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Palmscaping Athens

Towards a new reading of the Greek landscape

Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to investigate the role of plants in the formation of urban landscapes. With the conviction that 'Nature,' or more specifically plant elements, participate substantially in the shape of urban landscapes and social identities, a new reading of the contemporary Greek landscape is proposed, seeking the tools of this reading in the Palm tree.

Palms, in their majority, are considered as tropical trees, in the sense that they originate from tropical and subtropical regions. However, today palms are found all around the world, which proves that they are great travellers.

The perpetual journeys of plants have deeply reformed alimentary and agricultural practices all over the world. The introduction of plants to new ecosystems changes their evolution and inflorescence and sometimes produces new species, thus resulting in the creation of hybrid ecosystems. At the same time, new balances are also found at a social level. Transplantation of plants to different cultural environments changes their content and social significance, and they are called upon to fulfil different functions in their new habitats.

Since antiquity, palms have been returning to the Greek territory, either as a seed, a fruit, a tree or a myth. The Palm tree has long been seen as a characteristic feature of the Greek landscape, especially since its re-introduction during the era of Palingenesis, when the modern Greek state was established. Palms have been (re)introduced to Greece at several points in history, each time in a different way, under different cultural and socio-economic conditions. As an active element in the Greek landscape, they seem to have a particular capacity for taking on renewed or enriched conceptual content. In some cases, they dominate the city, becoming not only part of the cityscape, but also part of its social identity and history.

Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to investigate the role of plants in the formation of urban landscapes.

With the conviction that 'Nature,' or more specifically plant elements, participate substantially in the shape of urban landscapes and social identities, a new reading of the contemporary Greek landscape is proposed, seeking the tools of this reading in the Palm tree.

The term 'Palmscaping' is a new term, invented within the frame of a wider on-going research project.¹ It is used in the title to indicate that palm trees have been introduced in the Greek territory several times, each time in a different way, under different cultural conditions and in a different socio-economic frame. As an active element in the Greek landscape, they seem to have a particular capacity for taking on renewed or enriched conceptual content.

This paper will focus on Athens, the capital of the modern Greek state since 1834, and its landscape. We will investigate the continuous and persistent presence of palms that seems to have characterised the Attic landscape, from the era of Palingenesis,² the era when the modern Greek state was established, up to today.

Meeting with the 'other': Palms and transplantation of plants

Palms, in their majority, are considered as tropical trees, in the sense that they originate from tropical and subtropical regions of America, Asia and Africa. Their most northerly natural localities lie in southern France (Lack and Martius 2022, 9). However, today palms are found all around the world, a fact that proves that they are great travellers.

The action of travel is the action of going to somewhere else, and it is the prerequisite for the meeting with the 'other' (other people, other civilisations), which results at the same time in the meeting with 'other' ecosystems, 'other' landscapes, *exotic ones*. The word *exotic*, etymologically, comes from the Greek 'exotikos' (foreign), literally meaning 'from the outside' (in Greek 'exo' means 'outside'). It is used to describe something that comes from an 'other' land and therefore something we do not know, something unknown. The unknown or the unusual never leaves someone neutral or without emotions. Something that is *exotic* (*n. Exoticism*), as it incorporates the notion of the unknown, can either charm or horrify.

When the first western explorers travelled towards the East³ seeking new territories, they were attracted by the 'other' ecosystems they encountered in the lands they discovered, including their exotic plants and animals. They immediately showed great interest in uncovering their uses and roles in indigenous societies. Therefore, they drew them, described them, wrote about them, and eventually transported them to the West, according to their agricultural importance, their medical applications or their decorative value (Mendes Ferrao 2016, 9). Westerners gradually developed a great interest in exotic plants, whether for their potential medical uses or their richness in nutrient fruits, which offered great economic advantage (Rhizopoulou 2007, 35–6). This is why, despite the numerous difficulties involved in the act of transplantation, not only during long sea journeys that may have lasted for months,

¹ This paper is part of a wider on-going PhD research project, entitled Towards a new methodology of reading the Greek landscape: The Palm tree, that focuses on three different Greek cities: Nafplio (the first capital of Greece, 1829–1833), Mesolonghi (a city that played a very crucial role during the War of Independence), and Athens (capital of the modern Greek state from 1834 to the present day). This PhD research project has been granted the ELKE / NTUA scholarship since 2021.

