

# Greek Indologist Dimitrios Galanos

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Dimitrios Galanos (1760-1833) was the first Greek Indologist, and remains the most important and prolific one until the present day. Born in Athens in a middle class family, a good and diligent pupil, he made his studies in Athens, Mesolonghi, Patmos and Constantinople (Istanbul) in Greek, Latin, grammar, theology, philosophy and rhetorics; in the end, he accepted the offer of an agent in Constantinople to travel to Colcata in order to teach Greek to the children of the Greek merchant families living there, and being engaged in commerce in parallel.

The most important sources on his life and work are those by Vassiliades (2000: 138 ff.) who gives a concise general introduction, see also Vassiliades (2018), Schulz (1969), and Kargakos (1994). Also, several authors and officials contribute, as an Introduction to his life and lexicographical work, in his *Lexicon* (see Galanos 2010: 9-50).

We must bear in mind that Greece at that time was under Turkish rule. Indeed such a country as Greece did not exist. What existed was the Ottoman Empire of which Greece was a part. Unlike the country's glorious past, the present was modest, moreover, it is little known, that under Turkish rule, sciences and scholarship were prohibited. What was possible, was learning "theology", and what could be comprised in that discipline. Mesolonghi at that time, before the fatal siege by the Turks and its disaster in which also Lord Byron lost his life, was an important cultural centre. On Patmos, where the Cave of John the Revelator or Theologian, author of the last book of the Bible, is being shown, a large monastery has been established with a most rich library functioning until this day, where Galanos spent eight years learning theology, philosophy and related.

As it seems, he had a double vein: being trained to become a priest, he was also engaged in commerce from his early years, perhaps already in Messolongi, and he was very talented both here below and in the unwordly occupations. He never gave up his deep religious devotion either to God or to his parents, to whom he always wrote with deep

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respect. It is impressive, that having finished his studies in Constantinople, he rejected a favourable offer to become priest in the old Byzantine centre Caesarea (now Kayseri) in Cappadocia and preferred to continue to study according to his ambitious plans (Kargakos 1994: 36).

Following an offer to teach Greek to the children of the merchant families in Colcata, he arrived there, after more than six months of journey, in 1786, and he never returned to his homeland. As he did not know English, he immediately began with it, and he not only learnt the language quickly but also in an excellent level. After six years in teaching activity and learning, obviously paid very well by his fellow-countrymen, the talented young scholar felt well off enough to move to Varanasi and he dedicated himself there to studying various Indian languages, and to translating sacred Indian texts. He knew several modern languages, he learned Sanskrit, Persian, Hindi, Turkish and other languages, and sent numerous translations from Sanskrit to Athens to be published. He was also engaged in compiling vocabularies, phrase-books and dictionaries. Interested in philosophical thought, in his translational activity he concentrated on didactic stories and devotional poems, among which, naturally, there is the *Bhagavadgītā* (cf. Vassiliades 2000: 146-147).

For the peculiar Greek standards it must be remarked that during his life-time, and also before, no unified common Greek language existed. He used “Ancient Greek” in a simplified but correct way, or to be precise, a Koine-like language (Vassiliades 2000: 147) without mistakes and made himself understood both to his parents and friends with whom he had correspondence, and in scholarly level.<sup>1</sup> The ill-famed Greek “language question” which harassed the Greek society enough, began after him, with the birth of the independent state where a “purifying” language was created triggering a fierce linguistic debate that lasted for about 150 years. Given this idiosyncrasy, his capabilities in lexicography are especially impressive.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Koine or the “Common Dialect” was the late register of Classical Greek which came into being roughly from the 3rd cent. B.C., and had a life for about 600 years which does not mean that the old dialects died away at once. One result of the activity of Alexander the Great was that, for his large-scale plans, he had to hire soldiers from the *whole* of the Greek territory who spoke dialectically different mother-tongues. The interaction among them led to a “common” dialect. It pays to remark that the first language of Alexander was *Macedonian*, a northern Greek dialect although he received his education by Aristotle who, certainly, used the cultured Attic dialect.

Kargakos (1994: 50) calls him “Korais of the East”. To understand this, we must know that Adamandios Korais, a little after Galanos, was keen on “implanting” the western thought and civilization into the citizenry of the independent Greek state, with linguistic innovations added, whereas Galanos, similarly, wanted to bring the Indian wisdom to his country.

He lived in Varanasi for forty years and prepared to return to his country which became independent just about the time when he died in 1833. He made a considerable fortune that he gave over to a reliable bank to manage it, and he was able not only to help his relatives and friends economically but he also left part of his fortune to establish a scientific institution in Athens (now the University of Athens of which he is the main benefactor). His fortune was so considerable that for a time, the authorities made suspicions about its origin. However, except for his strange, anachoretic life, nothing suspicious was found. It is probable, that he received donations in addition the most important one of which must have been that by Piotr Fedoroff, a Russian merchant, with whom, “by natural affinity” he spent much time together. He erected a monument to his friend when he died.

Galanos is thought to have died on cholera just the moment when he decided to return to his country which became free of Turkish rule. Part of his legacy is in the National Library in Athens, comprising translations from Sanskrit, and the dictionary recently published. Some of his works remain in manuscript form.

His tomb can be visited in the Christian Cemetery in Varanasi (the place is not to be confused with the English Military Cemetery at the 99 Cantonment). The monument bears the dedication “In Memory of Demetrius Galanos an Athenian” written by Munshi Sital Singh who had been his teacher and friend, and is repeated in Greek and in Persian. He was also the person who suggested Galanos to undertake the difficult work of translations (Kargakos 1994: 89). A few years ago the tomb, then in a poor condition, was restored by the Greek Indologist Demetrius Vassiliades.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Whereas his Sanskrit-English-Greek Dictionary was published as late as 2001 (republished 2010), his contribution was familiar to August Böhtlingk, perhaps the most prolific lexicographer of the Sanskrit language. His importance for comparative philology was also stressed. Schulz (1969: 342) writes on “amazing etymological comparisons”, and that he must have been familiar with the discoveries of W. Jones. See also Vassiliades 2000: 150.

<sup>3</sup> See Vassiliades 2000: 145, and Pl. 22.

**References:**

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