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The Loss of the Greek Literary Society of Istanbul, the *Sylogos*, and Mapping as a Counter-Act

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The destruction and erasure of the non-Muslim presence in the urban fabric of Istanbul over the last century or more occurred at various levels, ranging from the departure or expulsion of individuals to the destruction of buildings and neighborhoods and the dismantling of institutional bodies.¹ This process, involving a multitude of actors operating at different scales, was largely driven by a common underlying motive: the desire to create a nation-state with a homogeneous national identity and culture, one defined by a single language, a single religion, and Turkified economic systems.² Several factors intensified the push for homogeneous populations on both shores of the Aegean, including the rising nationalist ambitions of Turks and Greeks after the 1908 Young Turk Revolution, the decade of wars from the 1910s to early 1920s, the Allied occupation of Istanbul following World War I, and the anti-minority policies of the period's new nation-states. Collectively, these factors led to the transformation and homogenization of urban Istanbul's economic, cultural, and intellectual landscapes. An illustrative example of this transformation is the Greek Literary Society of Istanbul (Ο ἐν Κωνσταντινουπόλει Ἑλληνικὸς Φιλολογικὸς Σύλλογος), known as the *Sylogos* (1861–1923). The *Sylogos*'s closure by the new republican administration in response to nationalist tensions, along with the confiscation of its properties, building, archive, and library, marked an early watershed in the erasure of Istanbul's non-Muslim—particularly Greek Orthodox—presence. This essay outlines this erasure and proposes a counter-effort to preserve the *Sylogos*'s legacy within modern scholarship.

Founded in 1861, the *Sylogos* operated as a literary society and intellectual hub in Beyoğlu (Pera), serving Istanbul's cosmopolitan intellectual life for over six decades and contributing to Pera's diverse cultural fabric. Its mission was to promote the education of Greek youth within the Ottoman Empire and to act as a focal point for an international scholarly network.³ Its members were a diverse group, ranging from doctors and lawyers to teachers and tradesmen.

Initially lacking a permanent home, the *Sylogos* met in members' residences and shared spaces with other contemporary institutions. After the devastating 1870 Pera fire, when the institution was restructured, a new building (fig. 1) was constructed in the Kalyon-

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1 For a discussion of early republican sectarian and anti-cosmopolitan discourse in the urban context of Istanbul, see Ümit Fırat Açıkgöz, "Global Locality, National Modernity: Negotiating Urban Transformation in Early Republican Istanbul (1923–1949)" (PhD diss., Rice University, 2018), 73–77. Although Istanbul, and particularly the Beyoğlu area, still preserves the remnants of its Greek Orthodox culture to a certain extent, notably through its buildings, schools, and churches, the decline is clear from the situation in the late nineteenth century, when the Greek community was highly visible in many aspects of public life, with Greek widely used in shop signs, newspapers, books, and journals and frequently heard on the streets.

2 Ayhan Aktar, "Homogenizing the Nation, Turkifying the Economy: The Turkish Experience of Population Exchange Reconsidered," in *Crossing the Aegean: An Appraisal of the 1923 Compulsory Population Exchange Between Greece and Turkey*, ed. Renée Hirschon (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003), 79–96.

3 Firuzan Melike Sümertaş, "From Antiquarianism to Urban Archaeology: Transformation of Research on Old Istanbul in the Nineteenth Century" (PhD diss., Boğaziçi University, 2021).



cukulluğu area, on Topçular Street (fig. 2),⁴ by the two architect members of the institution, Z. Kleanthis and K. A. Parigoris.⁵ The imposing facade of the two-story structure, with its large pediment and three classical columns, was designed in a neo-classical style, as was fairly common among the educational and secular institutions of the late nineteenth century.