² Palingenesis is considered as the era of the establishment of the modern Greek state during the nineteenth century, following the end of the Independence War and the creation of its new capital, Athens. This was an era marked by the construction of a national identity. It was during Palingenesis that the neoclassical style was gradually established as the official architectural style. This together with Queen Amalie's re-introduction of palms in the Royal, came to characterise the Attic landscape.

³ The 'East' is used here to describe those parts of the non-western world that later on became colonies of the West. 'East' may in this paper, therefore, refer to continents to the west or to the south of Europe, like America or Africa.

but also during the process of acclimatisation to the much colder climates of western European countries, many exotic plants were successfully introduced to Europe. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries⁴ various private expeditions were organised for the collecting of exotic plants to enrich western plant collections, with the ultimate aim of increasing the economic influence and prestige of the collectors (Harris 2011, 30–32).

The interest of the first western explorers was quickly captured by the Palm's characteristic form, and they very early on attempted to transport it to the West. According to Joseph Paxton's *Botanical Pocket Dictionary*, the species *Phoenix dactylifera* L., the well-known Date Palm, arrived from the 'Levant' (Arabia, Upper Egypt, etc.) in England for the first time in 1597 (Paxton 1840, 242). The commerce of its fruits, the dates,⁵ had been very popular during the Middle Ages thanks to the extended implantations of palm groves that were gradually established across Africa (Braudel 1972, 169).

Despite its early popularity, the Palm tree was studied quite late. By the late nineteenth century, very few species of palms had been systematically analysed. In fact, the palm tree figures proudly in many western royal gardens, sometimes in special constructions made out of steel and glass, the Palmhouses, many years before it finds its place in the taxonomical tables of the science of Botany.

Palms and the science of Botany

According to the *Genera Palmarum*, the latest study focused on the classification of palms (Dransfield 2008), it is estimated that there are 183 different genus and more than 2400 different species (Lack and Martius 2022, 9). Despite their diversity in form and in size,⁶ their recognisable, rather simple growth form and structure ensured that early European naturalists visiting the tropics would marvel at them as plants.

One of the first naturalists to focus on the classification of palms was the Bavarian Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius (1794-1868), who together with Johann Baptist Spix (1781-1826) was sent from Munich to Brazil in 1817 by Maximilian I Joseph, the King of Bavaria, as part of a wider scientific expedition that focused on the up-to-that-point largely unknown flora of Brazil. This three-year-long expedition in Brazil resulted in the *Historia naturalis palmarum*,⁷ which was one of the first, if not the first, attempt to focus on the impressive – and rather extensive as is now known – family of Palms. Martius was one of the few westerners able to see palms in their natural habitat. In his travelogue, *Travels in Brazil*, published in 1824, Martius/ refers to palms as *majestic* and talks about their *superiority*.⁸

4 It was mainly during the nineteenth century, which witnessed technological advances in the transportation of plants, such as the 'Wardian cases', as well as advances in the acclimatisation of plants, that the commerce in exotic plants became generalised.

5 According to H. Baillot, the dates, fruits of *Phoenix dactylifera*, are "un des plus riches présents faits à l'homme" (one of the richest presents given to humans) (H. Baillot 1895, 283).

6 Palms are evergreen trees whose leaves differ markedly in size (from 15cm up to 25m long) and shape throughout their stages of evolution. The height of different palm species varies from 12–25cm to over 50–60m.

7 Between 1824 and 1853, von Martius completed, together with H. Mohl and F. Unger, the volumes of *Historia naturalis Palmarum*.

8 "The towering stems of the palms, with their waving crowns, [palms] are an incomparable ornament of the forests, the beauty and majesty of which no language can describe" (Spix and Martius 1824, 240).

