Vagrant “Gypsies” and Respectable Greeks: A defining moment in early Greek-Melbourne, 1897–1900

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Well known in Australian history are the arrivals of Greeks. Less acknowledged are the attempts of Greeks to define themselves within the contours of the Australian nation and the implications of such endeavours. In 1898, a group of “Greek Gypsies” arrived in South Australia. Coincidentally their arrival coincided with the establishment of the Greek community of Melbourne and the emergent politics of Australian nation-building. As a group of semi-nomadic, questionably “Greek” migrants they were treated in contradictory ways. They received charitable assistance from some settlers while others — predominantly immigration restrictionists and the Greek-Melbournians — regarded them as a burden to colonial progress. How and why the Greek community of Melbourne chose to discredit these people was linked to the colonial ideal of respectability, which fostered the social traits of independence and permanent settlement. Positioning themselves within the attainable confines of respectability vindicated the Greeks of Melbourne as valued settlers.

Introduction

Today the Greek-Australian population of Melbourne is well established in the Australian multicultural psyche. It is curious to note then, that the attempts of early Greek-Melbournians to define themselves during the embryonic stages of Australian nation-building and the implications of such endeavours, have received only marginal attention by historians. For the most part, narratives of early Greek migration have tended to focus on Greek-Australian experiences of adversity, achievement or contribution (Tamis, 2005:117–120; Doumanis, 1999:58–64; Tounis, 1975:18–24). However as Catherine Dewhirst illustrates in her work on how Italians collaborated with whiteness, “ethnic group experience is integral to Australian history” and should not be treated as a mere “appendage for separate treatment in Australian historiography”. Although the history of Greeks in Australia has attracted multidisciplinary interest,
the integration of their stories into the meta-narrative of Australian nation-building, particularly prior to 1901, has not received specific attention by historians. Thus, the history of how Greek people themselves intersected with the politics of respectability and immigration restriction in the immediate years before and after Federation has not received the critical traction that has been recently experienced by insightful works on Italian-Australia and Chinese-Australia (Dewhirst, 2008:33; Fitzgerald, 2005:90). In an attempt to remedy this lapse in Australian historiography this paper focuses on a distinctive episode in Australian migration history.

On 20 June 1898, twenty three so-called “Greek Gypsies” arrived in Adelaide (South Australian Register, 23 June 1898:6).1 Keeping the notion of respectability at the foreground, this paper begins with an assessment of why people from the colonies of South Australia and Victoria treated in conflicting ways this semi-nomadic group of “unusual”, questionably Greek yet European migrants (The Advertiser, 23 June 1898:5). In 1890s Victoria, Catharine Coleborne writes, the movement of “poor Europeans, non-whites and transient peoples” within and between the Australian colonies could arouse concern and suspicion (Coleborne, 2011:47). Drawing from this historical assessment this paper examines how their movements across the colonies were increasingly policed and regulated. The paper then moves to assess how their arrival coincided with the politics of immigration restriction and the making of a Greek community in Melbourne. Through a close analysis of colonial newspapers, it contends that the arrival of these “Greek Gypsies” created a space for Greek-Melbournians to define themselves within the acceptable class-based confines of colonial respectability. By disassociating themselves from the questionable arrivals, early Greek settlers sought to showcase their qualities as permanent hard-working members of the emergent national polity.

From South Australian Charity to Victorian Hostility

Three days after the “Greek Gypsies” arrived an article appeared in the South Australian Register, titled “Greek Refugees at Largs Bay”. It informed its readers that a “batch of supposed Greeks” had formed an encampment on the sandhills of the Largs bay (South Australian Register, 23 June 1898:6). On the same day, The Advertiser also altered its readers of the arrival of these migrants but its headlines asserted they were “NOT GREEKS BUT GIPSIES”. The reporter stated that with the assistance of an interpreter he was able to determine that the new arrivals “were not naturally born Greeks but gipsies, who claim to be Greeks” because they had resided in Greece. When questioned as to how they intended to live in the colonies they “replied with a shrug of the shoulders, ‘Oh any way. We will go from town to town’” (The Advertiser, 23 June 1898:5). They had paid for a passage to Sydney and were under the misapprehension that it

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would be easy to walk to their destination. With the limited financial resources they had they intended to briefly camp at Adelaide and then proceed by foot to Melbourne en route to Sydney. The information that was obtained from South Australian interpreters and correspondents painted a mixed picture of the new arrivals. At one level, they were described as “Greek refugees”, which implied that they should be treated with a degree of sympathy, while on the other, they were labelled as misinformed poverty-stricken “Gypsies”.

