

# The Koraes Chair of Modern Greek History, Language and Literature

## What is the Koraes Chair?

At the time when it was established in 1918, the Koraes Chair was one of very few university positions anywhere in the world devoted to the study of Greek (Hellenic) civilisation after antiquity. Even today, 'Greece' and 'Greek' are often taken to refer to Europe's founding civilisation that flourished between 3000 and 2000 years ago. The legacy of 'classical Greece', along with that of ancient Rome, lies at the root of everything that we think of today as 'European' or 'western', and has had a profound impact on the cultures of the entire world – a vibrant source of creative interaction in modern times. An essential, and often overlooked, part of that story is the continuous existence of the Greek language in southeast Europe and in many of the lands bordering the eastern Mediterranean, right through the middle ages and down to our own times.

The Koraes Chair was created a hundred years ago, to fill that gap. Under its aegis, research and teaching at King's College London have brought to prominence the Christian empire of Byzantium, that flourished from its capital at Constantinople (today's Istanbul) for more than a millennium, from 330 to 1453, and the achievements of Greek-speakers in more recent times. These include the remarkable history of Greece as a modern nation-state, from its beginning in revolution against Ottoman Turkish rule in 1821, and of Cyprus, which gained its independence from Great Britain in 1960.

The Greek language, in its modern form, is spoken by some 15 million people, not only in these two states but around the world. The living descendant of the language of classical Greece, modern Greek is also an official language of the European Union and the medium for poetry, novels, plays and films that have become world-famous and earned Nobel prizes for literature for the poets George Seferis in 1963 and Odysseus Elytis in 1979. The novels of Nikos Kazantzakis, *Zorba the*

*Greek* and *The Last Temptation of Christ* have become world best-sellers, not least thanks to the success of the English-language films based on them. The Alexandrian Greek poet, C.P. Cavafy, has become one of the world's most translated and best loved poets of the 20th century.

Back in 1918, it was possible to lump together more than a millennium and a half of history, literary writing, and the changes in language over that long period, into the job description of a single university Professor. Today, the study of history, of language and of literature is divided into three well-recognised academic disciplines. The historical periods covered by the chair, from roughly 330 AD to the present, have also been divided: Byzantine studies and modern Greek studies are separate specialisms.

This is the remarkable challenge of the Koraes Chair, still unmatched anywhere in the world, even now that many more academic positions exist in all these subjects, not least in the many universities of Greece and Cyprus that have grown up since it was established. And this is why in addition to the Chair, King's over the past fifty years has invested in several new positions in both Byzantine and modern Greek studies. The Koraes Chair remains the centre of gravity and the focal point for the study of the post-classical Greek world at King's, which today is carried out by a team of 5 permanent academics, assisted by variable numbers of fixed-term researchers, and a team of distinguished academic visitors.

As we celebrate the centenary of the Koraes Chair in 2018 and look forward to its next hundred years, we can be confident that King's will continue to play a pre-eminent role in teaching and research into the post-classical Greek (Hellenic) world, and particularly in promoting public knowledge and understanding of that world in London, the UK, and around the world.



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## Establishment and early history

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The origins of the Chair lie in the years that immediately followed the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913. By 1913 the kingdom of Greece had more than doubled the size of its territory. Its prime minister was the charismatic lawyer from Crete, Eleftherios Venizelos, who first visited London in December 1912. There he began to map out his vision for the future of his country with Chancellor of the Exchequer and future prime minister David Lloyd George and First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill. It was also on this occasion that Venizelos met his future wife and a major donor to the Chair, Helena Schilizzi.

Since the 17th century a substantial Greek community had flourished in London – giving its name to Greek Street. During the 19th century this grew to include a large number of shipowners, who traded throughout the British Empire. These were highly respected members of British society, and passionate about their Greek identity. The success of their businesses made a significant contribution to the economy of the UK. Many of these families came, as their descendants do today, from the islands of Chios and nearby Oinousses; Venizelos had many friends and admirers among them; they came together with prominent British political and academic leaders, at the end of 1913, to form the Anglo-Hellenic League. The aims of the League were to promote the political and economic interests of Greece in the UK, and vice versa. Among the British academics who supported Venizelos and

the aims of the League were William Pember Reeves, Director of the London School of Economics, and Ronald Burrows, the classical scholar and philhellene who had recently become Principal of King's College London.