Linnaeus,⁹ who knew of only nine different palm species, called this rather unusual botanical family *Principes*, meaning *Princes*, distinguishing them from all the other plants (Baumann 1993, 58–9). Indeed, palms are members of one of the few monocotyledon families and are seldom mistaken for members of any other plant family. A cross-section of a palm stem does not follow the typical wood section of a tree of a dicotyledon family. The wood of dicotyledons consists of secondary tissues formed by a meristematic layer, the cambium, which usually produces yearly increments throughout the life of a tree. By contrast, the 'wood' of palms is primary in origin. A typical palm stem attains a maximum diameter, and subsequently shows relatively little increase in girth. The mechanical properties of palm stems, however, change with age (the stiffness of palm stems increases with height, for example). Their central vascular cylinders explain their flexibility and high resistance to strong wind. Concerning the roots, contrary to those of dicotyledons, most of the palm roots emerge directly from the stem. Large masses of relatively short roots are formed at ground level or slightly below, which can allow them to be relatively easily transported and transplanted.

However, once transplanted in the most temperate climes, palms become strictly ornamental. Transplanted to the West, the Palm tree does not play the same role as in the East, where it plays a key part in the local economy and alimentation¹⁰ of indigenous societies. Removed from their natural habitat, they become a strictly ornamental tree in the West. Even when transplanted into structures specially designed to house exotic plants, the glasshouses, or better the *Palmhouses*, which were glasshouses big enough to host and acclimatise Palm species, palms do not manage to reach the same maturity levels. On the contrary, they always remain undersized versions of their true selves (Lack and Martius 2022, 9). Gradually, palms, inside or outside the Palmhouse, become an icon of the East itself, living proof and evidence that the East exists...

The Palm tree in Greece and the Attic landscape

In the West, palms, with their distinctive nature and exotic origin, are considered as the embodiment of exoticism. But what happens when palms arrive in Greece?

Given the multiple journeys of different palm species to Greece, that country seems to have shown a keener interest in palms than any other western country, and this has not been a result only of Greece's warmer climate. Palms have been travelling to Greece since antiquity, and an interesting and multilayered relationship has formed throughout the centuries between the tree, the landscape, the local society and its history. Even though the Palm was not the only tree to be imported in large numbers, it is a unique case. While other species, such as Eucalyptus (from

⁹ Carl von Linnaeus (1722–1778) was a Swedish botanist who formalised the binomial nomenclature, the modern system for naming plants.

¹⁰ Paxton's *Botanical Pocket Dictionary* notes that palms of the genus of *Phoenix* (the Date Palm is one of these) are, among many other uses, used by local communities for food (not only their fruits, that are rich in nutrients, but also a juice sometimes extracted from the tree, that is used to make wine, or in certain cases, a kind of farina is made from the heart of the stem), their leaves are used for bags and baskets, and their trunk is used in construction, or in order to create ropes (Paxton 1840, 242).

Australia) or *Schinus Molle* (from northern South America), have similarly been imported into the Greek landscape at different times, none of these trees became associated with images of the Greek landscape to the same extent as did certain species of palms.

Palms have been present in the Mediterranean basin since antiquity. According to the latest classification of palms, only two are indigenous to European lands (Dransfield 2008, 106). The first is the *Phoenix theophrastii*,¹¹ or the Cretan Palm. It originates from the island of Crete and is named after *Theophrastus*, who, together with Aristotle, first attempted a systematic classification of plants. The second is the much smaller *Chamaeropes humilis*, known also as the European Dwarf Palm, indigenous to the south of France. However, neither of these are among the most popular species still thriving today, and neither are among those dominating the contemporary Greek landscape.

Greece appears to be a favourite destination for many palm species that are foreign to the indigenous Greek flora. *Phoenix dactylifera*, or the Date Palm, from Arabia, the two Washingtonian species, *filifera* and *W. robusta*, from California, and *Phoenix canariensis*, or the Canarian Palm, from the Canary Islands, are some of the many different Palm species that have been introduced to the Greek landscape several times.

The following paragraphs will trace some of the many journeys of different palm species to Greece, and more specifically to the Attic landscape.

