

# Catherine II, the Greek Project, Byzantium and the Russian Court

## The Setting

Russian foreign policy during the reign of Catherine II was characterized by a far-reaching southward expansion. In the period between 1768-1774 and 1787-1791, Catherine waged two successful wars against the Ottoman Empire, in between the annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 1783, which was promoted by Grigorj Potemkin, and the Empress's famous Tauride journey in 1787, on which she was accompanied for parts by Joseph II and Stanisław August Poniatowski. This journey can be considered the most outstanding example of Catherine's court on tour, which played with references to antiquity in its staging strategies, not only, but in many ways<sup>1</sup>. Russia's conflict with the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the eighteenth century not only influenced the balance of power between the powers in Europe, but also had effects within Russia on several levels, above all on the level of court culture, architecture, fine arts and literature. In a certain sense, it changed Russia's perspective on itself in the context of its self-positioning in Europe and in relation to Europe. It was the time when the Ottoman Empire, as a core power of the entire Orient, was stylized as the antithesis of the Orient in Russia's self-descriptions. Some research has already been done into how the strategic opposition between the two great empires not only shaped the images of the Ottomans in Russia, but how the images of the Ottomans that were created also prefigured the national self-confidence of the Russian elites in the late eighteenth century and served to reassure the autocratic power of its imperial status<sup>2</sup>. The direction of the progressive Orientalization of the Ottoman world in Russian discourses was, of course, not directed towards the East: the reception of Western European images of the Ottomans and the Orient in Russia since the early eighteenth century became intertwined with imperial claims to legitimacy, and this claim had already been formulated by Catherine at the beginning of her long reign, when Catherine made the statement in her »Great Instructions for the Prepa-

ration of a Code of Law« in 1766 that Russia was a European power<sup>3</sup>. The discursive creation of orientalizing images of the Ottoman foreigner on the basis of reception and transfer as well as personal experiences of encounters with the Ottomans, mostly as a result of imperial wars, served not least to intellectually process the processes of »westernization« of the elites and their cultural practices since Peter I, i. e. to confirm their own European identity. An important feature of the self-description of the Russian elites in the eighteenth century is the fact that this took place over many decades against the background of the permanent territorial expansion of the empire and it required immense reception and translation efforts to transform European topoi and concepts into the modes and strategies of imperial appropriation.

These were the decades in which the »Greek Project« occupied the European courts, i. e. the idea that Catherine II could establish an empire on the Bosphorus after the conquest of Constantinople, either as a second-generation empire or in union with the Russian Empire. The content and form of this plan have been the subject of much debate among contemporaries and in various historiographical traditions. Some saw the »Greek Project« as a continuation of the idea of »Moscow as the Third Rome« and in this sense as a possible completion of a *Translatio Imperii* idea<sup>4</sup>. Voltaire, for example, suggested a mission to liberate and conquer Constantinople from the infidels<sup>5</sup>. Against the background of Russian expansionist efforts in the Black Sea during the Oriental Question, Konstantin Leontev, for example, recommended the reconquest of Byzantium as the completion of an Orthodox area of rule under the leadership of the autocracy<sup>6</sup>. Even after the February Revolution, Pavel Miljukov, an important historian and temporary foreign minister of the Provisional Government in 1917, saw the conquest of Constantinople as Russia's central war aim in the First World War<sup>7</sup>. Against the background of these positions in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, philhellenism was also read and understood in Catherine's court circles and by the monarch herself.

1 Kusber, Katharina die Große 234-241.

2 Zorin, Kormja.

3 Instruction ch. I and II.

4 Hösch Griechisches Projekt; Tuschinski, Gerüchte; Ragsdale, Evaluating; Kamen-sikh »Antiquising imagination«.

5 In a letter to Catherine, 2 September 1769: »It is truth that your majesty has two great enemies, the Papa and the padishah of the Turks. Constantin did not

imagine that once his city of Rome would belong to the Priest, nor that he would build his city of Constantinople for the Tartars; but neither did he foresee that at some time near the river Moscow and the Neva an empire as vast as his own would be established« (Reddaway, Documents 33-34)

6 Leontiev, Vizantinism.

7 See his famed note from April 1917: Acton/Cherniaev/Rosenberg, Critical companion 62-64.

But was the monarch concerned with a Byzantine heritage of some kind? Did references in court culture play a tangible role? Or was the debate about the »Greek project« just a variation of the Europeanization discourse?

## War, Diplomacy and Rumors

The first Russian political ventures in the era of Catherine II caused a great stir in this context and seemed to indicate ambitious goals. After the outbreak of the first war against the Ottoman Empire after her rise to power, a total of five Russian squadrons were sent one after the other from the Baltic to the Mediterranean from 1769 onwards. There they took part in the military operations in Ottoman waters in the early 1770s. The most significant was the Battle of Chesme, which became the greatest Ottoman defeat at sea since the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. Catherine the Great immediately tried to make symbolic capital out of this and ordered the construction of four monuments to honor the victory: the Chesme Palace and the Chesmenskii Church in Saint Petersburg (1774-1777), the Obelisk in Gatchina (1775), and the Chesme Column in Tsarskoye Selo<sup>8</sup>.

