a book by Nikos Demou: The Light of the Greeks (To Phos ton Ellenon). It was not until I read the powerful essay and quotations that accompany the photographs there that I began to understand what had happened to me on that then long past January day in 1952. The

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DOI: 10.1017/byz.2024.27

https://doi.org/10.1017/byz.2024.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> Greeks see, feel, apprehend light not as others do, and from the beginning of history to its end.[1]

Fowles suggests the Greeks present a superior understanding of light, which has imbued their attitude towards the world since ancient times. He makes this admittedly bold claim in relation to a photographic essay containing photographs of Greek landscapes in intense light conditions which visually perform the philosophical points about the primacy of Greek light made in the text. We may ask here: if photography is an art dependent on light, does photograph in/of Greece, where light is a heavily charged concept, present itself as an indigenous art, an art quintessentially Greek? Seeking an answer to this question is less meaningful and urgent than trying to understand the conditions under which it was formed. Here I will attempt to offer an overview of these conditions, albeit cursory, from the mid-nineteenth century to the interwar years, exploring certain key moments.

To this end, I will outline the conceptualization of light's artistic agency in early accounts of the photographic medium; subsequently, I will discuss the reception of these ideas in mid-nineteenth-century Greece, focusing on occasions when photography became enveloped in discourses over national identity formation, and above all in the debate around Konstantinos Simonides' false claim that *heliotype* was a procedure already known in Greece in the sixth century AD. In the second part I will turn to the early twentieth-century understanding of light as a constitutive element of Greek landscape, and of Greek art by association, in the writings of Periklis Yannopoulos. In the third part, I will investigate Greek light in the juncture with photographic projects bringing together contemporary landscape with relics of the ancient past.

Light, a skilful artist

At the time of its invention photography was considered a scientific achievement which nevertheless yielded a 'magical' outcome: writing through light. The conception of light as an primary agent in the making of images is evident in the terms chosen to describe the new procedure. The first photographic experimentations were undertaken in 1816 by Joseph- Nicéphore Niépce, who named his process *heliography*, the writing of the sun, a term abandoned after his death, when his business partner Louis Daguerre patented the invention under his own name; the term *daguerreotype* prevailed for decades before *photography*, the writing of light, eventually caught on.[2] In 1844-6 William Henry Fox Talbot published *The Pencil of Nature*, a series of facsimiles of photographic plates and matching texts explaining the technique of 'photogenic

1 J. Fowles, 'Behind the Magus', *Twentieth-Century Literature* 42.1 (1996) 58-68 (67). The book in question is N. Demou, *Το φως των Ελλήνων* (Athens 2009, first published 1984).

2 Among the countless accounts of early photographic processes, a useful compact one is Q. Bajac, *The Invention of Photography*, tr. R. Taylor (New York 2002).

https://doi.org/10.1017/byz.2024.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

drawing' and its various applications. Talbot, who had achieved photographic results independently from Niépce/Daguerre, noted in the introduction:

> The little work now presented to the Public is the first attempt to publish a series of plates or pictures wholly executed by the new art of Photogenic Drawing, without any aid whatever from the artist's pencil.
>
> [...]
>
> It may suffice, then, to say, that the plates of this work have been obtained by the mere action of Light upon sensitive paper. They have been formed or depicted by optical and chemical means alone, and without the aid of any one acquainted with the art of drawing. It is needless, therefore, to say that they differ in all respects, and as widely as possible, in their origin, from plates of the ordinary kind, which owe their existence to the united skill of the Artist and the Engraver.[3]

Talbot's approach suggested an elimination of the human hand: nature itself, light and the sun, were the agents at work in the production of images. The primacy of light led to a new understanding of realism, free from human intervention, as objects of the physical world imprinted themselves on a chemically sensitized surface. Talbot, who had ventured into experimentations with the camera obscura after his own failure to produce quality drawings, makes a distinction between nature and culture in terms of artistic agency. Nature draws with her own pencil and thus becomes an artist in her own right. Her works are perfect; conversely, the works of culture depend on the imperfect human hand, which lacks in skill, accuracy, and speed. In this sense, Talbot and other photographic pioneers deemed representation by artistic means inferior to nature's achievement.[4]