The first journey: Forming a precedent

In ancient Greece, the Palm tree was known both as a fruit and a tree, and was usually placed (alone or in groups) next to a sacred place, such as a temple. Based on archaeological evidence, such as representations of palm trees in frescos,¹² as well as on ancient coins¹³ and vessels discovered in Santorini, Crete, Mycenae and Tiryns, palms were certainly present in the landscape (Tranta-Nikoli 2003, 80–85).

Other than the 'local' *Phoenix theophrastii*, known as the Cretan Palm, that may have been transplanted from the island of Crete to other Greek city-ports during antiquity, there was another Palm that was very common in the ancient Greek landscape: *Phoenix dactylifera*, or the Date Palm (Baumann 1993, 58, 213). Pausanias' ancient scripts describe the Date Palm as a foreign tree from Arabia whose fruits are not edible.¹⁴ This is an accurate description, as the fruits of the Date Palm in Greece do not mature sufficiently to eat in the way they do in their natural environment.

We do not know when or how the first Date Palm travelled to

¹¹ Theophrastus, after his teacher Aristotle, was the first to set the foundations of the science of Botany. His works '*Historia Plantarum*' and '*De causis plantarum*' are major.

¹² A characteristic example is the fresco at the East frieze of Room 5, West House, part of the Akrotiri archaeological site on the island of Santorini (Akrotiri settlement of Thira), depicting different palm trees along a river.

¹³ See the collection of coins preserved at the Nomismatiko Museum of Athens (Museum of Coin in Athens).

¹⁴ This is also mentioned by Theophrastus in his *History of Plants*, vol. III, 5.

Greece. According to Baumann, during the military expeditions of Alexander the Great, there were many plants that were collected and transported back to Athens, at the requests of Theophrastus and his teacher, Aristotle (Baumann 1993, 58–59). What we know for certain is that when the Date Palm arrives in Greece, it loses its economic value and becomes an ornamental and symbolic plant.

Above all, the Palm tree is a symbol. In Greek mythology, it is connected with the births of Apollo and Leto. It is also related to the cycle of life, suggesting that the mythical bird known as the Phoenix¹⁵ does not share its name with the palm genus of Phoenix¹⁶ purely by coincidence. 'Phoenix' derives from the Greek word 'Phoenikas,' or 'Foenikas' which means Palm tree, while at the same time, it can also mean 'someone whose origins are in ancient Phoenicia,' indicating perhaps palms' eastern origins. Furthermore, the Palm tree is mentioned as being one of the symbolic plants of the Olympic Games. Palm leaves have been symbols of power and victory ever since (Rhizopoulou and Rizou 2004) (Rhizopoulou 2004, 1602–1603).

Byzantine period

The symbolic use of plants, and in particular of palms, was not unknown during the Byzantine period. There is a very interesting thirteenth-century manuscript that presents 14 different plants of the wider Mediterranean region and links them to 14 different virtues. The author is unknown, but the manuscript is known as the 'Symbolic Garden,' or the 'Theoretikon Paradisseion.'¹⁷ The very precise and detailed description of plants the manuscript offers proves that the author was very familiar with his subject matter. Among those represented is the Date Palm. Following the typical Palm tree structure, the Date Palm has no branches. On the contrary, its evergreen leaves all sprout directly from its trunk [f. 18V, 14–15]. So, in the garden of virtues that the manuscript describes, the Date Palm becomes the symbol of Justice and good governance¹⁸ (Sophia Rhizopoulou 2012, 34, 62–63). Often, Byzantine emperors, saints and military leaders were depicted holding a palm leaf (Georgiadis 2019, 136).

Byzantine literature is replete with metaphorical uses of plants and gardens. The Garden of Eden is an interesting example, employed as a synonym of Paradise.¹⁹ There are many descriptions and representations of Paradise as a safe natural environment, with warm climate, sufficiency of water and abundance and variety of fruits (Rhizopoulou 2012, 16–17). And palms are inevitably part of this scene. But this story is explored further below.