Chesme Palace and the Church, for example, were actively incorporated by Catherine into her mobile court: The palace stood on the road from St Petersburg to Tsarskoye Selo with its imperial summer residences. It was often described as one of the empress's »maisons de plaisance«<sup>9</sup>, resembling a medieval castle. Later, in 1780 a church was erected next to it, also designed by Yury Felten. Dedicated to the birth of St. John the Baptist, it was frequently called the Chesme Church. The ensemble was to mark the place where Empress Catherine II presumably received the news of the grand victory over the Ottoman Empire. In the reign of Catherine II, the interiors of the ceremonial halls of the Chesme Palace featured fifty-nine portraits of monarchs from European royal houses (French, Swedish, Danish, Prussian, English, etc.). Some of these portraits were given to the empress as presents. Beside the portraits on the walls of ten of its rooms, the palace also featured a gallery of bas-reliefs of the Rurikids and Romanovs. Fifty-eight roundels by Fedor Shubin were placed just above almost the same number of monarchs' portraits. The front staircase led into the hall where the portrait of Catherine herself eventually appeared. Thus, the empress symbolically opened the Russian dynastic series and was placed at the head of the entire community of European monarchs<sup>10</sup>. Military symbolism was to be found in the marble statue of Catherine II as Minerva, an allegory of her victories. Catherine II treated this dynastic series in a small literary work called The

Chesme Palace (Chesmenskii dvorets), a short text originally written in French at the end of the century and brilliantly interpreted by Ekaterina Boltunova<sup>11</sup>.

With regard to practical political politics, the battle increased Russia's confidence in the fleet and secured Russian control of the Aegean during the war. In the Ottoman Empire, the destruction of the fleet inspired many minorities to revolt. Constantinople came within sight of Russian warships several times and a Russian archipelago principality was founded on 31 Greek islands, although it only existed between 1771 and 1774<sup>12</sup>. Strategically more important were the territorial expansions on the mainland, where the Russian armies literally overran the Danubian principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia. With the Peace of Küçük Kaynarca in 1774, the Russian Empire acquired the vast, long-desired territories between the Terek and Dnieper rivers<sup>13</sup>. In 1783, it annexed the territories of the Crimean Khanate to the empire, thereby securing its position in the Caucasus and on the Black Sea. These new territories were incorporated into the empire as part of the governorship of Ekaterinoslav (which included the governorates of Novorossiia and Azov) and as the Tauride region (with the Crimea, Taman and Kuban). Immediately after acquiring these territories, their governor, Prince Grigory Alexandrovich Potemkin, began to develop them. The corresponding, almost grandiose program included, among other things, the transformation of the landscape and the founding of new cities<sup>14</sup>. The future of these territories and the neighboring Moldavia, Wallachia and Bessarabia was a popular topic of conversation not only at courts, but also among the public inside and outside Russia. Legally, the annexation of Crimea to the Russian Empire seemed to be secured: in 1784, the Sublime Porte had recognized the affiliation of Crimea and the Kuban region to the Russian Empire. The Russian military successes on the Black Sea, the weakness of the Ottoman Empire and the general mood in Europe prepared fertile ground for far-reaching speculation about what steps Catherine would take next. The commander-in-chief of the Russian fleet and the initiator of the so-called Archipelago Expedition, Aleksei Grigoryevich Orlov and his brother Fyodor Grigoryevich, who were in Italy with their squadron, made no secret of their dreams of conquering Constantinople and from there fueled the rumor mill at the European courts, but also in St Petersburg itself<sup>15</sup>.

At the same time, Voltaire implored the empress in his letters to break the barbaric rule of the Muslim fanatics on ancient soil, indeed in the cradle of European civilization. In his letter of 1768, he wrote to the empress that it was already part of Peter I's plans to make Constantinople the capital of the Russian Empire. The empress took up the ball: Catherine II reported to her old pen pal Voltaire with expansive exuber-

8 Kusber Katharina die Große 102  
9 Batorevich, Chesmenskii dvorets 42.  
10 Skvortsova, Representing 455-460.  
11 Boltunova, The Historical Writing.

12 Smilyanskaya, Protection; Smilyanskaya, Grecheskie ostrova.  
13 On the broader context: Davies, The Russo-Turkish war.  
14 Kusber, Katharina die Große 214f.  
15 Smilanskaya Protection.

