

Meditations: Greece Past and Present

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Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [History](#)

I stopped. A funeral was going by. A pauper's burial. Only a woman and a child followed. I asked an old man looking on who it was.

"A neighbor who sold fruit and vegetables and couldn't pay the rent".

He looked up puzzled. "How could they afford a coffin, a burial site and a stone if he couldn't put food on the table when he was alive?"

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My grandfathers, stone cutters would find plenty of work: people of all ages are dying every day. The authorities call them "unnatural deaths". But how many grave sites have tomb stones?

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I gaze up at the Acropolis and the marble columns of the Parthenon shimmer under a brilliant blue sky . . . and I trip over a ragged body stretched across the sidewalk, a blackened hand grasping a crust of bread.

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I walk past the dead. I walk over the dying. And I hurry away from a wild-eyed, white bearded raving madman screaming in a high-pitched hoarse voice. "The crises is over! The banks are rich! We are saved!"

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I enter the Byzantine museum, a refuge from the turmoil, an inexpensive escape into the past . . . or is it? The ticket sellers, guards and guides are nowhere to be seen ... Are they on strike? Or have they been fired? Or both? I walk alone, unmolested, through a thousand years: the rise and fall of Constantinople.

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Is there a museum of modern Greece? Two hundred years of revolutions and imported monarchs. Of Great Ideas that bred Catastrophes. Of unsavory dictators and collaborators. Of heroic resistance fighters and concentration camps. Of juntas and student martyrs. Of alternating Conservative and Socialist kleptocrats.

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A museum depicting the collapse of illusions of wealth and streets paved with euros. A European city converted into the home for one hundred thousand beggars and two million unemployed.

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The bagmen are coming – its election time. The scrawny hands of impoverished pensioners reach out . . . A grizzly bald Socratic look-alike lines up at a soup kitchen. He questions the Athenians : “Do you believe the democratic authorities will add meat to the watery soup?”.

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Kimon, a recent graduate of Athens University, a classical scholar, sells counterfeit ancient coins on a street corner. He tells me an authentic fifth century Arethusa dekadrachm signed by Kimon or Euainetos or Eumenos would feed a thousand unemployed Greeks for a year, maybe two, if they are vegetarians.

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I stood behind a small crowd in front of a kiosk reading the headlines of the newspapers (who buys them these days?). An excited woman pushed her way out of the semi-circle and screeched to the silent on-lookers. “The Nazis called the Jews, Communists... the gas chambers, showers. The Americans call the fascists who burned alive three dozen workers in Odessa, Ukrainian Nationalists”. She turned abruptly and walked quickly down the street. The others mumbled incoherently and drifted away. A nattily dressed businessman smiled at me and nodded his head as if to say “Only a crazy woman screams in the street like her”.

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