Ottoman Athens

During the Byzantine and until the later Ottoman period, palms

15 According to Herodotus, the mythical bird 'Phoenix' is able to be reborn from its own ashes. It is therefore immortal. He says it lives in ancient Egypt but originated in Arabia.

16 There are 14 known species belonging to the genus of *Phoenix*, including *Phoenix dactylifera*, *Phoenix theophrastii* and *Phoenix canariensis* (Dransfield 2008, 242). Some of them, such as *Phoenix dactylifera* or the Date Palm, and *Phoenix theophrastii*, have been present in the Mediterranean basin since antiquity.

17 This manuscript was first published by Margaret Thompson (1907–1993) in French, with the title *Le Jardin symbolique*. The English version followed in 1989, with the title *Symbolic Garden: Reflections drawn from a Garden of Virtues, A XIIIth century Greek Manuscript* (Sophia Rhizopoulou 2012, 10–11).

18 According to the manuscript [f. 19R, 7–9], the Date Palm takes its time maturing its fruits. In the same way, justice requires a lot of effort to shine (free translation from the author).

19 The word 'Paradise' comes from the Persian word *pairi-daeza*, which means 'garden of pleasure.' It is a synthesis of the two words *pairi* (around/surroundings) and *daeza* (wall). Paradise, therefore, is an open space, surrounded and protected by walls, and so distinguished from the spaces beyond (Rhizopoulou, 2012, 16–17).

were sporadically present in Athens. According to William St Clair, Athens in 1800 was a very small oriental town, 'with its Palms, its camels, and its mosques,' that probably contained no more than 1300 houses in all (Merryman and Elsen 2002, 14). While their numbers were nowhere near to what they are today, in the early 1800s, single impressive palms would appear sporadically near a sacred place, such as a Byzantine church, or a mosque, near an ancient temple, such as the temple of Hephaestus or the Parthenon, or as part of a private garden of an important merchant.

Based on different panoramic representations and descriptions of Athens at the beginning of the nineteenth century, four to five standing palms have been recorded (Figure 1). It has not been possible to discover who put them there or when. But based on their representation, they must have all belonged to the genus of Phoenix (possibly either Phoenix dactylifera or Phoenix theophrastii). One of them was an impressive and tall date palm (Phoenix dactylifera), that was transplanted in the mid 1800s to decorate the gardens of the new Palace (Tambakis 2016, 393).



Figure 1. Some of the palm trees that were still standing in Athens in 1835. Extracts from the Panorama of Athens in 1835, drawn by Ferdinand Stademann, counsellor to the Regency of King Otto.

The second journey: Era of Palingenesis

When the isolated and remote village of Athens, ruined by the War of Independence and centuries of neglect, was chosen to become the capital of the modern Greek state, the Attic landscape was dry and deserted. The first King of Greece, Otto Friedrich Ludwig von Wittelsbach, arrived in Greece in the 1830s, together with his own architects and engineers. All were carriers of the tradition of the Grand Tour, cognisant of the work of Stuart and Revett, Winckelmann and Sir William Gell, as well as that of Linnaeus and Martius. And Otto, moreover, was the grandson of the King of Bavaria, Maximilian I Josef, who himself had sent the two Bavarian botanists, Martius and Spix, to Brazil. Otto was very young back then, but he certainly became acquainted with the expedition in Brazil, as well as with Martius' published work on palms. It is interesting to see that the new King and Queen of Greece were linked to the image of the Palm tree from the beginning. The painting below, the *Official entrance of King Otto and Queen*

Amalie in Athens, by Franz Wolff, represents the arrival of the royal couple against the backdrop of the Attic landscape of 1837. The newly-wed couple have just arrived on the outskirts of Athens in a carriage, surrounded by a large crowd. In the background is Athens, an oriental Ottoman village, with its mosques and palms, and the rock of the Acropolis on the right-hand side. To the left, we can see part of a small Byzantine church, on top of which sit a group of people greeting the royal couple. One holds a palm leaf (Figure 2).



Figure 2. The Official entrance of King Otto and Queen Amalie in Athens by Franz Wolff (1837) represents the arrival of the royal couple against the backdrop of the Attic landscape of 1837. Image source: www.hellenica.de.