ance: »If the war continues like this, the only thing left for us is the conquest of Byzantium, and I am actually beginning to believe that this would not be impossible«<sup>16</sup>. Since the correspondence was only partly private in nature and was very quickly circulated in society, the intense rumors about the territorial-political ambitions of the Russian tsarina are not surprising. English, German, Italian and French newspapers of the time reported on Catherine's intentions to end the Sultan's rule on the Bosphorus and either to establish a kingdom on the Black Sea with the capital in Constantinople or to expand the Russian Empire to Asia Minor. A slightly different rumor was that Potemkin, the Tsarina's all-powerful favorite, would strive for his own crown and use Russian troops to have himself declared king of a Greek state<sup>17</sup>. The balance of power in eighteenth century Europe, however, led not only the Russian government to consider the future distribution of power on the Black Sea. As Maria Petrova showed using diplomatic sources, this idea particularly occupied the Austrian Chancellor Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz-Rietberg. As notes with different variants on the division of Turkey from the years 1772-1774 show, he showed keen interest in the so-called Masino Plan. Giorgio Giuseppe Maria Valperga, Count (de) Masino, Knight of the Order of Malta, joined the Russian squadron of the Orlov brothers in Livorno in 1771 with his own ship. After some time, Masino met with Archduke Leopold, the brother of Joseph II and future Holy Roman Emperor, in Florence. Masino presented him with ideas on possible divisions of the Ottoman Empire. Archduke Leopold, Joseph II and Kaunitz were both carried away by these ideas and developed more detailed plans over the next few years. However, as can be seen from his instructions to Joseph von Kaunitz-Rietberg in 1777, only the Russian Empire was believed to have the military strength necessary to take Constantinople<sup>18</sup>. The first known evidence of serious Russian interest in a large-scale division of the Ottoman Empire only emerged with the rise of Catherine II's new private secretary, the future Imperial Count Aleksander Andreevich Bezborodko<sup>19</sup>. These written documents were created in preparation for an alliance treaty with Austria. In terms of content, the considerations contained therein were similar in some respects to the Masino plans, as they were further developed by Kaunitz.

The rapprochement between Catherine II and Emperor Joseph II began in 1780, when the latter expressed his wish to visit the Russian Empire. As Count Falkenstein, he was received in Mogilev by Catherine, Grigory Potemkin and the Empress's secretary, Aleksandr Bezborodko, and accompanied to St Petersburg. This meeting marked the beginning of an intensive correspondence between the two monarchs<sup>20</sup>. When the situation in the Crimean Khanate escalated in 1782 and

threatened to slip out of Russia's control, Catherine asked the Emperor about the possible annexation of the peninsula and the possible resulting war with the Ottoman Empire. Joseph II responded almost euphorically that he would support Russia whatever the outcome<sup>21</sup>. Catherine II then formulated her ideas about the future of the Ottoman Empire. In this context, the first Russian written evidence of the Greek Project was created: Bezborodko drafted the so-called Memorial on Political Affairs, which was commented on and corrected by Potemkin and finally incorporated by Catherine II into the famous letter to the Emperor dated 10/23 September 1782. The contents of Bezborodko's memorandum and the secret letters implied that the ancient Greek Empire should be restored if circumstances, i.e. the course of a coming war against the Ottoman Empire, allowed this. The border between the new Greek and Russian Empires would run through the Black Sea; the border with Austria would depend on what conquests Joseph II would make in the course of the obviously impending war. The archipelago islands that had until recently been occupied by Russia would also fall to the Greek Empire; finally, the Danube would form the border between the Greek Empire and a buffer state to be created, Dacia. Dacia would be an independent state, located between the three empires of Austria, Russia and Greece or the Ottomans, formed from Moldavia, part of Bessarabia and Wallachia. The founding of Dacia was therefore treated by Catherine II as a kind of precondition for the later, eventual restoration of Greece and the conquest of Constantinople. In Bezborodko's memorandum, Dacia was to be formed even if the two monarchs did not intend or consider the destruction of the Ottoman Empire possible and wanted to end the impending war as quickly as possible. The secret letters were not treated as too secret: Joseph II showed them to State Chancellor Kaunitz and sent copies to his ambassadors in St Petersburg and Paris, as well as to his brother Leopold in Tuscany. It is therefore not surprising that the »Grand Project«, as the emperor called it, soon became known throughout Europe<sup>22</sup>. As Dmitry Gorbatov pointed out, the lack of an official statement under these circumstances encouraged the intensification of rumors<sup>23</sup>. Free interpretations of the project's content spread quickly and aroused great public interest. Catherine II knew how to maintain this interest for her own purposes; in fact, she basically mythologized the »Greek Project«. She obviously worked deliberately to give the »Greek« dimension of Russian-Austrian foreign policy an appropriate aesthetic framework. Her most important propaganda medium in the educated public of Europe was her semi-private correspondence with international correspondents – such as Voltaire, Friedrich Melchior von Grimm,

16 Katharina II. to Voltaire, 19./30. March 1772, in: Schumann, Monsieur – Madame 283.

17 Sebag Montefiore, Prince of Princes 215-222.

18 Tuschinski, Gerüchte 245-246.

19 Hösch, Griechisches Projekt 193.

20 On his first visit in Russia: Petrova, Ekaterina II i Iosif II, 126-178.

21 Also on the following the still valuable article by Madariaga, The secret Austro-Russian Treaty; Kusber, Katharina die Große 228-231.

22 Petrova, Ekaterina II i Iosif II 94f. 271.

23 Gorbatov, Sluchi 36.



**Fig. 1** Richard Brompton, Portrait of Grand Dukes Alexander Pavlovich and Constantin Pavlovich, 1781. – (After Richard Brompton, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons; Hermitage Museum inv. nr. ГЭ-4491).

Johann Georg Zimmermann and Johanna Dorothea Bielke. In these letters, for example to Voltaire and Madame Bielke, Catherine II had been toying with the idea of conquering Constantinople since the 1760s<sup>24</sup>. She described to Baron von Grimm in great detail how Grand Duke Constantine, born in 1779, was surrounded by noble Greeks so that Greek culture would become his own and flirted with the idea of ruling with both her grandsons at her side.