The wondrous synergy between technology and light was picked up in early reports on the new medium of photography in Greece, such as this note published in the journal *Ευτέρπη* in 1848:

> From the moment the creator of all things said 'Let there be light' and light was born, the source of joy and bliss poured all over the world and illuminated its face. When humans saw this free, untouched, almost immaterial being, the creator's smile, they worshipped it in many places, building temples in its honour; they never dared to think they would ever to conquer or render it their

3 W.H.F. Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (London n.d.), Project Gutenberg, e-book, 1. Talbot's announcement on 31 January 1839 of his invention to the Royal Society of Great Britain was subsequently published as an independent report titled *Some Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing or the Process by Which Natural Objects may be Made to Delineate Themselves without the Aid of the Artist's Pencil* (London 1839).

4 A literary application of these ideas can be found in Ioannis Karasoutsas' poem 'Η παντεχνία του ανθρώπου' where he presents the sun as a painter drawing with a divinely inspired pen (*Η βάρβιτος ήτοι συλλογή των λυρικών αυτού ποιημάτων*, Athens 1860, 10).

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> manual copier. However, this is what science achieved in the present day. We say in the present day, because we do not wish to believe the wondrous rumours about light-impressions (θαυμάσια ακούσματα περί φωτοτυπίας) in the ancient world, before we acquire reliable evidence for their vercity.[5]

By evoking the light of Genesis, the note underpins the revelatory aspect of photography as a method that can manipulate a divine natural element. The 'wondrous rumours' mentioned here invoke the debate that had erupted around the infamous forger Konstantinos Simonides' claim that photography was known to the Greeks many centuries before its invention by Daguerre. Simonides had presented a partially manipulated manuscript, dated 1498, of an authentic treatise on icon painting (*Ερμηνεία της ζωγραφικής τέχνης*) written by the monk Dionysios of Fourna into which he had interpolated a chapter on the *heliotype* process, allegedly invented by the iconographer Manuel Panselinos.[6] In an attempt to create confusion, Simonides had offered different versions of the mysterious 'inventor', the earliest dated to AD 518. As expected, the early date prompted a frenzy around the assumption that photography was already known in late antiquity. Those deceived by Simonides, and they were quite a few, relished the thought that photography, among other scientific inventions also presented by him as Greek,[7] was an ingenious idea conceived by their ancestors. At the same time, they expressed indignation at the fact that those not convinced by Simonides' claims sought to prove him wrong; their effrontery in doubting their illustrious ancestors' achievements and conceding national treasures to the French, when they should be celebrated in the country that invented them, was, in effect, considered treason. A committee assembled by the Ministry of Education in December 1848 ruled positively on the authenticity of at least some of Simonides' manuscripts; the newspaper *Αιών* thanked the committee's members for proving that 'our fatherland, despite the robbery of its treasures committed by foreigners, can still present priceless heirlooms.'[8]

5 Anon, 'Εικόνες δια νέας φωτογραφικής μεθόδου', *Ευτέρπη* 26 (15.09.1848) 47.

6 A. Papadopoulo-Kerameus gives convincing evidence that Dionysios of Fourna lived in the early eighteenth century, and Panselinos in the early sixteenth. Simonides eventually published Dionysios' manuscript in 1853, but in the years prior to that worked tirelessly at disseminating the ideas contained in it. Panselinos' *heliotype* invention had already been mentioned in his manuscripts *Συμαΐς* and *Βυζαντίς* (A. Papadopoulo-Kerameus, 'Introduction' to Denys de Fourna, *Manuel d' Iconographie Chrétienne* (St Petersburg 1909) ε΄- κγ΄.