The revitalization of the *Sylogos* after 1870 spurred its scholarly activities. Focused on promoting research, the *Sylogos* built a substantial book collection from its early days, one it rapidly expanded through acquisitions, donations, and the incorporation of publications by its members. By one estimate, the library held around twenty thousand books and hundreds of manuscripts. Each book added to the collection was stamped with the *Sylogos* seal (fig. 3), a mark that continues to help trace items from the dispersed library today. In some of the surviving books, there is also a sticker on the book covers (fig. 4). Although the library had been opened to the public a few months before the fire, the establishment of a dedicated building allowed the library and reading room to be fully institutionalized. The building also became a bustling hub of scholarly activity, hosting member meetings, presentations, public talks, and lectures, which turned it into a well-frequented center for intellectual exchange.⁶

The growth of these activities, but mainly of the reading room and the book collection, required additional space, and a new floor was added to the building by the famous architect Perikles Photiades and Kleanthis Ivraki. The permission for the construction, which included significant repairs and redecorations along with the addition of a new floor, was granted

Figure 1: The Empty Syllagos Building. The third floor was added during the renovations of the late 1910s. *Cpolitian.gr*, accessed December 17, 2024, <https://www.cpolitian.gr/ελληνικός-φιλολογικός-σύλλογος/>.

Figure 2: Detail from *Plan d'assurance de Constantinople. Vol. II - Péra & Galata. No: 39, 1905*, map, 63 x 59 cm, Pera and Galata collection, APLGDPEGA39, Salt Research.

4 The building plot, which originally belonged to the Sultan Bayezid Han waqf, was secured by lease. It was the site of a burned-down store owned by several Armenian families, including the famous Düzoğlu family from the Imperial Mint. The store was bought by Konstantinos Karapanos, president of the Syllagos, who had the building registered in his name on Ramazan 16, 1288 / November 29, 1871; Presidential Ottoman Archives (BOA), İAZN 119/17.

5 *Syngamma Periodikon* 7 (1872–1873): 234 (meeting no. 333, August 9, 1872).

6 In this respect, its role was in many ways comparable to that of the Istanbul Research Institute (IAE) and Koç University Research Center for Anatolian Civilizations (ANAMED) in Beyoğlu today.

Figure 3: The *Sylogos* seal. (Κανονισμός του εν Κωνσταντινούπολει Ελληνικού Φιλολογικού Συλλόγου ιδρυθέντος τω 1861. Κωνσταντινούπολει: Ι. Παλλαμάρι, 1896). *Medusa Online Library*, accessed December 17, 2024, <https://medusa.libver.gr/>.

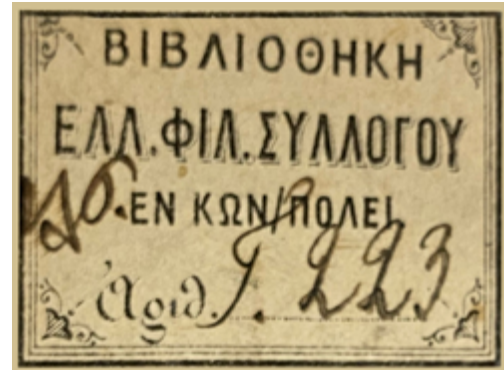


Figure 4: The *Sylogos* library label, National Library of Turkey, Ankara.

in 1915. The work, including repairs, was completed in 1920, a timeframe which serves as a testament to the *Sylogos*'s relative prosperity, even amid the challenges of wartime.

Throughout its long existence, the *Sylogos* maintained a degree of autonomy, partly due to its members' connections with the Ottoman administration, particularly with Sultan Abdülhamid II.⁷ However, after the 1908 Young Turk Revolution, the Committee of Union and Progress imposed policies targeting non-Muslim communities, marking the beginning of the *Sylogos*'s decline. In 1909, the institution faced heavy property taxation, particularly by the Beyoğlu/Pera municipality. Authorities claimed that the organization's headquarters were located on land belonging to the Sultan Bayezid Han waqf, thereby requiring the *Sylogos* to pay tax. The *Sylogos*, however, argued that although the building was registered under the name of Konstantin Karapanos, it was operated by a non-profit organization dedicated to public education and the common good. From correspondence with the Ottoman state and from Minas Afthentopoulos's later speech at the institution, it is evident that, unable to pay the tax, the *Sylogos* saw its furniture and books confiscated and auctioned off.

The *Sylogos*'s last decade was marked by the Balkan Wars, World War I, and the subsequent Greco-Turkish War, which stirred strong nationalist sentiments in Istanbul and among the *Sylogos* members. These conflicts fostered support for the Greek irredentist Megali Idea (Μεγάλη Ιδέα, "Great Ideal") among the organization's members, despite official bans on political discussions within its walls. Figures like Afthentopoulos gave speeches infused with nationalist themes, signaling a shift toward Greek irredentism and the vision of Constantinople's "Greekness."⁸ The *Sylogos* and its leadership echoed Venizelist discourse, with Eleftherios Venizelos named as the honorary president in December 1918.