Constantine's baptism was carried out according to the Greek Orthodox rite. The Greek wet nurses who were specially brought to Moscow and the Greek playmates who were given to the young man are just as much a part of this context as the birthday hymns based on the Greek model or the medals that were designed and in some cases minted on the occasion of the birth and symbolically captured Russia's future goals. First and foremost, it was a commitment to the philhellenic ideals of the time, presented in the pose of a classically educated, enlightened monarch. The propaganda effect that inevitably resulted from these unmistakable gestures was taken into account by the Empress. She wanted to »win the sympathy of the nation over which her grandson

would one day rule«. She founded the Institute of Greek Cadets in Petersburg, formed her own troop corps in her army from Greek emigrants, recruited respected Greeks into her civil service, appointed Greek clergy to high and lucrative church offices in her empire, sought through her consuls and agents in the Ottoman Empire to maintain and re-establish the old ties between the Greeks and Russia in every way possible, and above all spread the belief there that Russia alone was capable and willing to protect Christians against the Turks.

The context of such actions and speeches had become obvious since the conclusion of the widely known secret treaties and became politically significant. For example, the Swedish ambassador and the French envoy discussed the »Greek« future of the tsarina's second eldest grandson far from their homeland in Istanbul<sup>25</sup>.

This topic was not only mentioned in correspondence and conversations of Catherine, but also in her art commissions from the 1780s onwards. References to the Greek-Byzantine patron saints were promoted in all art genres, particularly in connection with the future heir to the throne, Alexander, and his brother Constantine. Thanks to the Tsarina's personal explanation in a letter to Baron von Grimm, for example, Richard Brompton's painting became famous, which depicts the two brothers in reference to Alexander the Great and Emperor Constantine. Brompton owed his artistic and material survival to the Empress. Extravagant living and debtors<sup>26</sup> brought him to court, but he was rescued by the Empress of Russia, at whose request he went to St Petersburg, where he was appointed portrait painter to the empress, and where he met with much employment. During this time he was patronized by the empress favorite, Grigory Potemkin<sup>27</sup> (fig. 1).

The dynastic political options of the »Greek Project« were thus constantly present in everyday court life. Vera Proskurina examined how these and similar allegories were repeatedly explained in poetry and plays. She showed how the theme of the »Greek Project« was trend-setting for the entire literary mythology of the Russian Empire in the late eighteenth century. She also showed how Russia's role in the wars against the Ottoman Empire changed at the intersection of the »literary field« and the »field of power«: the empire striving for territorial gain was stylized as a liberator taking revenge on the enemies of Christ<sup>28</sup>.

## Court Architecture as a Tool

The exploitation of the »Greek« theme in Catherine's impression management was not limited to that, however. With the strategy of evocative naming, which not only affected the

<sup>24</sup> Tuschinski, *Gerüchte* 255 f.

<sup>25</sup> Bode, *Flottenpolitik* 180.

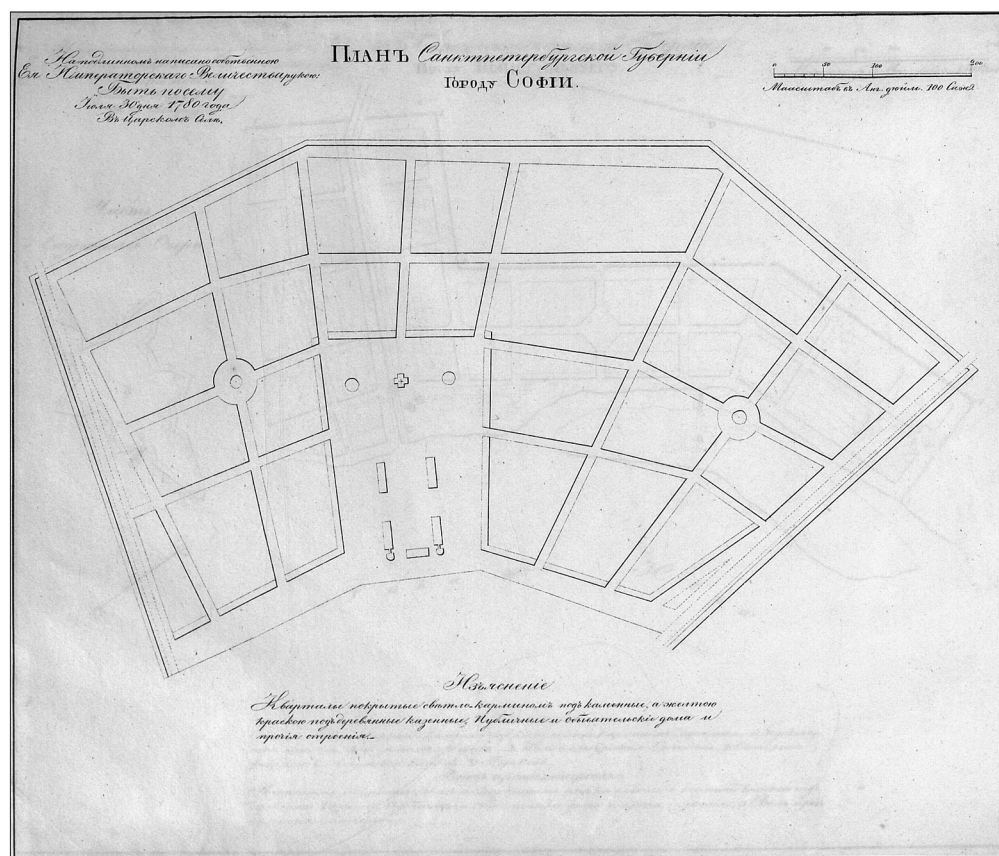
<sup>26</sup> Schulz-Forberg, *Hagen Unravelling Civilisation* 229.