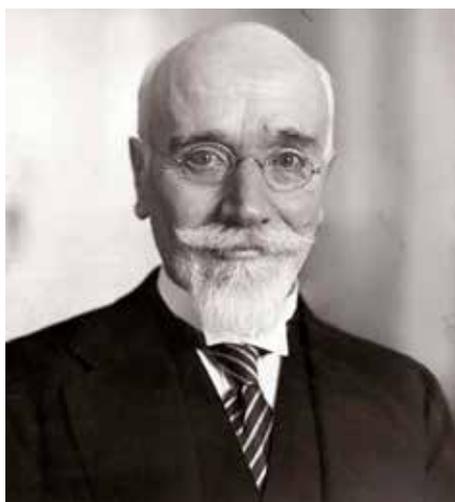
Fundraising to make possible a chair of post-classical Greek studies at the University of London began while the First World War was at its height. Since Principal Burrows was behind the initiative, it was natural that the Chair should be housed at King's. Contributors from the Greek community included many famous names: Schilizzi, Ionides, Pallis, Zochonis, Embiricos, Cassavettis, Ralli among many others.

At this time Greece was deeply divided between those, like Venizelos, who wished to join the war on the side of Great Britain, France and Russia, and followers of King Constantine, who insisted on neutrality. For more than a year Greece had two rival governments, one in Athens, the other in Thessaloniki, where Venizelos formed a provisional government in 1916. It was not until 1917 that the 'National Schism', as it has been known ever since, was resolved, with the return of Venizelos to power in Athens, and Greece's entry into the war as an ally of the Entente. In November of that year, at Venizelos's instigation, the Parliament of the Hellenes voted an annual sum in support of the Chair at King's, for a fixed period of seven years. The Chair itself was established in May 1918. Its first incumbent, Arnold Toynbee, was appointed and took up his duties a year

later. Toynbee's inaugural lecture in October 1919 was attended by prime minister Venizelos and introduced by the Greek ambassador to London, Ioannes Gennadius.

Toynbee's appointment was to prove controversial. Greek troops had landed in Smyrna (now the Turkish city of Izmir) earlier that year, with a mandate given by the Peace Conference in Paris which was engaged in redrawing the map of Europe after the war. The young Korae Professor left his post to work for the *Manchester Guardian* as a war correspondent in Asia Minor. Not long after his return to London, the city of Smyrna was destroyed in September 1922 after falling to the victorious Turkish Nationalist forces of Mustafa Kemal, later known as Atatürk. Toynbee's credibility with the donors to the Chair and the university that employed him could never be the same again. He resigned in 1924.

The appointment of this brilliant young historian had not brought the results that either the donors or the university had hoped for. On the other hand, it did launch the career of one of the most famous (if idiosyncratic) world historians of the 20th century. Toynbee would go on to build an entire edifice of world history upon his own formative experiences as an observer of the conflict between Greeks and Turks in Asia in the early 1920s. His last book, published after his death in 1975, is an elegant and thoughtful reflection on the extraordinary story of what he termed 'the Greeks and their heritages'.



For further information, see Richard Clogg, *Politics and the Academy: Arnold Toynbee and the Korae Chair* (London: Frank Cass, 1986)

Image left: Eleftherios Venizelos, photographic portrait in 1935, wikipedia.  
Image right: Ronald Burrows, courtesy of King's College London Archives.



## Holders of the Chair and selected works

### 1919 – 1924 Arnold Toynbee, FBA

- ♦ *A Study of History*, 12 vols (1934-1961)
- ♦ *Constantine Porphyrogenitus and his World* (1973)
- ♦ *The Greeks and their Heritages* (1981)

### 1926 – 1943 F.H. Marshall

- ♦ *Three Cretan Plays: The Sacrifice of Abraham; Erofile; Gyparis; also the Cretan Pastoral Poem, The Fair Shepherdess*, translated (1929)

### 1946 – 1960 Romilly Jenkins

- ♦ *Dionysius Solomòs* (1940)
- ♦ *The Dilessi Murders* (1961)
- ♦ *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries AD 610-1071* (1966)

### 1963 – 1968 Cyril Mango, FBA

- ♦ *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453: Sources and Documents* (1972)
- ♦ *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome* (1980)
- ♦ *The Oxford History of Byzantium* (edited, 2002)

### 1970 – 1988 Donald Nicol, FBA

- ♦ *The Despotate of Epiros* (2 vols, 1957, 1984)
- ♦ *The Last Centuries of Byzantium* (1972)
- ♦ *Byzantium and Venice: A Study in Diplomatic and Cultural Relations* (1988)