The *South Australian Register* reported that the “Greek Gypsies” possessed a book which provided a written account of their reason for migration. The book was written in English and produced by a “young boy of fourteen or so, whose English only amount[ed] to a few words”. It read: “During the misfortunes of Greece we have lost all that we had in our country. Our houses were burned by the barbarous Turks, who had also stolen all our money. For a long time we were exposed in the moisture and cold”. An appeal for help followed. It was ascertained, by an anonymous South Australian correspondent that the new arrivals were from Larissa, in Thessaly, a geographically disputed area since the Greek War of Independence (1821–1832). In 1897, a Greco-Turkish War broke out and conflict took place in and around the city. Indeed, the correspondent noted some in the colony were “indignant at the wrongs of the Greeks at the hands of the Turks, and expressed great sympathy with the refugees. That any of them would reach” South Australia was hardly contemplated (*South Australian Register*, 23 June 1898:6). In order to prevent any miscommunication that might arise from their limited knowledge of English, the presentation of a letter written in the English language was accordingly of vital importance to how they identified themselves. Conscious that their hosts would be English-speaking people and unable to verbally communicate their misfortunes, the new arrivals evidently felt that the provision of a letter written in the English language permitted them to be viewed in a more sympathetic manner than might have otherwise been the case.

Despite their unexpected arrival, the local residents of Adelaide answered the group’s request for help. In a show of support the proprietor of the Largs Pier Hotel, charitably provided for the new arrivals. They were given “a side of mutton and a large piece of beef, as well as bread and several gallons of tea”. Mr Witkin, the former Greek consul, who was shocked by the vulnerable condition these people were in, managed to obtain a paper from the Commissioner of Police, which instructed “members of the police force ... to afford the party all the assistance in their power in the way of directing them on their route” (*The Advertiser*, 24 June 1898:5). Most probably because of the ill fortune they had suffered in Greece, the new arrivals were considered deserving of charity. But such dependency seldom conformed to colonial expectations of migrants and the impoverished circumstances of the supposed “refugees” soon aroused concern.

The *South Australian Register* reported “that such undesirable immigrants should not have been permitted to land” and South Australian authorities had no “power
under the existing legislation by which they” could force the impoverished party to “quit the colony”. In an effort to deal with the situation the police took definite action and ordered them to move on. They travelled through the suburbs of Salisbury, Norwood, Glen Osmond and then to the towns of Gawler, Williamstown, Mannum, and Murray Bridge. One Salisbury correspondent noticed that the women and children travelled in a dray while the men walked. When they reached Salisbury they camped upon a vacant lot in the centre of the township and attracted much notice. Uncertain about what they intended to do the message they carried from the Commissioner of Police insisted that they would continue to be “assisted and directed on their way to Victoria” (South Australian Register, 2 July 1898:7).

When the party eventually reached Victoria the South Australian press noted that wherever they camped in the colony:

they were treated in precisely the same way, the hat being sent round for subscriptions to pay for their conveyance to the next township... Thus South Australians are rid of them. If the Victorian Government should decline the honours of a permanent visit too no doubt the South Australian government would refuse to have them back. (Ibid.)

By the time they crossed the border and arrived in Serviceton, “the Greeks” were described as a “nuisance to the residents... so a subscription... [was] raised to pay the fares to the next station” (South Australian Register, 25 July 1898:4). Thus, South Australia was pleased to be rid of the dependent arrivals. Should Victoria refuse them entrance it was made clear that the sympathetic assistance which various South Australians had extended to the new arrivals would not be offered a second time.

