Greek Spirit

Keep calm and carry on the conversation

On the occasion of an exhibition of the extensive Vovolini Archives at the Gennadius Library, the director of the latter - Maria Georgopoulou and James Wright, director of the American School of Classical Studies in Athens (ASCSA) to which Gennadius belongs, spoke to Business File about ASCSA’s mission to ‘advance the knowledge of Greece in all ages’

Tucked away in the Athenian hub of Kolonaki are a few exquisite buildings not very well known to the general public, who periodically gaze outside their gates in wonder at the beautiful edifices in the manicured gardens and sprawling trees and shrubbery. If you’re a student or scholar of Greek history and culture, you may recognise the Gennadius Library and the rest of the campus of the American School of Classical Studies in Athens (ASCSA). If not, James Wright, director at ASCSA, and Maria Georgopoulou, director of the Gennadius, would like to change that and extend an invitation to join the “conversation”.

The sprawling grounds are home to hundreds of thousands of books, many rare, as well as old manuscripts, rich archives by such notables as George Seferis and Constantine Cavafy, key archaeological and other research notepads, and house one of Greece’s rare large public library spaces to boot, providing fertile ground in which to trace and muse on the Greek identity - a timely topic.

“We speak very directly to the condition of modern Greece in all of the research we do,” says Wright, an archaeologist by training, adding “it’s very relevant. If you start to think about how you put all of these different pieces together. Why was Cavafy or Seferis, or any of the other poets and painters, so interested in the Greek past? Because it’s part of the process of creating that national identity, the conversation about which, is continuous today. That’s why the Vovolini Archives (donated in 2012), or the archives of Ilias Venezis that are in the Gennadius, are just as important as the archives of Schliemann.”

Wright, an American entering his second year of a five-year term as director of the American School, has a deep passion for its work that dates back to 1972-73, when he became a regular member, then secretary, while he has been digging in ancient Corinth, Nemea, and Komos on Crete since the 70s; and has since developed a name for himself as a champion of international controls on the sale of cultural property.

He speaks quickly, expanding on how the school, founded in 1881 - the first overseas American research centre and now the largest along with the American Academy in Rome - lives up to its mission.

The school’s mission is to “advance the knowledge of Greece in all periods, training young scholars, sponsoring and promoting archaeological fieldwork, providing resources for scholarly work, and disseminating research”. It is also charged by the Greek culture and tourism ministry with primary responsibility for all American archaeological research - it chooses which six projects will go ahead each year - and has ongoing excavations of its own in the Athens Agora and in Ancient Corinth.

The American School is also the largest of the 17 foreign institutes in Greece, and is
recognised as one of the best places worldwide to study Greek history and culture from antiquity to the present day.

“We have scholars who go out and preach the ‘gospel’ of Greek prehistory, Classical Greece, Roman Greece, Byzantine Greece, Ottoman Greece and modern Greece every academic year in hundreds of classrooms around the country [the US], and they come back here because this is the locus, this is where the best libraries are. It’s where you have this community conversation,” says Wright.

“Our neighbours, the British, are literally in the same plot; people spend time with their colleagues at the French, German and Swedish Institutes, and with many, many Greek colleagues from the university. So, this is a real centre and the archaeological research laboratory and the Gennadius Library provide us with facilities that really are unmatched. We have 1,000 visiting readers, who have cards to read in the Blegen Library - the primary archaeological library. Most of those people are Greek scholars and graduate students, but a huge number of them are from Spain, Israel, Austria, and other places.”

Maria Georgopoulou, director at the Gennadius for close to a decade, agrees about the conversation that these grounds help shape. Aside from the rare manuscripts, bindings, books, paintings and significant primary sources, the Gennadius - named for the Greek diplomat and bibliophile Ioannes Gennadius who donated his rich 26,000 volume collection to ASCSA in 1922 - also houses more unparalleled archives that are pieces of the puzzle, and help its own role as a research institution.

“From the ‘50s onwards, for example, we are a depository for very, very important archives; it is really the making of the history of contemporary Greece because all these people were related in the end. This is a very small country. You have letters from Seferis to Elytis, from Venezis to Myrivilis, and you open one letter, and the response is in the other archive. It’s as if you have a pæca (company) that is brought together again.

“That’s why the Vovolini Archive, for example, is very, very interesting because it pools together other members of this group – the intellectuals. We know the historians and the politicians and the literati.”

Georgopoulou adds that, though the library is geared to an academic public “because we have wonderful treasures that we want very much to share with the world, we need to find ways to open up to the world, and one way to do this is through digital applications”.

“Five years ago, I went to the British Library in London and I was just mesmerised by these huge computer screens where you could actually turn the pages of some of their treasures,” says Georgopoulou, a scholar in the art and architecture of the Mediterranean region, and former associate professor of art history at Yale University.

“I thought this is an amazing thing - to feel as if you are turning the pages of a precious manuscript that you’ll never be able to touch. As a huge number of them are from Spain, Israel, Austria, and other places.”

Another EU grant was used to digitise the notebooks of ASCSA’s 82-year-old excavations of the Agora. “Not just digitise them,” says Wright, with a twinkle in his eye, “but we’ve had people who we’ve hired go through the notebooks and they have hypertexted all the information in them to links to other notebooks, so that if it refers you to a catalogue, you just click on it, and it takes you to the drawing, or the photograph, the catalogue entry in another notebook!”

