

# Introduction

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We would like to think a little about Turkey and Europe's common roots.<sup>1</sup> This is an important topic both for Turkey and Europe, and, in a wider sense, for the West and the Near East. The term 'Near East' is of course Eurocentric, meaning the region near to, but East of, Europe. Turkey is somehow situated between these two regions and cannot be said to entirely belong to one or the other.<sup>2</sup> The question of whether Turkey belongs to Europe or not is frequently asked but never satisfactorily answered.

## Turkey and Europe

According to its well-known definition, Europe ends in the east at the Ural mountains and the Bosphorus strait. This definition would leave only a tiny piece of Turkey together with half of Istanbul in Europe. Yet this metropolis straddles the Bosphorus, and its two sides do not belong to different worlds. The geographical definition of Europe is not an objective and rational one, but rather a historical and political one.<sup>3</sup> Religious, military and economic criteria and interests influence decisions on the 'Europeanness' of Turkey. The cultural-historical definition of Europe states that only countries that participated in the Renaissance belong to it. This would exclude the Balkan countries and Greece.<sup>4</sup> This definition is obviously too narrow; it restricts Europe to its western and central parts.

One could escape from this quandary and yet retain the historical-cultural way of defining Europe by asking which countries have crucially contributed to the cultural face of Europe, and, in a broader sense, that of the West. The Greeks regarded almost everybody involved in the Hellenic world as 'Greek'; their identity was almost exclusively a cultural one.<sup>5</sup> What happens if Turkey is regarded this way?

The roots of philosophy – that is of the radically rational approach to the world – are to be found on the Aegean coast of Asia Minor, i.e. present-day Anatolia, especially in the Greek cities between Smyrna and Miletus. Heraclitus of Ephesus summed it up in one sentence: 'Common to all is thinking' (or: 'it is given to all men to recognise themselves and to think sensibly').<sup>6</sup> From Thales and Heraclitus, who supplemented the mythical worldview with one based on careful observation and

rational explanation, there has been an uninterrupted line of philosophers and scientists which continues to the present day.

About 800 BC, a Greek trading post was formed at Al Mina on the river Orontes near Antakya. These traders were confronted with a host of foreign languages. Influenced by the new rational thinking, they asked whether there were basic elements – atoms – in all languages. As such they identified the sounds. Thus the alphabet – the first phonetic transcription in human history – was developed.<sup>7</sup> This invention now enabled everyone to learn to read and write with a little effort in a relatively short time. Phonetic spelling, first used by the merchants in documentation and accounting, was soon applied to other texts, such as epics, poems and historical notes. Laws could now be written down and everyone could learn about their rights and obligations, which rationalised politics and administration.

A third element of modern culture was created in Anatolia. Coins were minted, for the first time in history, in the culturally rich triangle between Sardis, Smyrna and Miletus, i.e. the Phrygian-Lyidian-Ionian area. Following this innovation, all kinds of goods, commodities and services could be exchanged. It was now possible to measure and aggregate property exactly.

Philosophy and science, the alphabet and coined money may be seen as collective inventions, the outcome<sup>6</sup> of a common intellectual climate. Individual figures, whose names are still revered as the founders of Western culture, were also features and products of this climate.

Galenus, who summarised and systemised Greco-Roman medical knowledge and became the most influential teacher of medicine until early modernity, was a citizen of Bergama, ancient Pergamon. The best-known pharmacologist of antiquity, Dioscorides, came from Anazarbos near Adana. Herodotus of Halicarnassos (today's Bodrum), the father of history, geography and ethnography, Strabo of Amasia, the most famous antique geographer, and Pausanias of Manisa, author of the first travel guide, all came from Asia Minor. So too did the mathematicians and astronomers Thales of Miletus and Apollonius of Perge. These scholars influenced not only Europe and the West, but also the Arabs and Islamic culture. Asia Minor was the cradle of poetic innovators such as Homer and Aesop. From there originated also Paulus of Tarsus, John the Evangelist and the Cappadocian church fathers.

Western culture is thus, to a considerable extent, based on the achievements of the pluri-cultural region now called Anatolia. The same can be said of Islamic culture. Asia Minor may also serve as a role model for tolerance; in its cities shrines of various religions can be found side-by-side. The three monotheistic world religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam were able to coexist there for a long time. In Christian Anatolia, Jewish communities existed, and in Islamic Anatolia Christian communities survived almost up to the present time. This combination of widespread tolerance with a global outlook is something we should strive to regain or to preserve wherever its vestiges still exist.