In its later years, the organization even hosted gatherings of local Venizelist groups, which represented the Greek elite in Istanbul and openly supported irredentist ideals. The Megali Idea became a focal topic in *Sylogos* lectures, and members of the Greek military mission and even the high commissioner of Greece in Istanbul attended these meetings. This overt alignment with Venizelism, however, put the institution in direct opposition to the Turkish nationalist movement, which grew as the war concluded. When the Ankara government took control, it saw the *Sylogos* as a pro-Greek entity that undermined the new republic, particularly because of its members' connections to the Greek army and involvement in funerals for Greek officers who had died in Anatolia. The Turkish authorities closed the *Sylogos* in 1923, confiscating its building, library, and archive. This marked the end of the *Sylogos* under Turkish rule, and its fate remains emblematic of the wider challenges faced by Greeks in Istanbul in the early republican period.

7 Firuzan Melike Sümertaş, "Dr. Alexandros G. Paspatis'ten Dersaadet Rum Cemiyet-i Edebiyesi'ne: İstanbul'un Kara Surları Hakkında Bir Çalışma," *Toplumsal Tarih*, no. 272 (2016): 42–50; Sümertaş, "From Antiquarianism to Urban Archaeology," 241–308.

8 Firuzan Melike Sümertaş, "The Loss of the Greek Literary Society in Constantinople: The Dismantling of an Institution, Displacement of a Library, and Dissolution of an Intellectual Hub," *Turkish Historical Review* 14, no. 2–3 (2023): 224–251, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18775462-bja10062>. See also Artemis Papatheodorou, "The Hellenic Literary Society at Constantinople between Ottomanism and Greek Irredentism," *YILLIK: Annual of Istanbul Studies* 4 (2022): 115–119.

130 The closure of the *Sylogos* by the new republican government in response to the pro-nationalist activism at the institution was a significant step in the homogenization of the intellectual environment of the new republic.⁹ The confiscation of its archive, library, and building resulted in the loss of six decades of accumulated knowledge in many different scientific fields, from physics, chemistry, and hygiene to psychology, history, and classical and modern philology. It also resulted in the dissolution of the scholarly network that had gathered around the institution, which could be viewed as the loss of “cultural and social capital.”¹⁰

The archive of the institution is lost,¹¹ the library is dispersed in different public libraries in Ankara,¹² and the building no longer exists. Shortly after it was confiscated, the building was handed over to the Republican People’s Party and repurposed as a youth center. Later, it served several public institutions, suffered looting during the pogrom of September 6–7, 1955, and ultimately collapsed in 1965. Today, where the building once stood in Beyoğlu, Kalyoncukulluğu, there is not just an empty space but a parking lot with its own temporary enclosed structure. This area, once a hub of cultural and intellectual life, has been reduced to a shelter—a void in both the literal and historical sense.

The dispossession of the *Sylogos* in the early years of the republic can be seen as a precursor to the broader erasure of Greek Orthodox culture, especially in Beyoğlu, where the Greek presence had grown significantly in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The *Sylogos* building—or the void that now marks its absence—lies just above Tarlabaşı Boulevard, once a narrow street within the densely populated area of Beyoğlu. Over the past century, the gradual loss of the *Sylogos* building was part of a broader transformation that culminated in the large-scale Tarlabaşı demolitions of 1986–1989, and further demolitions in the late 2010s.

Historic milestones like the compulsory population exchange, the property tax of the 1940s, the 1955 pogrom (Σεπτεμβριανά, or September Events), and the Turkish government’s unilateral expulsion of Greek citizens in 1964 all significantly affected the Beyoğlu (or Pera) area. With these events, it lost much of its identity as a Greek neighborhood, a shift that began with the loss of prominent institutions like the *Sylogos*.