### 1988 – 2018 Roderick Beaton, FBA

- ♦ *The Medieval Greek Romance* (1989)
- ♦ *An Introduction to Modern Greek Literature* (1994)
- ♦ *George Seferis: Waiting for the Angel. A Biography* (2003)

## A century of change: an overview

Ronald Burrows died in 1920. His collection of books on modern Greece and Byzantium passed to the College Library. Ever since, the Maughan Library, as it is known today, has built on this foundation to become the prime collection in the UK and one of the leading collections in the world, outside Greece and Cyprus, of books and periodicals devoted to the post-classical Greek world.

In the conditions of the interwar years, and immediately after the Second World War, the role of Koraeas Professor was to research into the subjects covered by the Chair and to organise and teach classes. For some time these remained small, as UK universities themselves did. During the 1950s doctorates were awarded to scholars who would later become eminent in their fields: Apostolos Sachinis and Philip Sherrard. It was not until the end of the 1960s that modern Greek and Byzantine studies came to be organised as a full part of the curriculum, for the time being in partnership with the University of London's School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES), itself an offshoot of King's (today part of UCL). In 1974 the University introduced a single-subject BA degree in Modern Greek Language and Literature, at the time the only one of its kind, taught at King's.

By this time a whole academic department was growing around the nucleus of the Koraeas Chair. This was the Department of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies. The department's students were often recruited from the Greek and Greek-Cypriot communities of London. Later, as it expanded and its reputation grew, it attracted many postgraduates who had completed a first degree in Greece or (later) at the University of Cyprus. Under the aegis of the Koraeas Chair,

students of Greek background perfected advanced reading and writing skills in their own language at the highest level, while British and other European students came to King's prompted by intellectual curiosity about a history and a culture that were new to them. They, too, learned modern Greek intensively and became highly proficient. Master's-level studies were added to the curriculum in 1990, with new degrees offered in Modern Greek Studies and in Late Antique & Byzantine Studies. Distinguished alumni of the Department include the *Guardian's* long-serving Athens correspondent, Helena Smith, and John Kittmer, HM Ambassador to Greece from 2013 to 2016. Since the 1970s, several students per year have gained the degree of PhD in many different aspects of Modern Greek and Byzantine history, language and literature. Many of those have gone on to prominent academic positions in the UK, Greece, Cyprus and the USA.

As demand for teaching has grown and changed over the years, and with the development of new and exciting academic horizons in the Arts & Humanities, the activities once concentrated upon the Koraeas Chair have diversified beyond what would have been possible for a single professor to sustain. In this way, over different periods since the late 1960s, the existence of the Chair has been able to attract some of the best talents to King's in the fields that it covers. Current colleagues of the Koraeas Professor, in permanent positions, are:

- ♦ **David Ricks**, Professor of Modern Greek & Comparative Literature
- ♦ **Dr Dionysios Stathakopoulos**, Senior Lecturer in Byzantine Studies
- ♦ **Dr Tassos Papacostas**, Senior Lecturer in Byzantine Material Culture
- ♦ **Dr Ioannis Papadogiannakis**, Lecturer in Patristics



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## A century of change: an overview ~ continued...

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### RESEARCH FELLOWSHIPS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR EARLY CAREER RESEARCHERS

The Department regularly hosts post-doctoral fellowships funded by outside bodies, who work on specific projects under the direction of the Koraes Professor:

♦ **2016-2018**

Dr Polina Tambakaki, Niki Marangou  
Postdoctoral Fellow (modern Greek literature of Cyprus)

♦ **2017-2019**

Dr Katerina Levidou, Marie Curie  
Postdoctoral Fellow (modern Greek music and national identity).

♦ **2018-2020**

Tassos and Angele Nomikos  
Postdoctoral Fellow in Modern Greek and Byzantine Studies (tba)

In 1989 the College established the Centre for Hellenic Studies, to coordinate all the activities of its academic staff in the field, from prehistory down to the present. Since then, the Centre has run an ambitious programme of public lectures, conferences and publications, aimed at promoting knowledge and understanding of the Hellenic world of all historical periods among the wider community of London, the UK, and the English-speaking world. The Centre also organises and participates in events in Greece and in other countries, through an expanding network of collaborations. The Centre's Director since 2012 has been the Koraes Professor.

