

June 22, 2005

Greeks And Coffeehouses Now Forever Linked In The Urbanite Mind

6/18/05

By Steve Frangos
Special to The National Herald

In the popular culture of Western Europe and North America, Greeks and their descendants have long been associated with the art and business of coffee brewing. The direct identification of Greeks in the United States with coffeehouses, diners and restaurants is the most enduring of all contemporary stereotypes. Among the very first photographs one can find of Greeks in North American cities are those which document them inside or in front of coffeehouses.

There is no single explanation or one story for why Greeks and coffee are linked in the popular mind. Instead, there are a variety of overlapping and parallel stories, all with their own histories. Interestingly, these different accounts serve as reinforcing symbols for each other, which ultimately strengthened the overall connection between Greeks and coffee.

Continued on Page 4

Greeks And Coffeehouses Now Fore

Continued from page 1

Historians of the coffee plant trace the discovery of the coffee berry back to the nomadic Oromo tribe of East Africa. For our purposes here, we can be far more selective and attend only to those instances when Greeks are directly related to the historical record to coffee.

LONDON COFFEEHOUSES

The first two coffeehouses in London, England trace their origins to Greeks. In 1652, Pasqua Rosee opened a coffeehouse in St. Michael's Alley, in the Cornhill neighborhood of London. Rosee was a native of Smyrna who had been brought to England by Daniel Edwards, a merchant. Rosee apparently first made this new drink for Edwards and his friends. The drink became so popular so quickly that Rosee soon opened his coffeehouse in Cornhill. It was a sensation.

The exact historical development of early London coffeehouses is still not completely understood. This is shown by the fact that, while another Greek ("Constantine the Grecian") is also credited with establishing a coffeehouse, no exact date for this event is now known. Constantine is said to have started his coffeehouse in the Essex Building by the Temple sometime between 1651 and 1665. The basis for this claim is made by virtue of the exceptionally bad poem, "The Character of a Coffee House," written "by an Eye and Ear witness" who decided to remain anonymous:

*"And if you see the great Morat
With Shash on's head instead of
hat,*

Or any Sultan in his dress.

Or picture of a Sultaness,

Or John's admired curl'd pate,

*Or the great Mogul in's Chair of
State*

Or Constantine the Grecian,

*Who for fourteen years was the old
man*

*That made Coffee for the great
Bashaw,*

*Which plainly do Spectators tell
That in that house they Coffee
sell..."*

No record now exists of whatever became of Pasqua Rosee's coffeehouse. The Grecian stayed in business with different owners (some of whom, at first, actually appear to have been Greek) until 1843. That this coffeehouse stayed in operation at least 178 years speaks to its singular popularity.

With the very establishment of these first coffeehouses, we find that they also became extremely popular social settings for public debate. From these first two Greek-owned businesses, London soon boasted more than 2,000 coffeehouses by 1700.

Inexplicably, these coffeehouses quickly became the place for political and literary conversation, as well as locations where the latest news of the day could be learned. This undoubtedly contributed to their new nickname. Since these first cups of coffee cost a penny each, the new coffeehouses soon became known as "penny universities." Coffee, then, was clearly not just a beverage, and from these early coffeehouses, many new ideas were born.

Sir Isaac Newton frequented the Grecian Coffee House. Oliver Goldsmith not only drank coffee there, he very often ate his dinner there, as well. The Tattler and the Spectator, said to be the first newspapers in England, were both conceived and initially sold out of the new coffeehouses.

But ideas born in this new public space were not restricted to science and the arts. In 1668, Edward Lloyd opened a coffeehouse which was eventually frequented by sailors, merchants and maritime insurance agents. The sailors soon began making "Ship's Lists" for underwriters, and in no time at all, "Lloyd's of London," the famous insurance company, was born.

The new, bustling coffeehouse culture was responsible for many new innovations. But there was also a reinforcement, and even subtle transformation, of older notions. By at least 1557, the English usage of the word Grecian had already come to mean a learned man in the Greek language. Over time, when one wan-

ted to compliment a learned man, he called that man a Grecian. Did the fact that Sir Isaac Newton and so many other leading intellectuals of the day frequent the Grecian Coffeehouse help in this ever so slight transformation in the usage of Grecian to mean "learned men?"

THE ANTHORA CUP

Unlike England, the popular culture merger of Greeks and coffee in North America did not transpire until the 1960's. Without



Copper engraving of a 17th Century coffeehouse. Ever coffeehouses can actually trace t

question, the approximately 500,000 Greek immigrants of the 1880-1920 era brought the kafe-nion with them. But Greeks were not the first to bring Coffee to the New World. It is said that, in 1607, when Captain John Smith helped to establish the colony of Virginia at Jamestown, he also introduced coffee to North America. By 1668, coffee had become New York City's favorite breakfast drink. But all this is far from the Greek-motif coffee cups we see today.