<sup>27</sup> Andreeva, *Tvorchestvo* 47-48; Kross, *Britancy* 335.

<sup>28</sup> Proskurina, Vera. »The War in Greek Garb – see also Zorin, Russians.



**Fig. 2** Plan of city of Sofiya as printed in the *Polnoe sobranie zakonov*. – (After *Sobranie pervoe. Kniga chertezhei i risunkov* 1839).



two grand dukes, the peculiarity of the Greek discourse of the time was probably taken into account for the first time in the Russian Empire. Since the second half of the eighteenth century at the latest, the topos of Greece stood on the one hand for the Byzantine Empire with its »Greek« faith, and on the other hand for pre-Byzantine Greek antiquity with its pagan high culture. This was widely reflected in the court and church architecture: The Greek project and Russia's successes in the wars with the Ottoman Empire determined the ideological program of many structures in the park of Tsarskoye Selo near St Petersburg. The beginning of the work coincided with the successful actions against the Turks in the war of 1768-1774, after the already mentioned projects around the victory at Chesme. The first project of the architect V. I. Neelov (with the participation of the empress) assumed the creation of a kind of Roman Forum in the park with the Crimean Column (to commemorate the annexation of Crimea) and the Orlov Triumphal Gate. On the far bank of the Bolshoy Pond they planned to create »Turkey« (decorations depicting a Turkish city)<sup>29</sup>. A »Turkish tent« was temporarily built. The empress wanted to examine the »Turkish coast« through a telescope from the Cameron Gallery<sup>30</sup>. In the center of the Tsarskoye Selo pond on an island, the already briefly mentioned Chesme rostral column was erected on a granite pedestal according to the design of A. Rinaldi. The column

is 25 m high and is crowned with a bronze eagle (from the coat of arms of Russia) breaking a crescent moon – a symbol of Muslim Turkey.

The idea of creating the city of Sofia was likely connected with the Greek project of Catherine the Great. Rumors on this plan were mentioned in a memoir of Sir James Harris to London in 1779:

»Prince Potemkin pays little attention to the politics of Western Europe: his thoughts are constantly occupied with the plan to found a new empire in the East. The Empress shares these intentions to such an extent that, pursuing her dream, she has already named the newborn Grand Duke Constantine, assigned a Greek woman named Elena as his nanny, and in her inner circle talks about elevating him to the throne of the Eastern Empire. Meanwhile, she is building a city in Tsarskoe Selo, which will be called Constantinegrad<sup>31</sup>«.

In 1780, then, this district town was founded southwest of the Tsarskoye Selo park. The plan was developed by the Scottish architect Charles Cameron according to the »Project of large territories« conceived by Catherine: six parks and settlements up to the village of Pavlovskoye should be united by a regular layout similar to Plato's ideal state or the legend-

29 Vasiliev, *architektury Neelovy*.

30 Petrov *Znachenie* 17-18.

31 Harris, *Rossiia* 154.



**Fig. 3** Giacomo Quarenghi: View of Sophia Cathedral near Tsarskoe Selo, 1790s. – (After Giacomo Quarenghi, *Architetture e vedute*. Bergamo, Palazzo della Ragione, 14 maggio – 17 luglio 1994 [exhibition cat.] (Milano 1994) No. 255).

ary Atlantis. Cameron designed standard houses, buildings of the magistrate, the City Council, and the People's School. »Model houses« were to be built in a line (fig. 2).

The colonnade led to St Sophia Cathedral. At the request of the Empress, its architecture was to be associated with that of St Sophia in Constantinople, hence the name of the church and the city (and also by association with the »ideal rationality« of the state structure in the spirit of the works of the French Enlightenment thinkers Ch.-L. Montesquieu and J.-J. Rousseau). The cathedral was built in 1782-1788 according to Cameron's design under the supervision of Ivan E. Starov. Square in plan, with low domes, it only partly resembles the Constantinople shrine. When the overgrown trees in the park obscured the »Turkish city« on the shore of the Great Pond, the empress looked from the Cameron Gallery at the dome of the St Sophia Cathedral. Cameron had little understanding of Byzantine architecture<sup>32</sup>, so the cathedral, cross-domed in plan, with facades decorated with Doric porticoes, was interpreted more similar to the famous villa Capra la Rotonda, built by Andrea Palladio near Vicenza, and, in part, to the 4<sup>th</sup> century mausoleum of Santa Costanza in Rome<sup>33</sup>. But overall: With this architectural program the parks of Tsarskoye Selo became a courtly space, in which the Byzantine discourse was on display (fig 3).