In 2015 the academic responsibilities of the Department of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies became fully integrated within the Department of Classics, to create the third largest such department in the UK, and the only one to offer courses and to carry out research across the full range of Hellenic studies, from ancient to modern, within a single academic unit. The Koraes Chair and the other academic roles associated with it are now an integral part of that enlarged department.

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## Courses and teaching in modern Greek and Byzantine studies today

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The Department of Classics offers the following programmes of study in the fields covered by the Koraes Chair:

- ♦ BA Classical & Modern Greek Studies
- ♦ MA The Classical World & its Reception
- ♦ MA Late Antique & Byzantine Studies
- ♦ PhD in Byzantine & Modern Greek Studies

In addition, modules (courses) in Byzantine and modern Greek studies are taken by students from the Departments of Comparative Literature, English, History, Theology & Religious Studies, and the BA programme in Liberal Arts. Approximately 100-150 students are enrolled on modules (courses) in modern Greek and Byzantine studies in any one year

Full information about modules available each year can be found online at [www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/classics/modules/index.aspx](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/classics/modules/index.aspx)



Details from *Athens: temple of Olympian Zeus (foreground), and Acropolis (background) in 1810*; John Cam Hobhouse. *A journey through Albania, and other provinces of Turkey in Europe and Asia*. London, 1813. Foyle Special Collections, King's College London

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## Who was Adamantios Korais?

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An intellectual founding-father of the modern Greek state that was created out of the Revolution of 1821, Korais was born in Smyrna in 1748. His family came from the nearby island of Chios, as did many of the families of those who contributed to the Chair that would later be established in his name.

He spent his early years in Smyrna and Amsterdam, where he was sent by his father to carry on the family business. But Korais was not cut out to be a merchant. After a brief return to Smyrna, he left for France. There he trained as a medical doctor and wrote an influential treatise on the medical writings attributed to Hippocrates. In 1788, the year before the outbreak of the French Revolution, he moved to Paris, which remained his home for the rest of his long life. He died in 1833.

In Paris, Korais observed every phase of the Revolution at first hand. Here, he quickly established a reputation as a brilliant classical scholar and editor of ancient Greek texts, under the French form of his name, Adamance Coray. Writing in both French and Greek, he promoted a view of the Greeks as an ancient nation that had fallen into barbarism, but was now ready for what he called its 'regeneration'. The way to

achieve this, he believed, was through education. For this reason his name is particularly appropriate to a university Chair of modern Greek studies.

Korais edited ancient Greek texts, in the original language, for distribution to his fellow-countrymen living under Ottoman rule. These he prefaced with long introductions in modern Greek, in which he set out his ideas about the nation, its history, its achievements and his hopes for its future.

He also held strong views about the Greek language. These were very influential during the 19th century, when they led to the cultivation of the written form of modern Greek known as *katharevousa* ('language in the process of being cleaned up'). Korais's proposals for reforming the modern language have fallen out of favour today. But his conviction that language is 'the most inalienable possession of the nation' has stood the test of time and has been vindicated by the deep affection in which most Greeks hold the language that they speak and write.

As a political thinker, Korais championed liberty and the rights of the individual. He corresponded with leading figures of the Greek Revolution and with the author of the American

Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson. He was the first to put on paper a coherent vision of Greece as a modern nation-state, in the form that we know it today. In that sense he was truly a founding-father, just as Jefferson was. The 'revolution' that he promoted was a revolution of ideas and of morals, not an act of violence. Indeed he was taken by surprise when the standard of revolt was raised in Greece in 1821.

Adamantios Korais was one of the last great thinkers of the European Enlightenment. At the same time he participated in the emergence of new ideas, particularly about nations and languages, that we associate today with the Romantic movement that was gathering momentum during his lifetime. His legacy to modern Greece and to modern Europe lies in the distillation of these ideas and the impetus he gave to the establishment of Greece as a new, independent nation-state, during the last years of his life.

Though he never held a university position himself, Korais was first and foremost a scholar and an educator. As such, he is fittingly commemorated by the Korais Chair of Modern Greek and Byzantine History, Language and Literature at King's College London.



For further information, see Paschalis M. Kitromilides (ed.), *Adamantios Korais and the European Enlightenment* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2010)

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**For further information about the  
Centre for Hellenic Studies, see  
[www.kcl.ac.uk/chs](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/chs)**

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Image left: Adamantios Korais, wikipedia.