On July 25, the Melbourne newspaper the Argus, reported that the Victorian government was “unable to prevent” the “Gypsies” entrance “owing to there being no law dealing with men and women of this class”. A provision would be added to the Immigration Restriction Bill which would prohibit such persons coming to the colony (The Argus, 25 July 1898:5). On 3 August, the “Gypsies” were discussed in the Victorian Legislative Assembly. Unanimously described across the chamber as “Gipsy Vagrants”, they were the subject of questions to the Liberal Premier George Turner who was asked “whether there was not some means by which” the beggars “could be got rid of instead of being allowed to travel... at the expense of various districts”. Turner’s response signified that because they had already entered the colony and due to the non existence of restrictive legislation, they would have to be treated “as any of our own people who were looked upon as vagrants... [that] is have them arrested, brought before the court and dealt with” (Victorian Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 88, 3 August 1889:602). Such legal action required significant financial resources at the expense of the colony and was therefore not adopted. Later in the parliamentary calendar year, the Assembly introduced A Bill to Place Restrictions on Immigration. The Bill provided definitions of a “prohibited immigrant”, and a clause was inserted to prevent the potential of such people from entering the colony. In section three, paragraph (b) it was specified “any person being a pauper or likely to become a public
charge” would be prohibited. After their being in the colonies for just over two months the destitute economic situation of the travelling party together with their method of living caused much alarm.

As the articles in the South Australian and Victorian press suggested they received a mixed reception. As their treatment in South Australia revealed, they received sympathetic assistance while they were simultaneously spurred to move on. At no time was it ever considered that the new arrivals would be permitted to reside in South Australia permanently. By the time they entered Victoria, they were increasingly referred to as a “begging” class. Their movements were policed in each town they traversed.

**Asserting Respectability**

When the Greek population of Melbourne, small though it was, got wind of the “Greek Gypsies”, they instantly wanted to distance themselves from them. They were especially unhappy that such undesirable immigrants had been labelled as Greeks. “The Melbourne Greeks”, wrote a reporter from the *Argus*, aver that the “Gypsies” were:

> lazy, good-for-nothing people, who lead a nomadic existence, preferring to beg and get a living by even more questionable means than by hard work. The idea that they are refugees from the district surrounding Larissa is ridiculed, for according to the latest advice from Greece, the Government of that country was reinstating the people in their farms, and even rebuilding the houses and villages destroyed during the war. (*The Argus*, 25 July 1898:5)

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2 Section 3, Paragraph (b), *A Bill to Place Restriction on Immigration*, Victorian Legislative Assembly, Bills Introduced and Proceedings Thereon, 29 June 1898:633.
This was confirmed by Alexandros Maniakis, a successful entrepreneur and one of the founders of the Greek Orthodox Community of Melbourne. Dismayed that the Greek label was being applied to the “Gypsies”, Maniakis, informed the readers of the *Argus* that there was no need for the recent arrivals to have left their place of origin. “So far for assistance,” he wrote, “the Thessalian refugees were cared for in Greece during negotiations for peace, and since the Turks [had] evacuated Thessaly... [the refugees had] resettled... with Government assistance” (*The Argus*, 26 July 1898:6). These words imply that Maniakis was aware of the peace settlement that was signed after the Greco-Turkish War. Except for part of Thessaly, including Larissa where the “Gypsies” claimed to be from, much of the Greek soil had not been fought over and the process of repatriation was promptly carried out. A true proponent of Hellenism abroad Maniakis also differentiated a Greek settler from a “Gypsy”. He wrote the “undesirable visitors” were most certainly:

>a tribe well known in Europe for its roving disposition...On the other hand the Greek... [who] comes to these colonies had a place to go to, and is a single young man until he is wooed by the Australian girl, to whose charms he falls an easy victim. (Ibid.)