Greece welcomes its new King and Queen as its 'saviours' and according to its Christian tradition.²⁰ But the Palm for the royal couple is not just an ornamental tree that happens to sporadically mark the Attic landscape. When the master plan for the new Greek capital is first presented in 1834 by the Bavarian architects Kleanthis and Schaubert the discussion around both the location and the architectural plans for the Palace is very animated.²¹ While there are many different proposals and plans,²² there are two points on which everybody can agree: the architectural style should be Neoclassical, and palms should form an important part of the surrounding landscape.

The Palace was constructed between 1836 and 1843,²³ and in order to complete its rigid neoclassical facade, groups of impressive palms were added. Gradually, thousands of other palms would have to travel from different parts of the world to form its Garden.

20 Palm leaves have been, and still are, part of the Orthodox Christian tradition and practices.

21 Ludwic I, Otto's father, played an important part in discussions on what should be the official architecture for the newly established Greek state.

22 Some interesting proposals for the Palace were made by various important architects, such as Klenze, Lange and Schinkel.

23 The Palace together with the University, another important neoclassical building, designed by the Danish architect Christian Hansen, were the new capital's first two important buildings, whose architecture would soon come to characterise the Attic cityscape.

The Royal Garden was created by the architect-sculptor Edward Riedel and two gardeners: Louis François Louis Bareaud and Friedrich von Schmidt. Right from the beginning, Queen Amalie played an important role in the Garden's creation, and she made it very clear that one of its essential elements would be the Palm tree.

Different palms were imported from various parts of the world, including from Italy, Egypt, Sudan and Brazil (Buchet 2011, vol. I: 876, vol. II: 43, 71, 741). At the same time, Queen Amalie tried to identify different palms from across the Kingdom of Greece (Buchet 2011, vol. I: 859). Some of these were located in the country's more inaccessible regions, and the organising of their transportation and transplantation to the Garden was never easy.²⁴ Many would not make it due to quarantine restrictions or other delays (Buchet 2011, vol. II: 336-7).

But, why was Queen Amalie so interested in the Garden and in palms? Reading through her letters to her father, it is quickly noticeable how she repeatedly refers to the Greeks as 'Easterners' (Buchet 2011, vol. II: 139). For Queen Amalie, Greece is the 'East,' and it is not just the milder weather that makes her think that. Everything is different, from the costumes to the language and manners.

But, first and foremost, palms are exotic for her. She finds them poetic and enjoys their shadow. She admires their distinctive and impressive nature, which makes them stand out from surrounding plants. For her, the Palm tree represents Power and Beauty. She names her most beautiful and powerful horse 'Phoenix,' after the Greek word for palm (Buchet 2011, vol. II: 226, 461). She places gigantic date trees near the Palace to make it 'more beautiful' (Buchet 2011, vol. II: 47, 493). She characteristically writes that the Palm tree is royal and the noblest of all plants (Buchet 2011, vol. II: 48), which is not far from the view of Martius and Linnaeus.

In the letters addressed to her father and other members of her family, she states her desire to create an "oasis of Palms" and says she wants to be remembered as the "Queen of Palms" (Buchet 2011, vol. II: 39, 43, 169, 177). The utility of palms in the East is vital, especially in the desert, where an oasis of palms is all you need. To the deserted Athens, Amalie brings as many palms as possible to create her own oasis of palms, but also she places them at important places, either in small groups of three to four or as a single tree, not because of their utility, but because of what they represent.