The destruction of the *Sylogos*’s physical and institutional presence, along with the loss of its archives and the dispersal of its library, has left us without direct access to one of the most vibrant intellectual hubs of late nineteenth-century Ottoman Istanbul and hence the scholarship that had gathered around it. What remains available to researchers today provides only a faint glimpse into the original collection’s scale, depth, and scholarly value.

To reconstruct the memory, history, and intellectual framework of the *Sylogos*, there are a few significant sources. Foremost among them is the institution’s journal, *Syngramma Periodikon*, which documented its six-decade existence over thirty-four volumes, including supplements, off-prints, and maps. Each volume contained lists of honorary, corresponding, and regular members, as well as records of donors at various levels.¹³ Weekly meeting minutes detailed the attendees present and the discussions and presentations held there. The journal also featured articles and papers presented by members or submitted by correspondents, capturing a wealth of intellectual exchange. Additionally, it includes insights into the institution’s interactions with the Ottoman state and some records of its financial affairs, offering a precious window into its operations and influence. The journal, now an

9 See Dimitris Kamouzis, *Greeks in Turkey: Elite Nationalism and Minority Politics in Late Ottoman and Early Republican Istanbul* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

10 Sümertaş, “The Loss of the Greek Literary Society in Constantinople.”

11 The archive is known to have been confiscated along with the library; however, the whereabouts of the archival material is a mystery. Only three notebooks with the minutes of the *Sylogos* meetings are accessible, at the National Library (Milli Kütüphane) in Ankara. See Sümertaş “The Loss of the Greek Literary Society in Constantinople.”

12 The Türk Tarih Kurumu Library is one of the main addresses. See Sümertaş, “The Loss of the Greek Literary Society in Constantinople,” and Elçin Macar “İstanbul’dan Ankara’ya: İstanbul Helen Edebiyat Cemiyeti (Sylogos) Kütüphanesi’nin İzinde,” *İstanbul Ticaret Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 12, no. 23 (2103): 144.

13 As part of the İstanbulluc Collaborative (www.istanpolis.org), we are working on gathering a database of the members of the *Sylogos*, in addition to the collaborative’s other projects.

artifact and a domain of knowledge, serves as a conduit for the accumulated body of knowledge sustained within the institution, even decades after its closure.

The surviving part of the *Syllogos*'s book collection, as another set of material remnants of the institution, is now housed mostly in Ankara. Although a substantial number of books, approximately six thousand volumes, are accessible through the Türk Tarih Kurumu collection (where they are listed as donations from the İstanbul Rum Edebiyat Derneği),¹⁴ researchers may also encounter volumes bearing the *Syllogos*'s seal at other libraries, such as the National Library.

Besides Ankara, today, traces of the *Syllogos* live on across various other locales: approximately eighty universities worldwide preserve copies of the *Syllogos* journal. In locations like Athens, particularly at institutions such as the Center for Asia Minor Studies, complete collections of the publication are accessible, alongside additional archival materials associated with figures linked to the institution. Among them is Pericles Photiades, the prominent late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century architect of Istanbul. Not only did he design the final significant renovation of the institution's building, he also actively participated in *Syllogos* activities shortly before its closure. His correspondence with the institution offers us tangible remnants of the *Syllogos*'s past, such as letterheads featuring the institution's address and logo. Additionally, the Istanbul Research Institute has preserved photographs of archaeological studies by the *Syllogos*, including sketches of inscriptions from Istanbul's Land Walls, within the Semavi Eyice Library collection.¹⁵

Similar to the Photiades archive, the Ottoman archives in Istanbul also hold various correspondence and other documents related to the institution. Notably, the only available description of the building's interior comes from a tax document, which records the number of rooms and windows yet provides no floor plan or other visual representation. A striking aspect of the *Syllogos* as an institution is the scarcity of photographic documentation; apart from a few images of its facade, there is minimal visual record of the interior.¹⁶ Interestingly, the institution was established and existed during a time when photography became an integral part of urban life in Istanbul. From monumental structures and city panoramas to portraits of both prominent figures and ordinary citizens, the number of photographs taken and published grew exponentially toward the end of the century. Publications of this period increasingly featured photographs as part of their design and content, marking a shift in visual culture.¹⁷ However, *Syngamma Periodikon*, aside from special issues contains no photographs.