In claiming that the “Gypsies” were known for their nomadic existence Maniakis singled out colonial anxieties about masculinity and mobility. During this period, Coleburne notes that colonial Victorian institutions regulated “mobility and masculinity”; mobility and settlement were constructed in opposition to each other (Coleburne, 2011:45-46). Whereas a Greek had a “place to go” and therefore could conform with notions of acceptable colonial settlement, the dependent movement of the “Gypsies” within and between the colonies, was an example of unfavourable colonial mobility. Moreover, Maniakis’ reference to Greeks as single young men could also be viewed as an attempt to promote Greek settlers as suitable white male migrants. His words positioned Greek settlers as youthful European bachelors with strong colonial aspirations whose masculinity was so faultless it prompted Australian “girls” to woo them into a relationship. During this period, Chinese men were often portrayed as a heterosexual threat to Anglo-Australian women. Various images and texts circulated which claimed “vulnerable” Anglo-Australian women needed to be controlled and protected against the lure of the racially inferior Chinese migrant (Walker, 1997:13). No such systematic representations against Greeks existed. Indeed, Maniakis’ remark suggests the contrary. Such a discrediting of the “Gypsies” claims and promotion of the Greeks as desirable male settlers, made it clear before the new arrivals had even reached Melbourne that the Greek settlers had already prepared to reject any claim that the “Gypsies” were of the same ilk as themselves.

As the questionable immigrants approached Melbourne, the Victorian Chief Secretary, Alexander Peacock, interviewed the honorary Greek Consul in Melbourne, Robert Curtain, in order to gain some clarity about who these people were and whether they would receive any assistance from Greek settlers. On 11 August, the *Argus* printed the details of the interview: “It was stated by the consul that... the recent
arrivals were not Greeks”. Peacock then referred the Consul to the fact that “they had passports from the Greek Consul in Port Said”, to which Mr Curtain replied: “if their credentials showed that they were Greeks the members of that nationality in Melbourne would be prepared to help them” (*The Argus*, 11 August 1898:5). Curtain himself was not of Greek origin, did not have any command of the Greek language and communicated with the Greek Foreign Ministry in French. The information he gathered about their nationality would have come from sources like Maniakis and Athanasios Kantopoulos, a Greek Orthodox priest. Regardless of the unfavourable information the Consul managed to assemble he felt it necessary to optimistically inform his colonial superior that if the new arrivals were actually of Greek nationality then the Greek residents of the city were prepared to find them work.

On 15 August, the *Barrier Miner*, the local newspaper in the distant town of Broken Hill also described the details of the interview and noted that the “arrived pastor of the Greek Church, the Rev. Father Athanasius [Athanasios Kantopoulos], happened, strangely enough, to have come out by the same steamer which picked up the gipsies at Port Said”. In a discussion he had with the Consul, the Greek priest noted that the “Gypsies” were “not Greeks and... were not desirable emigrants” (*Barrier Miner*, 15 August 1898:2). Kantopoulos’ arrival was an important gain for the emergent Greek community. When Maniakis, Anthony Lucas and others established the Greek Orthodox Community of Melbourne in 1898, the Community Committee wrote a letter to the Orthodox Patriarch in Jerusalem to send a priest who could conduct the Orthodox liturgy. When Kantopoulos arrived he brought with him a letter of introduction from the British Consul in Jerusalem together with his religious credentials which were presented to Peacock (*The Argus*, 1 July 1898:3). As an official religious dignitary who had travelled with the “Greek Gypsies” on the long voyage from Egypt, Kantopoulos’ opinion that they were undesirable would have been considered reputable by the Victorian political authorities who sought to know how Greek-Melbournians would receive them. The article in the *Barrier Miner* also stipulated that some Greek residents in Melbourne had “told [the Consul] that if these people...[were] fellow countrymen in distress they...[would] help them to settle here respectfully”. In an effort to alleviate any potential fears that Peacock might have had, the Consul remarked that one Melbourne Greek was “prepared to take at least five of them into his own home” (*Barrier Miner*, 15 August 1898:2). If the immigrants in question were Greek “countrymen in distress” then Greeks settlers would assist them in their endeavours.