Catherine's most ambitious project in this context was to build a palace for her son not far from Saint Petersburg, which has not been preserved. It points in the direction of the pagan antiquity discourse in the Empresses enlightened discourse: Pella Palace was planned as lavish and luxury summer residence was started to build during the reign of Catherine II of Russia for her grandson, future emperor Alexander<sup>34</sup>. It was situated on the left bank of the Neva River, then 30km east of Saint Petersburg. If completed, it would have been

Russia's largest imperial palace. Pella, partially built in 1785-1789, has been razed to the ground by Catherine's son, Paul I of Russia. Not only the buildings disappeared, but very few images of it survived the Battle of the Palaces: existing knowledge of Pella relies on a few facade elevations and watercolors by Giacomo Quarenghi and an elaborate drawing on Catherine's fan, also based on Quarenghi's drafts. Extremely fond of her grandson Alexander, the Empress liked to think of him as the new Alexander the Great. In November 1784 she purchased the estate of Pallila (also called Ivanovskaya Myza) from the heirs of the noble Ivan Neplyuev. Ivanovskaya had already been a well-appointed estate with a two-storey wooden manor, four guest houses and various services. The park contained a pool, connected to the river Neva by a canal, and was modestly adorned with statues and follies. Catherine stayed in the manor occasionally before major construction commenced. In 1785 Ivanovskaya was renamed to Pella, an allusion to the birthplace of Alexander the Great and the illustrious future envisioned for Alexander. In April 1785 Catherine wrote to Melchior Grimm that she planned to set up an English landscape park around Pella. In fact, earlier, on March 13, 1785, she authorized Ivan Starov's draft for a spacious, proper imperial palace. Groundbreaking ceremony was celebrated on July 17, 1785 when work was already underway. Grigorij Potemkin's favorite architect, Ivan Starov, was instructed to recreate the palace of the ancient rulers of Macedon in the Neoclassical style and to suitably adorn the residence with antique objects. Giacomo Quarenghi provided regular consultancy to Catherine, liaising with Starov, the English gardener John Bush was appointed to do the landscaping in 1787<sup>35</sup>. In order to accomplish the task, Starov obtained copies of Étienne-Louis Boullée's grandiose designs for rebuilding the Versailles Palace. His design for Pella, mod-

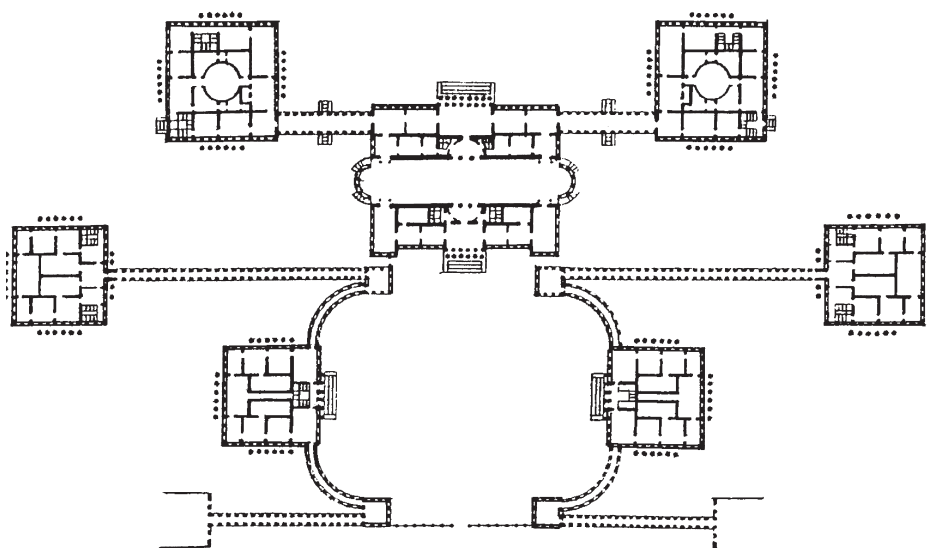
32 Tuschinski, *Gerüchte* 260.

33 Hayden, *Russian Parks and Gardens* 92-94.

34 For the following: Shvidkovsky, *Russian architecture* 286-288.

35 Voronov, *Ivan Starov* 245-250.

**Fig. 4** Ivan Starov, Plan of the Pella Palace, 1784-1789. – (After Shvidkovsky, Russian architecture 287 fig. 306).



eled on Boullée's unexecuted project, pleased the Empress so much that she declared to her European correspondents: »all my summer residences are mere huts if you compare them with Pella, which rises like Phoenix from ashes«. Catherine called Pella »rising phoenix«, alluding to Alexander's ascension to power after her own death<sup>36</sup>. Pella, designed by Ivan Starov, was the largest Russian imperial palace of the period, and more complex in composition than anything in Russia. According to the design, the core palace was to be encircled with eight auxiliary residences and sixteen smaller service buildings in Palladian style, connected with double-colonnaded galleries<sup>37</sup> (fig. 4).