“It’s more than simply digitisation. And what it means is that you can be in the trenches in the ancient Agora of Athens, digging, and using your iPad consulting the library notebooks for that section that was dug 20 years before that’s right adjacent to you,” enthuses Wright. “You don’t have to go back into the workrooms to pull that notebook out. You have it right in front of you, and it’s instantaneous, and this was another grant that we had from the European Union.”

In fact, Wright and Georgopoulou, a gifted Greek scholar who went to study in the US on a Fulbright grant, met in the trenches when the latter worked as an archaeologist, early in her career, before she changed course.
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Vovolini Archives exhibit at the Gennadius Library

An exhibition of the unique Vovolini Archives at the Gennadius Library opened in March and ran through June, tracing the creation of The Great Greek Biographical Dictionary, and other key aspects of the rich Vovolini Archives. The Vovolini Archives are now housed at the Gennadius Library, joining a whole rank of notable archives, including those of George Seferis and Constantine P Cavafy. "There’s been enormous interest in the Vovolini Archives and for us, too, it is quite fascinating, because it does open a new venue, as we focus on history and literature," says Maria Georgopoulou, director of the Gennadius Library, adding that it "opens up vistas through biography and the other parts of the Archive on a variety of issues".

Rich with material collected by Constantinos A Vovolinis in order to write The Great Greek Biographical Dictionary, the first of its kind, profiling key figures of Greece’s economic, political and scientific life, including Karadethoris, Loverdos, Eftaxias, Kalifronas, Trikoupis, Diomidis, Kanellopoulos and Maximos, the archive also has a plethora of clippings and other data from the Viomihaniki Epitheorisi publication, the precursor of Oikonomiki Epitheorisi - the sister publication of Business File - which celebrates 80 years.

"My fault," says Wright.

"No it’s not your fault, although I worked with him as an excavator!" Georgopoulou says with roaring laughter, adding, "the truth of the matter is that the excavations that the American School have conducted in Greece are so extraordinary that they have put foundations, very, very important foundations, academic and scholarly, of how to do things. They’re like practice books. The excavation of ancient Corinth for instance, is the best excavated Byzantine site in the world!"

Wright agrees, and repays the collegial compliment.

“One of the greatest things the Gennadius Library is doing is the Medieval Summer School," enthuses Jim Wright. "What we’re doing with this programme is training the next generation of the best medieval scholars. Without question."

"It’s intense," Georgopoulou agrees, "but after four weeks they can make sense of Byzantine texts, and it’s exciting for them because they see a different world." Already, this was the fifth one and already these kids have gone into having university positions."

Admission to the school’s annual academic program is also very competitive, says Wright.

“We get the finest graduate students from the United States and Canada in that programme. You have to be examined, not just apply, to become a member of the regular programme. You can come and do research, but then you come in a different status, so that they’re all highly trained and highly capable, and form a core of people who support the school," he notes.

And most people who staff ASCSA are Greek, says Wright, "because, especially today, there are so many highly competent Greek nationals whom you can employ."

The private, non-profit institution also publishes a host of publications, monographs and the journal Hesperia, out of its Princeton office and is known throughout the US, as it is in fact made up of a consortium of 195 major research institutions, colleges and universities in North America. "I’ve been making a list and we’re in nearly every state in the union," says Wright.

“We are an American institution that opens a window for people into American ways of doing things, American scholarship, and so forth, but really we are a Greek institution,” he adds. "Fundamentally, we live and are surrounded by a Greek community, Greek culture, and Greece’s crisis that we all live in and deal with on a daily basis. We want to retain our distinctive character as a research institution and as one that exemplifies the best of American research methods and approaches, while at the same time making it clear to people that we are public cultural organisation - a politistiko kedro,” Wright says in fluent Greek, "and we have many different ways we can affect outreach."

He hopes to show through the schools’ lecture series and other public events that the "school is not some kind of American enclave, but a welcoming place both for scholars and the public".

Wright also says he’s very focused on "taking care of the monuments that we excavate and the sites that we excavate, not only in preserving them and protecting them, but also figuring out how they can be presented to the public for appreciation."

“I’ve identified four different sites - the Agora, ancient Corinth, the site in Crete and another one in the Argolid, that I have begun talking to Greek authorities about, the ways in which we can work together and leverage resources to do this,” he says.

Other planned projects include the expansion of the Gennadius Library and "hopefully” a bigger archaeological laboratory - expanding ASCSA’s well-known Weiner Laboratory - through ESPA and USAID funding respectively.

When asked how ASCSA has been affected by the Greek crisis, Wright says that its staff is shouldering a "heavier tax burden", and that the school as a whole has been affected by the decline in the value of the school’s endowment, which is based in the US. He hopes that generous support from foundations and individuals in Greece and the US will continue, so that the conversation can continue to thrive.

"In a world where we are wrestling with divisions among people’s tribal groups, cultural groups, that have been fighting with each other or wrestling for a place at the table, for hundreds and hundreds of years, this resonates in Greece, because Greece rises out of a complicated situation of having been a part of the Ottoman Empire, but having had a glorious past, that was interrupted by Roman domination, and then a Byzantine Empire, and then the Ottoman yoke, and then the struggle for independence, and the struggle for self national identification," says Wright, adding, “These are fascinating things that we can speak to.”