7 Lilia Diamantopoulou singles out the telescope, which Simonides 'consciously selects [as] a prestigious object of first-class scientific value' and the diving bell, a contraption 'consist[ing] of mirrors and other things': 'Technologies "Made in Greece": Konstantinos Simonides' steampunk inventions through the looking-glass', in M. Gerolemou and L. Diamantopoulou (eds), *Mirrors and Mirroring from Antiquity to the Early Modern Period* (London 2000) 189-97 (190). One could argue that both inventions, along with the *heliotype*, were perhaps chosen by Simonides precisely because they could be linked to constitutive elements of Greek nature: light and sea.

8 *Αιών*, 929 (01.01.1849) 2. See also a letter published in *Ελπίς* 484 (07.10. 1848) 1953-4, arguing against the scepticism expressed in *Ευτέρπη* over photography's ancient origins.

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Alexandros Rizos Rangavis, an eminent scholar and Professor of Archaeology at the University of Athens, had inspected Simonides' manuscript and expressed doubts as to its authenticity.[9] Reading Simonides' account hand in hand with Daguerre's instruction manual, Rangavis easily discovered the source of the former's proclamations. From the pages of the journal *Πανδώρα*, he refuted the pseudo-scientific process described by Dionysios, laughing off the plant- and seashell-based solutions which Simonides claimed were used by Panselinos for sensitizing the (tin) plates instead of the iodine or bromide solutions devised by early photographic pioneers. His suspicion that *heliotype* was a figment of Simonides' imagination was corroborated by the blatant absence of any mention of it in a French edition of that same manuscript by Adolphe-Napoléon Didron and Paul Durand a few years earlier.[10] Simonides had argued that the two French scholars had deliberately omitted the passage on *heliotype* to avoid challenging the novelty of Daguerre's technique.

Despite Rangavis' intervention, the feud between the supporters and adversaries of Simonides went on for several years, as can be seen by numerous newspaper articles devoted to the subject. Even if it lacked substance or supporting scientific evidence the debate around the *heliotype* shows the national importance attached to it. It was an attempt to reinvent, and in a sense, rewrite the nation's present by means of adjusting its past. As Nikitas Siniossoglou puts it, 'the forged Simonidean account of the past forces its way into our experience of the present. A forged past is present nonetheless.'[11] For Simonides' supporters, photography was – naturally – an invention of the Greeks, precisely because it involved light: Simonides used the term *heliotype*, a term resembling that offered by Niépce, to draw particular attention to its Greek origin. Sunlight, a natural element working hand in hand with chemical solutions in fixing the image, was an already heavily charged concept synonymous with spirit, epiphany, divine providence, knowledge, and culture, and a Greek element at that.[12] If photography were a sixth-century Greek invention, the nation's present would be illuminated by its glorious light.

Observing the Greek landscape

If in the mid-nineteenth century Greek light signified the ancient spirit of knowledge, it had not yet been linked with specificities of landscape or contextualized within Greek topography. This would occur at the turn of the century in the writings of Periklis

9 A. Rizos Rangavis, 'Σιμωνίδου χειρόγραφα', *Πανδώρα* 23 (February 1851) 553-5.

10 See M. Mitsou, 'Η επινόηση της φιλολογίας. Ένας πλαστογράφος, ο Κωνσταντίνος Σιμωνίδης, στην Αθήνα (1847-1850), *Κονδυλοφόρος* 14 (2015) 39-67 (53).

11 N. Siniossoglou, 'Constantine Simonides and philosophy' in A.E. Müller, A. Katsakiori Rankl, L. Diamantopoulou and C. Gastgeber (eds), *Die getäuschte Wissenschaft: Ein Genie betrügt Europa – Konstantinos Simonides*, ed. (Vienna 2017) 53-67 (64).

12 For the conceptualization of light in ancient Greek texts see M. Christopoulos, E. Karakantza, and O. Levaniouk (eds.), *Light and Darkness in Ancient Greek Myth and Religion* (Lanham MD 2010).