But what responses does one actually see? Are contemporary Anatolians or the West aware of this common ground? Do Turkish high schools teach Greek? Is there

some consciousness of the common cultural heroes? Has Amaseia erected a monument to Strabo, the greatest son of the city? Or have the inhabitants of Kütahya erected one to Aesop? Somewhat more advanced in this respect is Antalya. In its centre stands a statue of Attalus, King of Pergamon, who founded the city after whom it was called; this statue was erected a few years ago. It is a sign of hope. Yet, where in the cultural centre of Bodrum can one find any monument named after Herodotus? Or, the hospital in Bergama named after Galenus? Is there a Dioscorides Eczanesi (pharmacy) in Mersin? Much work remains to be done to make the citizens of Turkey aware of a glorious past which is, after all, their own.

Over the past 50 years, many ruins from this past have been uncovered and partially reconstructed. They remain, however, mainly tourist attractions. Even the more well-educated Turks see little more in them than their economic value. Archaeologists, historians and educational tourists, who come in increasing numbers to Turkey every year to work on the ancient monuments or to contemplate them, are too often seen as strangers who are merely seeking their own cultural roots and not those of Turkey and the Turks. Since the foundation of the Turkish Republic, its citizens tend to predominantly identify with the conquerors of Anatolia who came from Central Asia. This is historically inaccurate and potentially disastrous politically. Today's Turks are a mixture of many components. Amongst these are Assyrians, Hittites, Urartians, Phrygians, Lydians, Armenians, Kurds, Thracians, Greeks, Romans, even Celts and Germans, Jews and, finally, after the Byzantine defeat against the Selçuks at Manzikert (1071) also Turkish tribes. The Turkish people did not come to Anatolia, it originated there out of these components. So to single out one of them, the central Asiatic one, means a decisive standoffishness from Europe as well as from the Near East.

Each of these components has helped to form the contemporary Turkish people and culture. If a hierarchy among them is to be established, the most important components are (in historical succession): the culture of Greco-Roman antiquity, the Byzantine culture of the Middle Ages, the Selçuk-Ottoman culture of the High Middle Ages and early modern times, and Western culture. From Central Asia, of course, comes the Turkish language and the name. Yet in this the Turks are no exception. The Hungarians and Estonians also speak non-European languages, which are remotely related to Turkish. Yet nobody doubts the Europeaness of these people or even thinks to exclude their countries from the EU. Turkey is, however, an Islamic country (as are, incidentally, also Bosnia and Albania). Turkish exclusion from Europe is partly self-exclusion.

There is a one-sided identification with the Turkish tribes of Central Asia. Of course it could be argued that this has also been imposed on the Turks by the Christian Occident, which regarded the Ottoman Empire as its arch-enemy. This 'othering' of the Turks has continued into modern, secularist times. Ignorance and ideology play a calamitous role on both sides. Questions like those above posed to the Turks may also be posed to the guardians of European identity. Why do the common cultural roots hardly play a role in the debate about Turkey's EU membership? Are European leaders unaware of them? And what do these leaders do for the

maintenance of a common historical-cultural consciousness? Is Greek taught in many European high schools? Is the EU a mainly economical-political amalgamation or is it a club of post-Christians?

Conflicts of interests or of ideologies can hardly be solved by rational argumentation. Yet by patient explanation some common ground might still be found.

### References and Notes

1. The information given here is based on a conference 'Turkey and the Roots of European Culture', organised by Professor Dr Johannes Nollé at Akdeniz University in 2007.
2. Y. H. Ferguson (2013) Turkey and the EU: a changed context. *European Review*, **21**, pp. 362–371. See also Ferguson's paper in this issue.
3. M. Cornis-Pope, T. Noble and J. Stagl (2000) Perspectives on Europe. *Sociologica Internationalis*, **38**(2), pp. 245–256.
4. This would also exclude Russia and the Byzantine Empire.
5. A similar moot question in ancient Greece was whether Macedonians were Hellenes or not. It has now resurfaced in the quarrel about whether the ancient Macedonians can be appropriated as forefathers by the contemporary states of Greece and Macedonia.
6. B 113 (xynón esti pási to phronéein).
7. G. Lehman (2005) Al Mina and the East: A Report on research in progress. In: A. Villing (ed.), *The Greeks in the East* (London: British Museum Research Publications), vol. 157, pp. 61–92.

### About the Author

**Esma Durugönül** studied Sociology, Political Sciences and Spanish Philology, receiving her MA in 1985 and her PhD in 1993 from the Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn, Germany. She is currently a professor and chair of the Department of Sociology of the Faculty of Letters at the Akdeniz University, Antalya, Turkey. Her research interests include identity, culture, migration, the African Diaspora in Asia and in Turkey; racism, nationalism, ethnocentrism and social movements.