Among the various species that arrive in the Garden, there is one that has been discovered relatively recently, the Washingtonian filifera. The genus Washingtonian has only two species, the *W. filifera* and *W. robusta*. They are both very impressive fan palm trees from California. They were discovered by the German

²⁴ Characteristic is the case of the three Date Palms brought from the island of Ios, whose original rather inaccessible location and large size (Queen Amalie in her letters describes them as "giants") made their transportation a rather long and difficult journey. It was necessary to hire more than 40 sailors to open roads and to build special chariots and bring many horses. It took three months to bring the palms to the port of Piraeus, longer than the time taken to transport a ship-full of plants from Brazil (Buchet 2011, vol. I: 889, vol. II: 39, 41-45).

botanist Herman Wendland, who named them after American president George Washington. Queen Amalie seems to be very proud of these species.²⁵ In 1845, she characteristically writes to her father that she is planning to "plant two alignments of Palms, which would head towards the Palace" and that this "would be something unique of its kind" (Buchet 2011, vol. I: 865). The only alignment of palms in the Garden consists of Washingtonian Palms, placed at the western entrance and pointing towards the Palace. It is a rather monumental arrangement, quite unique even today, whose central position in the Garden reveals its importance (Figure 3). The Athenian Garden's monumental alignment of Washingtonian Palms, and its large number of other Palm species, show that, when it came to palms, it was ahead of other western royal gardens of the same era.²⁶



Figure 3. The double alignment of Washingtonian filifera of Queen Amalie as it is today. Photo taken by the author, June 2022.

Establishing patterns: Palms and neoclassicism

The Royal Garden was not the only garden Queen Amalie created in Athens. The creation of the botanical garden, as well as the so called 'Eptalofos' Estate in the North of Athens, formed precedents in the deserted and dry Attic landscape. In a way, those first gardens set the example for subsequent gardens. Queen Amalie created the Royal Garden not only to decorate the Palace and to impress its western visitors, but also to educate the local aristocracy, to set the rules for both the architecture and the landscape design of the new state. The presence of palms in front of the most important and iconic buildings of the new state would link forever this tree with the new architecture. We can still see traces of this pattern today.

Soon after the Palace and its gardens were created, the Greek aristocracy followed the Queen's example and started building

²⁵ According to N. Tambakis, former president of the Garden, eight of the Garden's *W. filifera* were planted by seed by Amalie herself in 1842 (Tambakis 2016, 66).

²⁶ Edmond François Valentin About (1828–1885) states in his book *La Grèce contemporaine* (1854) that the Royal Garden of Athens had bigger palms than the Botanical Garden of Paris (About 2018, 85). About's book has been translated in Greek as *Otto's Greece*.

neoclassical villas, planting at the same time palms in their gardens. The case of Palaio Phaliro, or Phaliro, the seaside region where the ancient port Phaliron existed, is characteristic of this trend. Phaliro early on became a favourite place of retreat and recreation for wealthy Athenians. Gradually, at the dawn of the nineteenth century, its deserted rocky landscape became crowded with neoclassical villas, each with their own set of impressive palms by their main entrances and in their gardens.

A continuous return: Touristic landscape

By the end of the twentieth century, palms had been re-introduced to the Attic landscape several times and in great numbers. By now, 'palmscaping,' the extensive use of palms in urban design, has become common practice in the mass tourism industry.

From the Royal Garden, palms eventually populated not only the gardens of the neoclassical villas, but also the seaside avenue of Phaliro, Poseidon Avenue, and its beaches. It is the Syggrou Avenue that connects the Royal Garden to the seafront of Phaliro. The initial intention behind the creation of Syggrou Avenue was to create direct access to the sea: a straight line connecting the historic centre of Athens to its seafront, Phaliro. Today, the central alignment of young palms, of the species of *Phoenix canariensis*,²⁷ are characteristic of the Attic landscape. They were initially introduced in 1979, when Greece was getting ready to make its entrance to the European Union. For the arrival of the French president, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the Attic landscape had to be welcoming and glorious at the same time. The alignment of palms seemed a very promising solution at the time. More palms were added in 2004, when Greece hosted the Olympic Games, for the second time. Palms, as one of the symbolic plants of the Olympic Games in ancient Athens, had to be present in the urban landscape again. Every time Athens hosted or bid to host the Olympic games (revival of the Olympic Games in 1896, Athens 1996, Athens 2004), more palm trees would be added to its urban landscape.