The Empress invested the enormous sum of 823 thousand roubles before the Russo-Turkish War of 1787-1792 broke out and construction works were suspended in November 1789. By this time, nine core buildings and two of five connecting galleries were completed; the service buildings had not been started. The project consumed 25 million bricks, 1383 cubic sazhen of granite cladding; palaces have already been equipped with 350 heating ovens and furniture made by David Roentgen<sup>38</sup>. The palace shell, with a riverside frontage stretching for 500 m (1600 feet), remained in place until December 1796, when Catherine's successor Paul, eager to obliterate the memory of his mother's undertakings<sup>39</sup>, ordered the palace to be demolished and materials to be reused for construction of Saint Michael's Castle in St Petersburg. Demolition, authorized by Paul on December 7, 1796 actually commenced in May 1797, starting with connecting galleries. By January 1801 six of the nine buildings had been completely demolished, three others were razed during Alexander's reign. Thus, the most significant representation of the »greek discourse« was destroyed after Catherine's death (fig. 5).

## Byzantium as a Separate Topic in the Discourse?

But what about this play with the design options of courtly representational strategies and Catherine's interest in Byzantium? Catherine II inspired many Russian projects in historical studies. She herself was an active, although amateur, historian. The Empress used history avidly to promote her own political ideas and was an avid reader of Russian and ancient history<sup>40</sup>. But what about Byzantine history? One might think that she should have been interested in it too, since she kept talking about dismembering the Ottoman Empire and rebuilding Byzantium with Constantinople as its capital. This »Greek Project,« generally considered the main thrust of Russian foreign policy for the past fifteen years, had very solid cultural »shells,« such as the briefly discussed architectural projects, poems, dramas, paintings, medals, etc. But were these elements of courtly and imperial representation accompanied by a deeper interest and knowledge of the history of Byzantium that Catherine wanted to revive? Perhaps more direct information than her correspondence or the evacuation of Greece and/or Byzantium may be her study of history. Apart from Slavic-Byzantine relations, Byzantine history did not become the subject of scholarly research during her reign. Catherine II, we know, began reading Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, but gave up after the eighth volume of the French translation and did not get further than the fifth century, when Byzantium proper was just emerging. In her piece *Oleg's Early Reign*, she demonstrated, according to Sergei Ivanov, total ignorance of Byzantine history, culture, court ceremonies, etc<sup>41</sup>. Finally, numerous and obvious errors in the »Byzantine« sections of her notes on Russian history indicate

36 Quotations in: Shvidkovsky, Russian architecture 286-287.

37 Kjučarianc, Starov 99-112.

38 Voronov, Ivan Starov 250-252.

39 Kusber, Katharina die Große 286f.

40 Kusber, Katharina die Große 191-193.

41 Ivanov, Catherine.





**Fig. 5** Pella Palace. Drawing by Giacomo Quarenghi, 1791. – (After Piljavskij, Džakomo Kvarengi 57).

that Catherine had no interest in Byzantine history. Only once in this voluminous book, and then only in a footnote, do we suddenly come across a very precise, thoughtful and detailed description of Byzantine facts, namely the Varangian guards at the imperial court of Constantinople. This suggests that when Catherine considered a subject important, she could find comprehensive information on any »Byzantine« question. But, as Sergey Ivanov has convincingly argued, Catherine showed interest in Byzantine history only when it came to the »Norman question«, a highly sensitive issue in her time, and since »Byzantium« was now and then an argument for Catherine in practical politics; in court culture, ancient pre-Byzantine Greece was popular, not Byzantium. This was very much in the spirit of the Enlightenment. Catherine II distanced herself from the ideas of her pen-friend Voltaire, if she ever really shared them. The ideas of the Enlightenment were diverse and could point in completely different political directions. Voltaire's enlightened-utopian concept of the ideal state referred neither to real Greece nor to Byzantium, but to Hellas as the utopia of a secular state far removed from the imperial idea, and could more easily be applied to a territorial nation-state: When le philosophe de Verney called Catherine the »conqueror of the Ottoman Empire«<sup>42</sup>, he was thinking beyond religious, dynastic and imperial-expansionist categories; on the contrary, he dreamed of the end of a religiously legitimized oriental despotism<sup>43</sup>. In Russian discourse, however, the fight against the Ottomans was explained with decidedly imperial-expansionist motives and with strong reminiscences of a new crusade.

## Conclusions

It is striking that Catherine's architectural projects around the capital breathed much more of the discourse of the »greek project« and its possible references to Byzantium than her historical writings or the Tauride Journey in 1787, which was intended to bring about the annexation of New Russia and the Crimea. Marginal references to Byzantium were offered there. Although Potemkin had the illustrious traveling party pass through a triumphal arch on which an inscription pointed the way to Byzantium, this was to be understood more as the geographical direction of imperial expansion than just as a political and cultural heritage. In Catherine's representation, Chersones and the Crimea were established more as a sacred space, as a place of worship for the holy Prince Vladimir. The annexation of the Crimea was proclaimed as the recovery of the cradle of Orthodoxy, namely the place where the Kievan Prince Vladimir was to be baptized. The Russian Orthodox Church was now in charge here and no longer Constantinople<sup>44</sup>. The representative and politically symbolic high point of this wide-ranging imperial-expansive rule program was the famous trip of Catherine II and Joseph II to Crimea in 1787, the solemn »holy campaign« through which Catherine symbolically acquired new territories of the empire through her own physical presence<sup>45</sup>. The poet Gavriil Derzhavin proclaimed the annexation of Crimea not as the conquest of new territories but as a reunification with the territories that had formerly belonged to Russia, i.e. not an annexation but the restoration of the empire<sup>46</sup>.