When the party finally arrived in Melbourne, however, the Greek residents of Melbourne thought it necessary to inform the readers of *The Argus* of their opinion of the new arrivals. Written by D. N. Arsensis and Anthony Lucas, on behalf of the ninety four Greek residents of Melbourne, a strident letter to the editor denounced the “Gypsies”:

> We the undersigned Greek residents of Melbourne, desire, through your columns to emphatically protest against the gipsies, ... being classed as Greeks — not one of them is of Greek nationality, nor do they come from any part of the Greek states, nor... are
they under the protection of Greece. Those of your readers who have travelled through Balkania [the Balkans] will not have the slightest difficulty in recognising in these gipsies members of the begging fraternity infesting proportions of the Balkan states... The people at present on show are not the poor hunted refugees deserving of every pity your readers have thought them: they are simply out on a money making expedition. Let your readers thoroughly understand that these gipsies are not Greeks and not deserving of sympathy. If they had been do you think that we and our fellow countrymen in Australia would have come to their assistance, and prevented them being pushed from town to town as they were until some enterprising showmen took them in hand? Why, sir, we would have amply provided for them had they been Greeks, or had they deserved assistance, but we could not countenance these people coming here for the purposes of making money, and passing themselves of as our countrymen. (The Argus, 8 October 1898:10)

The attitude of the Greek community towards the “Greek Gypsies” was unmistakable. Determined to represent their views the Greek residents of Melbourne used the Argus as a vehicle to publicly differentiate themselves. They presented themselves as the authority on the “Gypsy” issue and sought to set the record straight. By alluding to “Gypsies” as “members of a begging fraternity which was infesting the Balkan states” they made it apparent they rejected their claims to be refugees and could not comprehend how the “Greek” label was attributed to them (Ibid.). In stating that they were not Greeks and not deserving of pity they also demonstrated that they regarded the travelling party as deceitful people whose sole purpose to was to fraudulently deceive the residents of the colonies for the purpose of money making.

In describing the group as a “begging fraternity” they also appealed to a distinctive aspect of colonial respectability: the notion of “hard-work”. The ideal of respectability, as John Fitzgerald writes, was a potent force working for social transformation (Fitzgerald, 2007:82). The social traits of self-reliance, independence, and disciplined work, were regarded as key qualities required for social acceptance. As many of the Melbourne Greeks either ran their own businesses, like Maniakis, or were employed, in Anthony Lucas’ Town Hall Cafe, the “Gypsies” way of earning money was a major point of antagonism between the emergent culture of the Greek colonists and that of the nomadic “Gypsies”. Begging was considered to be a form of laziness and dependence which was commonly thought to be detrimental to the progress of the colony. It was distinctly not what a dignified respectable migrant who wished to permanently settle in the colony would do. Thus, the arrival of “Gypsies” provided a platform for the Greeks of Melbourne to mount and uphold a public image of themselves as respectable settlers who wished to contribute to the growth of Australian colonies indefinitely. Greeks could provide social support for their countrymen while they also took a patriotic stand on issues of current importance. As Maniakis stated, the true Greek colonist was a young man who had “a place to go” unlike the “begging fraternity” of “Gypsies” who moved “from town to town” (The Argus, 25 July 1898:5).

Two days after the letter was published, the “Gypsies” themselves replied to the Greek protest: Jas Crilly, the leader of the travelling party wrote:
The Greek people of Melbourne, according to your paper, say we are not Greek subjects. Well, we hold our passports from Greece and we speak their language. We make no claims to be Greeks. We are a distinct people, known as gipsies the world over, and claim our descent from Abraham and Hagar: something before the Greeks were heard of. Those people who doubt our words can examine our passports at the Victoria Hall – Burke Street, during the coming week... (*The Argus*, 10 October 1898:6)

The “Gypsy” reply suggested the new arrivals were unfazed by the alarmist claims made against them. In allowing their passports to be inspected and invoking their ancestral origins they attempted to position themselves as worthy immigrants, despite what the Greeks wanted the readers of *The Argus* to believe.