On Poseidon Avenue, the seaside avenue of Phaliro, the combination of sand and alignments of exotic palms (Figure 4) is in accordance with the designs of tourism promoters. As the fantasy land of Tourism continues to expand and to grow, so does the presence of palms. In this case, they are the Canarian Palm, or *Phoenix Canariensis*, and Washingtonian palms. Canarian Palm trees, originating from the Canary Islands, were exotic by definition, becoming the embodiment of faraway lands and exoticism. On top of that, the tourism industry added further associations, of leisure and fun. The popularisation of California's Palm Drive in Hollywood movies may have encouraged commercially-driven attempts to create an avenue defined by glorious palm trees. Yet even if this was the initial intention of some mayors of Athens, and the main

27 According to the *Genadios Dictionary*, the Canarian Palm was first introduced in Greece in 1882 (Tambakis 2016, 135-6). Until the end of the twentieth century, Canarian Palms were highly commercialised and were popular all over the world.

reference for the Athenian seaside avenues, the realisation has not been entirely successful. The distances of the palms from the sides, their size, density and quantity, and the quality of the soil, reveal a certain lack of experience and expertise. In any case, the palms are in place, ready to welcome visitors, but also accompanying the locals from the city to the sea, a continuous and repetitive presence that makes them almost invisible.



Figure 4. The alignment of Washingtonian Palms along Poseidon avenue as it is today. Photo taken by the author, July 2023.

Along Poseidon Avenue, there are the beaches of 'Mpatis' and 'Eden,' whose name also evoke a garden. The reference to the Garden of Eden is direct. And Eden is a synonym of Paradise. Paradise is a word of Persian origin meaning enclosed meadow, often referring to a place of sublime beauty. The idea of Paradise consists of the image of a beautiful piece of land surrounded by wilderness. Paradise, either an island in the middle of an ocean or a garden anywhere, is safe. In other words, its inhabitants feel protected and at the same time have a direct relationship with nature and live in absolute harmony with it. Beauty, comfort and safety were also the main elements in the imagery developed by the tourism industry during the twentieth century. These elements were deployed by the industry to create images new landscapes that would later be used to promote almost all tourist destinations around the world. On this paradisiac Attic seafront, Washingtonian species or Canarian ones are planted directly in the sand, forming a kind of oasis and lending a particular character to the urban landscape (Figure 5).

From the Garden, with its clearly defined borders, where solitary and impressive palms or groups of palms mark crucial views to the Acropolis and the Palace, to the repetitive and almost continuous linear arrangement of palms along the different contemporary seafront avenues, palms constitute a characteristic feature in the contemporary Attic landscape.



Figure 5. Aerial view of Eden Beach with its Washingtonian palms directly on the sand, in Palaio Phaliro. January 2022.

The presence of palms proved to be important not only during the era of Palingenesis, but even today, 200 years after the creation of the capital of the modern Greek state, it has evolved into a continuous and rather persistent element. Certain Palm species, such as the Washingtonian Palm and the Canarian one, foreign to the local flora, have been successfully imported to Athens several times since Palingenesis, and they have managed to grow strong roots, not only in the Attic landscape, but also in its inhabitants' hearts.

Conclusion

Transplantation of plants to a different cultural environment changes their content and their social role, and they are called to play a new part. Nowadays, palms are everywhere in the Attic landscape. They can be seen in groups ornamenting public squares, hotels or private gardens, in alignments accompanying the driver along seafront avenues, as single palms signifying important places, and by neoclassical buildings, archaeological sites and Byzantine churches. Despite being imported to Greece from other countries, palms have managed to become not only part of the Athens' cityscape, but also part of its social identity and history.

The Palm tree, whether as a symbol of power and victory, a representation of justice and good governance, an embodiment of exoticism, or part of the commercialised touristic landscape, each time is called to frame a different meaning, to form a different landscape, that is designed and defined by different

protagonists. Every time, the image of the Palm tree seems to be the same, despite the fact that different Palm species have different morphology. What changes is the frame from which we look at it; the signifier—the palm tree—is always the same, whereas the signified—the historical, social context—changes according to the different views and way of thinking that each society projects at a specific historical moment. The Palm tree is like a 'ready-made' symbol, always ready to take on new conceptual content.

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