These scattered remnants of the *Syllogos*'s legacy are mere fragments of a vast, thousand-piece puzzle, lacking the cohesion necessary to fully preserve the memory and heritage of one of late Ottoman Istanbul's most influential institutions. As David Lowenthal notes, "The supreme merit of tangible remains is the ready access they afford to the past's ubiquitous traces."¹⁸ Bereft of such tangible remains, we are left with the task of reconstructing the memory of this vital institution ourselves and making it accessible for contemporary engagement.¹⁹

14 See the donators page on the Türk Tarih Kurumu website at <https://kutuphane.ttk.gov.tr/donators>.

15 For a brief outline of the content of this material, which is not yet open to researchers, see Hüseyin Sami Öztürk, "Hellenikos Philologikos Syllogos Yazıtlar Corpus'u," *Aktüel Arkeoloji*, no. 44 (2015): 8–9; Hüseyin Sami Öztürk "Konstantinopolis (İstanbul) Sur ve Kule Yazıtları," *İstanbul Araştırmaları Yıllığı* 5 (2016): 1–34; Hüseyin Sami Öztürk and Bülent Öztürk, "İstanbul Araştırmaları Enstitüsü, Hellenikos Philologikos Syllogos Yazıtlar Corpusu: İstanbul'dan Antik Dönem Yazıtları," *İstanbul Araştırmaları Yıllığı* 4 (2015): 7–26.

16 Since the building itself was not located on the main street of the Grand Rue de Pera, but rather on a narrow street called Topçular (today, Topçekenler), it was difficult to get a proper, oblique-angle representation of the façade of the building. Accordingly, the only two photos that reveal the phases of the building before and after the addition of a new floor are from the same angle.

17 For the role of photography in the printed journals of the late Ottoman Empire, see Ahmet A. Ersoy, "Ottomans and the Kodak Galaxy: Archiving Everyday Life and Historical Space in Ottoman Illustrated Journals," *History of Photography* 40, no. 3 (2016): 330–357, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2016.1215401>.

18 David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country – Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 389.

19 My own efforts in this regard were partly inspired by the *Hayal-et* exhibition in Istanbul in 2010. The wordplay in the exhibition's title suggests imagining the city both with its historical structures still alive and with them as "ghosts," features of the past remembered but no longer tangible today except as spectral warnings to those involved in Istanbul's

132 This paper proposes an online map as both an instructional and an analytical tool, a (virtual) object of knowledge, to first compile and transmit but also to spatialize the surviving traces of the *Sylogos*.²⁰ Such digital mapping efforts represent “a significant methodological improvement for the field, a means to communicate both evidence and hypotheses while potentially adhering more closely to the complexities, inconclusiveness, and even messiness (or fuzziness) of the surviving evidence.”²¹ Accordingly, through this (ongoing) digital mapping project, my aim is to revive, albeit virtually, the interconnected world of the *Sylogos*, the network surrounding it, and the broad geographical reach of its scholarly influence. Mapping these dispersed remnants offers insights into the structure and influence of the *Sylogos* by allowing us to track its tangible imprints.

While mapping serves primarily as a spatial tool to anchor information and historical remnants to specific coordinates, it also functions as a visualization tool, simplifying the display and communication of complex networks and diverse modes of information. With current technology, we can engage with these layers in ways that enhance research accessibility and interactivity.

This digital mapping project serves as a virtual repository of layered information about the *Sylogos*'s legacy: the extent of its scholarship through its connections with various institutions and individuals, the libraries that preserve its journals, and more. This open-source map not only supports research on the *Sylogos* but also strives to perpetuate the institution's intellectual impact, helping to sustain its global reach and connectivity in a modern context.

urban construction market and its rampant demand for reconstruction. Cem Kozar, Işıl Ünal, and Turgut Saner, eds., *Hayal-et Yapılar* (Istanbul: PATTU Mimarlık, Araştırma, Tasarım, 2010).

20 “Mapping the Sylogos,” İstanİóluc, <https://www.istanpolis.org/projects/sylogos>.

21 Sean T. Perrone, Adam Franklin-Lyons, David Gary Shaw, and Jesse W. Torgerson, “Visualization, Mapping, and the History of Mobility in the Middle Ages,” *The Historian* 84, no. 3 (2022): 506, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00182370.2023.2262868>.