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Yannopoulos (1869-1910), the eccentric champion of Greek art, who took intellectual life in the Greek capital by storm, inundating the public with passionate essays until his suicide. At the beginning of the new century Yannopoulos published two articles in which he advocated art of a distinctive Greek character, inspired by the country's landscape. In the first of these, 'Η ελληνική γραμμή' ('The Hellenic line') (1901), Yannopoulos maintained, citing the columns in ancient temples and Byzantine churches as examples, that curves, as opposed to straight lines, were the authentic Greek forms which should be imitated by today's artists. Similarly, in 'Το ελληνικόν χρώμα' (Hellenic colour) (1904) he singled out colours seen as Greek, such as blue, silver and gold, calling for their use in painting and architecture. Veering into the polemical in this second essay, he reproached Greek painters for imitating their Western European peers working in faintly-lit ateliers in dull colours. Greek painters, Yannopoulos argued, should work in broad daylight that amplifies brightness of colours; this brightness, the 'ethereality' of forms, should be brought into their art.[13]

Yannopoulos' ideas seem to stem from observation rather than research; to a large extent, his arguments originate in his own experience, relishing the Greek landscape in daily excursions. He opens both essays urging readers to climb the hills of Attica and take in the scenery from a high vantage point, preferably St Demetrios chapel beneath the Acropolis, to watch, and watch closely, until the sight is imprinted on their minds:

> Go there, either during the dry, cloudless, rosy break of dawn, or in a light-soaked afternoon, or, even better, three hours before sunset, when everything is read more clearly and simply by the uninitiated eye. Stay put for two, three, four, five hours. There's no harm in that just for once. It is so beautiful, so pleasurable to sit on the ground of the motherland and caress the blades of grass and the pretty stones, with which one is united. Sit down without a thought, without a purpose; let your soul relish those recreative views and let your brain photograph in its darkroom hills, mountains, shores, waters, smoke, colours, whatever is in sight.[14]

Yannopoulos does not promote photography as a method; he champions art created by the human hand rather than technological automation. Despite not advocating photography as a technology, he does use the analogy of the camera and its mechanisms to describe the workings of the brain. He parallels forming visual impressions with 'exposures', the length of time needed for light to work on the sensitized plate. This analogy allows him to ponder further on observation as a prolonged learning method and to single out different qualities of looking: 'Let your eyes follow your fingers caressing the ground,' he instructs his readers, encouraging

13 A. Danos, 'The culmination of aesthetic and artistic discourse in nineteenth-century Greece: Periklis Yannopoulos and Nikolaos Gyzis', *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 20.1 (May 2002) 75-112.

14 P. Yannopoulos, 'Η ελληνική γραμμή' in *Άπαντα*, ed. D. Lazoyiorgou-Ellinikou (Athens 1993) 18 (essay first published in the journal *Ανατολή* in May 1901).

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them to employ senses beyond sight. 'Watch more carefully,' he continues, obsessively repeating the verb *observe* in the imperative (παρατηρήστε). All details should come into focus: stones and rocky mountains, waters, veins running through a hill and undulations in the contours of mountains in the far distance. Even without the camera, the eye follows closely the world's subtle nuances to conjure copies of physical objects illuminated by the light.

Yannopoulos evokes early photographic processes; he refers to the camera as a *darkroom* (σκοτεινός θάλαμος). The daguerreotype process was essentially a method of fixing the image on the walls of the camera obscura, by furnishing it with a chemically sensitized plate. At the time of writing (1901), the automatic compact camera, patented by Kodak in 1888, was already being used widely in Europe and North America, but Yannopoulos seems to have in mind the heavy equipment of the daguerreotype method, obviously linked with the camera obscura, a device often used by painters.[15] In 'Hellenic colour' he describes Western painting, adjusted to the lack of light, in terms of that method: 'The grandest painter renders their atelier a dark photographic room and leaves a tiny hole in the ceiling. His image is Hades and only a strip of face appears to be illuminated, a bit of cheek, one eye, the line of nose.'[16] Thinking of (and refuting) the photographic camera as the advanced version of the camera obscura, which let in light through a miniscule opening, Yannopoulos rejects the techniques of Western art: chiaroscuro, used by the likes of Caravaggio and Rembrandt, seems to be at the core of his description. These partly-lit faces, which viewers admire in European museums, do not belong to the scope of Greek art, Yannopoulos argues, calling for the cataclysmic storming of light, a light, we may add, so intense it would destroy the photographic plate. Yannopoulos wonders on the paradox; while light is essential in understanding form in physical objects, artists are instructed to turn their back on it:

> while for all things in this world, one tells another when they want to see something, bring in light, open the window, open your eyes, come close to see, to discern, for Painting you need to let the clouds in, close the windows, dim the lights, move backward, let your lamp be switched off.[17]

15 Yannopoulos mentions the process of painting with the camera obscura elsewhere in the same essay: 'Take a big pot of yoghurt-like semolina, throw in all sorts of colours, mix them up frantically and throw this concoction at the face of the first passer-by you come across on the street; grab him, shove him into the darkroom, dig a hole on the wall wherever you please, illuminate him as you please and paint him. It is only then you can claim in Greece that you *painted from nature* and achieved this result'. ('Το ελληνικόν χρώμα', *Άπαντα*, 54, essay first published in newspaper *Το Άστυ* in 1904). On looking through the camera obscura see J. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: on vision and modernity in the nineteenth century* (Cambridge MA 1992) 25-66.

16 P. Yannopoulos, 'Το ελληνικόν χρώμα', 62.

17 'Το ελληνικόν χρώμα', 56.

https://doi.org/10.1017/byz.2024.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Light for Yannopoulos signifies revelation; it leads to knowledge and stands at the heart of the nation's spiritual awakening, views he develops further in the extended essay 'New spirit' (1906). But this awakening always bears the mark of the aesthetic.[18] Yannopoulos' ideas originate in the specificities of Greek light, particularly the broad Attic light, allowing for limpid figures to be revealed before the viewer's eyes.[19] His attention to the act of seeing, to the physicality of diverting one's eyes to particular aspects of the landscape signals a shift in the parameters of perception, offering an enriched visual experience.

Greek light, shine upon us

Yannopoulos' views on the function of light, his unprecedented emphasis on the gaze, and the unexpected references he makes to the photographic camera constitute an important link in understanding the ways in which Greek light became aestheticized in the context of photography in the early twentieth century. Similar views associating the uniqueness of Greek light with Greek topography were expressed by Alexandros Filadelfeus, Chief of the Antiquities Ephorate in Athens. Describing the capital's climate in the *Guide to Ancient, Medieval and Modern Monuments of Athens* he wrote:

> The divine light, which illuminates the city, renders even the most mundane objects clear and discernible, so that the eye relishes the shine and clarity of lines as if standing in front of a freshly painted work. Even the finest folds of the mountains are visible to the naked eye, while in the night the starry sky of Attica charms the soul, filling it with bliss and pleasure.[20]

Like Yannopoulos, Filadelfeus emphasized the uniqueness of Greek light, equating it with clarity of vision and, by association, sharpness in perception. It is a kind of light that brings together connotations of the ancient past (implicit in the word 'divine') with an awareness of the gaze in the present circumstances, as an affirmation of the here and now. In 1936 Filadelfeus would explicitly link these views with photography, writing in the introduction to a volume of photographs by Antonius Oikonomidis:

> In no other country in the world can such beautiful images be taken as in Greece... Indeed the Greek light is a unique element... It is the same light that created these geniuses that so enthusiastically engaged in anything Great, Beautiful and True. We should not be surprised at the miracles that can be created by a photographer's artistry, a great lover of the darkroom who knows how to accommodate the best part of this divine gift of immortal Greece.[21]

18 A. Leontis, *Topographies of Hellenism: mapping the homeland* (Ithaca NY 1995) 85-9.

19 See E. Gazi, G. Giannakopoulos, and K. Papari, 'Rethinking Hellenism: Greek intellectuals between nation and empire, 1890-1930', *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 39.1 (May 2021) 163-89 (172).