Sometime between 1963 and 1967, Leslie Buck, a sales manager for the Sherri Cup Company of Kensington, Connecticut, specifi-

ver Linked In The Urbanite Mind

cally designed the 10-ounce "Anthora" takeout cup for the hundreds of Greek diners and delis operating in New York City. Buck claims he was inspired to create the Anthora design by an article he had read on a sunken Greek ship.

Buck conceived of a white cup with blue and gold lettering accompanied by Greek key trim. In the middle of the cup Buck placed the words, "We are happy to serve you" in gold lettering above three cups of steaming coffee cups. The



London coffeehouse. England's first—their origins to Greek immigrants.

slogan and cups are flanked by two Grecian urns. A classical figure with his arm outstretched is on each urn. This design is printed twice on the cup, divided by the urns, thus creating a sense of two sides to the cup. Various accounts circulate about how "amphora" became "Anthora." Today, the Sherri Cup Company sells more than 15 million Anthora cups every month.

The Anthora cup soon became a symbol of New York City itself. Anyone can enter the gift shop at the Museum of Art and purchase a durable ceramic version of the "We are happy to serve you" coffee cups. Nothing can more clearly

demonstrate this object's iconic status.

As with all symbols, the connection between Greeks and coffee undergoes innumerable ongoing usages. The cover art for the upcoming book by Tori Carrington (Karayianni) is based squarely on New York sensibilities. This forthcoming book is entitled simply, "Sofie Metropolis" (Forge, New York: 2005). So the cover art offers the heroine's name above an Anthora cup with the phrase, "A NOVEL," printed in the center of the cup. A red lipstick stain on the edge of the cup adds some flare. Obviously, the designers of this cover meant to emphasize both New York City as the setting for this crime novel, while simultaneously projecting Sofie's ethnicity (and gender) in a way any New Yorker would instantly recognize.

THE GREEK MOTIF

The Anthora cups are a familiar sight anywhere on the streets of New York City. Still, the Anthora cup has never been popular outside the five boroughs. Most American restaurants use foam cups, or chain stores like Starbucks or Caribou use cups with their own logos.

Writer Andy Levine has identified six variations on the Anthora cup.

First we have the Anthora Master 8-ounce cup a mini-version of the Anthora classic, "except that the figure represented on the amphora extends the left arm on both amphoras, rather than right on one panel and left on the other, evident in the 10-ounce model.

The second variant is the "BHC-10," a 10-ounce cup manufactured by Alfred Bleyer & Co., based in Maspeth, New York. As Levine reports, "This versatile 10-ounce cup is distinguished by the liberal use of yellow as a background element. Note the two ionic columns meeting at the seam and the 3/4-view of the Parthenon. Also represented is an unidentified enthroned figure holding what could be a scepter, possibly Poseidon." Curiously, all the cups Levine discusses were first issued around 1997.

The third variant is "No. 110" by the Premier Paper Manufacturing Corporation in Mount Vernon, New York. This cup features Discobolus and "a crumbling, double set of Corinthian columns from an as-yet unidentified temple or structure. A double set. So far, the only occurrence of Corinthian columns anywhere in this medium."

The fourth cup is the 10-ounce "SMS-10" by Imperial Bondware Corporation of Montvale, New Jersey. The SMS-10 is undistinguished except for its sharply rendered Ionic columns framing the text plate, which reads, "It's our pleasure to serve you." This is a somewhat more familiar and personal variant, considering the use of "our," with a "nice shot of the Parthenon curiously viewed as if from a high hedge. Note the leaf-like elements forming the frame."

The 10-ounce "No. 2340 GR" by James River Corporation of Norwalk, Connecticut is the fifth variant. "Seated on a diminutive column, a foxy goddess seductively plays a lyre. To date, the only occurrence of 1) a Doric column, 2) a foxy goddess, and 3) a musical instrument. Classic text, color and geometric detail prove the obvious lineage of this design. Foxy goddess is most likely Erato, the giver of pleasure and muse of love poetry. Note the ellipses at the end of the text, adding yet another meaning to the "pleasure of serving."

Finally, the sixth variation is the 10-ounce "Greek Key Design" by the Solo Cup Company of Chicago, Illinois. This cup is blue and white, with "simple large text plate flanked by Ionic columns." The cup also lacks a true Greek key design and features trim which looks like the letter "S."

From the first coffeehouses of London to the first iconic image of a take-out cup in New York City, Greeks and coffee are now forever linked in the minds of urbanites across the centuries.

Readers interested in contacting Mr. Frangos are encouraged to e-mail him at greekwrite@yahoo.com.