42 Schumann, *Monsieur – Madame* 227-228.

43 Schumann, *Monsieur – Madame* 71-75.

44 Sebag Montefiore, *Prince of Princes* 244-259.

45 Jobst, *Taurische Reise*; Schonle, *Garden*.

46 Derzhavin, *Na priobretenie Kryma* 181-188.



It can be assumed that Catherine never regarded the »Greek Project« as a practical endeavor to restore a real state with its own laws, officials, territorial divisions and, ultimately, the church. Instead, the »Greek Project« of Catherine II functioned as an amalgamation of foreign diplomatic and economic regulatory objectives as well as ethical-aesthetic ideas of civilization and self-presentation strategies of the Russian government and thus displayed in art, literature and especially architecture. At the same time, architectural forms were developed that symbolically exaggerated the historical potential of this alliance with a view to the restoration of the Greek Empire. Independently of this Russian-Austrian

foreign policy cooperation, the conflicts with the Ottoman Empire and the incorporation of the territories on the Black Sea were mythologized depending on the target audience and political needs. The Greek theme could be inscribed in any religious, moral-philosophical or aesthetic context due to the diversity and presence of the enlightened discourse on antiquity. This diversity and topicality also allowed for a variety of interpretations, attributions and classifications that became at some point independent of the official mythologization. Ultimately, the »Greek Project« became more of a powerful rumour with an impact on Russian court culture than a concrete political project.

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## Summary / Zusammenfassung / Résumé

### Catherine II., the Greek Project, Byzantium and the Russian Court

Russia's conflict with the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the eighteenth century not only influenced the balance of power between the powers in Europe, but also had effects within Russia on several levels, above all on the level of court culture, architecture, fine arts and literature. In a certain sense, it changed Russia's perspective on itself in the context of its self-positioning in Europe and in relation to Europe. This change is also reflected in the so called »Greek Project«. Its upcoming in the context with the Austro-Russian Treaty of 1780, its representation in court culture and its possible connection that mixed an enlightened discourse on ancient Greece with the Russian Monarchy as a possible heir of the Byzantine Empire, is discussed in the essay. For Catherine II and the Russian court the rumor that the Russian Empire could conquer the European parts of the Ottoman Empire and its capital was as much of importance than the actual geopolitical result.

### Katharina II., das griechische Projekt, Byzanz und der russische Hof

Der Konflikt Russlands mit dem Osmanischen Reich in der zweiten Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts beeinflusste nicht nur das Kräfteverhältnis zwischen den Mächten in Europa, sondern hatte auch Auswirkungen innerhalb Russlands auf mehreren Ebenen, vor allem auf der Ebene der höfischen Kultur, Architektur, bildenden Kunst und Literatur. In gewisser Weise veränderte er Russlands Perspektive auf sich selbst im Kontext seiner Selbstpositionierung in Europa und in Bezug auf Europa. Diese Veränderung spiegelt sich auch im sogenannten »Griechischen Projekt« wider. Sein Aufkommen im Zusammenhang mit dem österreichisch-russischen Vertrag von 1780, seine Darstellung in der höfischen Kultur und seine mögliche Verbindung, die einen aufgeklärten Diskurs über das antike Griechenland mit der russischen Monarchie als möglichem Erben des Byzantinischen Reiches vermischte, werden in dem Aufsatz diskutiert. Für Katharina II. und den russischen Hof war das Gerücht, dass das Russische Reich die europäischen Teile des Osmanischen Reiches und seine Hauptstadt erobern könnte, ebenso wichtig wie das tatsächliche geopolitische Ergebnis.

## **Catherine II, le projet grec, Byzance et la cour de Russie**

Le conflit entre la Russie et l'Empire ottoman dans la seconde moitié du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle n'a pas seulement influencé l'équilibre des forces entre les puissances en Europe, mais a également eu des effets à l'intérieur de la Russie à plusieurs niveaux, surtout au niveau de la culture de cour, de l'architecture, des beaux-arts et de la littérature. D'une certaine manière, la Russie a changé de perspective sur elle-même dans le contexte de son positionnement en Europe et par rapport à l'Europe.

Ce changement se reflète également dans ce que l'on appelle le »projet grec«. Son apparition dans le contexte du traité austro-russe de 1780, sa représentation dans la culture de la cour et son lien possible entre un discours éclairé sur la Grèce antique et la monarchie russe en tant qu'héritière possible de l'empire byzantin, sont examinés dans cet essai. Pour Catherine II et la cour de Russie, la rumeur selon laquelle l'Empire russe pourrait conquérir les parties européennes de l'Empire ottoman et sa capitale était aussi importante que le résultat géopolitique réel.