20 A. Filadelfeus, *Οδηγός των αρχαίων, μεσαιωνικών και νεωτέρων μνημείων των Αθηνών* (Athens: n.d.) 360.

21 Quoted in Y. Stathatos, 'Η επινόηση του ελληνικού τοπίου', in I. Papaioannou (ed.), *Η ελληνική φωτογραφία και η φωτογραφία στην Ελλάδα* (Athens 2013) 114-44 (132).

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Bathed in sunlight, perceived both as divine spirit and an element of landscape experienced through the senses, Greece was defined by Filadelfeus as the optimum setting for taking pictures. As Chief of Ephorate for Antiquities Filadelfeus had given permission in 1925 to the photographer Elli Sougioultzoglou-Seraidari, operating under the name Nelly's, to photograph the Russian dancer Mona Paiva nude on the Acropolis.[22] The story of this iconic photoshoot is well known: Filadelfeus came in for criticism from those who condemned the dancer's nudity at the ancient temple as an act of sacrilege.[23] In reality, however, his consent to the photographer's project was in harmony with views already in wide circulation. Nelly's images brought together the physicality of the naked body with elements of landscape that had already been conceptualized as fundamental in Greek identity formation: the ancient temple, the view of the modern city below, and, most importantly, the light – the light as a distinctive, overarching force of past and present, uniting the spirit of the ancient years with contemporary sights. In an article published in the newspaper *Εστία* in defence of Nelly's project, the author Pavlos Nirvanas emphasized these elements:

> I now imagine – some had the pleasure of seeing this with their own eyes – on the one hand the beautiful priestess, loosening her zone in front of Apollo and shedding the shrouds covering her divine nudity and to bathe in his light – according to one description – the body of a statue and a rosy skin, like the smiles of Dawn.[24]

Absent from the photoshoot, but having heard detailed descriptions of it, Nirvanas, an experienced user of the camera,[25] allowed himself to make a mental photograph of the dancer, the light and the ancient temple. Invoking classical references, he deliberately led the reader into oscillating between present and past, the light felt on one's skin, illuminating the ephemeral beauty of the dancer's body and, on the other, Apollo's light, the light associated with transcendental knowledge. Nirvanas signaled the act of photographing as a heightened awareness of looking; perceiving the landscape as contemporary, but also as a permanent fixture since ancient times, divine and immortal.[26]

22 Nelly's, *Αυτοπροσωπογραφία*, ed. E. Ch. Kasdaglis (Athens 1989) 100.

23 M. Karali, 'Nelly's: τα γυμνά της Ακρόπολης και η «κουλτούρα του γυμνού» στην Ελλάδα του Μεσοπολέμου, in P. Petsini and Y. Stathatos *Φωτογραφία και συλλογικές ταυτότητες* (Athens 2021) 131-58. See also K. Zacharia, 'Nelly's iconography of Greece', in Carabott, Hamilakis, and Papargyriou *Camera Graeca* (Farnham 2015), 233-56.

24 Nelly's, *Αυτοπροσωπογραφία*, 103.

25 Nirvanas is the first to have persuaded the author Alexandros Papadiamandis to sit for a photographic portrait in 1906: E. Papargyriou, 'Το φωτογραφικό πορτραίτο του συγγραφέα', *Νέα Εστία* 1830 (February 2010), 339-59.

26 On the physicality of photographing light on ancient monuments see Carabott, Hamilakis and Papargyriou, *Camera Graeca*, 4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/byz.2024.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Eleni Papargyriou is Assistant Professor in Modern Greek Literary Studies at the University of Patras. She has published the monograph Reading Games in the Greek Novel *(Legenda 2011) and co-edited the volumes* Camera Graeca: photographs, narratives, materialities (2015) *and* Greece in British Women's Literary Imagination 1913-2013 (2017), and *also the special issues* Cavafy Pop: readings of C.P. Cavafy in popular culture (2015) *and* '1821': mediation, reception, archive *(2021). Her research interests focus on European and Greek modernism, intercultural literary relations, photography and literature and, more recently, digital literary studies. She is Principal Co-Editor of the peer-reviewed* Journal of Greek Media and Culture.

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