In December, the group had set up camp on a vacant allotment near the St Kilda Esplanade. They gave noisy performances in the presence of a crowd through the day and into the evening. The *Argus* reported that although “no objection” could be made to their earning a living in this way their presence nonetheless gave “great offence and annoyance to the residents of the neighbourhood” (*The Argus*, 8 December 1898:6). Responding to several complaints the St Kilda Council’s City Inspector looked into the matter but found nothing to warrant any action being taken. It appeared there was some legal difficulty in the way of action being taken as they had encamped on private property. In an effort to improve the situation, it was decided that the owner of the property in question was to be “informed of the injustice” that the local residents had to endure (*The Argus*, 13 December 1898:7).

Unwanted by both the Melbourne Greeks and the local inhabitant of St Kilda the group made their way to New South Wales. On the 17 January 1899, a final press report on the movement of the questionable “Greeks Gypsies” was printed in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The article mentioned that Mr D’Arcy, the sub-collector of customs in Albury, had received instructions to not allow them to cross the inter-colonial border unless they complied with the New South Wales Immigration Restriction Act. “When two of the party arrived at the bridge”, it reported, “they were promptly sent back” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 January 1899:5). It is at this point coverage of their activities ceased and it is not certain if they ever managed to reach Sydney.

Later in 1899, a block of land in East Melbourne was obtained by the emergent Greek community for the erection of Melbourne’s first Greek Orthodox Church. On 6 December 1900, Kantopoulos would lay the foundation stone in front of a large crowd which included various dignitaries, like the Rabbi of the East Melbourne Synagogue, the Russian Consul-General and the Lord Mayor of Melbourne, Samuel Gillott. In a congratulatory speech Gillott proclaimed that “in the British dominions all professing the Christian faith were welcome and none more so than the adherents of this church, who numbered amongst them some of the most industrious and law abiding citizens” who had “resolved to become permanent citizens of Melbourne” (*The Argus*, 20 December 1900:7).³ His speech signified that believers of the Greek

³ See also the Minutes of the Community Committee, “Greek Orthodox Community of Melbourne and Victoria”, 1898:32.
Orthodox faith were to be included in Victorian public life as worthy colonists with shared values and customs. The building of the church and the arrival of Kantopoulos, as the first accredited resident priest, was then a pivotal moment when the Greeks of Melbourne could be recognized to have cemented a sufficiently permanent presence within the colony.

**Conclusion**

As the nineteenth century came to an end it was clear that the arrival of the “Greek Gypsies” had caused much contestation. From the moment they entered South Australia they received charitable assistance as destitute refugees, while as they trekked into Victoria, they were increasingly met with inhospitality from their hosts. Their semi-authorized and semi-nomadic movement within and between the colonies was not an acceptable form of colonial mobility and as a result townsfolk and politicians alike were uncertain how to best receive them. Concerned about their arrival into Melbourne Victorian political authorities anticipated that because the “Gypsies” were labelled as “Greeks”, the Greeks of Melbourne would instinctively support them. Ironically the most hostile treatment they received was from the Greeks-Melbournians, who refused to accept them as Greeks.

How and why the Greek community chose to discredit these people was inextricably linked to the colonial ideal of respectability, which fostered the social traits of self-reliance and permanent settlement. By 1898, Australia’s first Greek communities were established under the nascent leadership of wealthy Greeks like Anthony Lucas and Alexander Maniakis. Their businesses employed many fellow Greeks and their financial wealth contributed to the arrival of Australia’s first official Orthodox priest and the building of one of Australia’s first Greek Orthodox Churches. The idea that the impoverished “Greek Gypsies” were in need of assistance from Greek settlers gravely threatened the social gains Greeks had made in the colonies. Thus, the Greeks of Melbourne saw it their duty to protect their fellow countrymen from any comparison with a people who begged for a living. Priding themselves within the attainable and agreeable confines of respectability vindicated Greeks as valued settlers at a decisive moment prior to Federation. Committed to participation in the political processes of Australian nation-building they had begun to formulate an understanding of their Greekness within the society they had settled. This understanding of themselves would be retained and reworked when Greeks were questioned along constructed racial boundaries that dictated the political discourse of Australian immigration and labour laws in the early twentieth-century.
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