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Greek Masons in Africa: the case of the Karpathian Masons of the Sudan

by EVANGELIA N. GEORGITSOYANNI

Introduction

The activity of the Greek masons (builders, marble-workers, carpenters, etc.) abroad, most of who originated from regions having a long tradition in these arts, constitutes an interesting aspect of the history of the Greek Diaspora (Petronotis and Kamilakis 1986: 61-78).

The case of those originating from Karpathos—the second largest island in the Dodecanese, which lies on the southeastern edge of the Aegean between Crete and Rhodes—is characteristic.¹ The Karpathians were the most numerous, and also the most active, builders and carpenters among the so-called “traditional” masons, who lived on the Aegean islands during the period of Turkish occupation. They worked mainly on the nearby islands—especially on Crete—and in Asia Minor; they were temporary immigrants who worked in groups every year from April to October and then returned home. Following the creation of the modern Greek state their activity also expanded into the regions included within its borders, because of the work opportunities arising out of the building activity which was beginning there. From the turn of the twentieth century onwards they started to seek work in Africa and Asia, and in America as well (Logothetis 1984: 238-267; Petronotis and Kamilakis 1986: 63, 67, 71, 73). Several factors contributed to this migration. Among the most important were: after 1869 the gradual abolition by the Ottoman government of many of the “privileges” of the Dodecanese, the

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population growth of the island from the end of the nineteenth century, the Italian Occupation of the Dodecanese (1912), the Greek defeat in Asia Minor (1922)—after which the Karpathian masons were cut off definitively from Asia Minor—and of course, the growing demand for skilled craftsmen in the countries of acceptance (Loukatos 1977: 380-382; Idem 1978: 465; Philippidis 1983: 9).

Thus, having learned of the new work opportunities in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan that had been created in 1899,² many Karpathian masons left for that country (Hiotis 1984: 331). The present article deals with the activity of these masons, the last of the traditional craftsmen, and their descendants, in the Sudan. The sources I have utilized are Greek newspapers, oral narratives, archives, old guides and published works.

Karpathian Masons in the Sudan

English people's familiarity with Greeks [in Egypt as well as in the expedition for the conquest of the Sudan (1898-99), when Greeks from Egypt undertook the provisioning of the Anglo-Egyptian troops under Lord Herbert Kitchener], the absence of other numerous and well-organized European communities in the Sudan, and last but not least the higher level of technical knowledge of Greeks compared with that of the natives, were the principal reasons for Greeks being attracted to that country, and for the professional progress they achieved there. The Greek immigrants originated mainly in the Greek communities in Egypt but also came from regions under foreign rule and from the Greek state itself.

In the years that followed, the Hellenism of the Sudan grew rapidly. Vigorous Greek communities were created, with their own communal organization, churches and schools, the most important of them being those at Khartoum, at Port-Sudan, at Wad-Medani and at El Obeid. The Greeks of that country were mainly merchants, contractors, craftsmen and employees, but there were also industrialists and scientists (Dendias 1919: 71-72; Evangelidis 1925; Procopiou 1931: 153-165; *Panellinos Emporikos Odigos* 1933: 134-172; Hiotis 1957; Kamitsis 1967; Hiotis 1984; Hassiotis 1993: 100-101, 103; Georgoulis and Houliaras 1995: 158-159; *Greeks Abroad* 1972: 77-78; Kazakos et al. 1998: 174;

Markakis 1998: 51-56; Makris 2001).³ The early immigrants from Karpathos who came, mostly via Egypt, to work in the Sudan, like the other Greeks,⁴ were taking advantage of the reconstruction of the country in accordance with European standards by the English, including large-scale public works.⁵ They were either contractors or subcontractors at the head of groups of craftsmen from their own country, or they were the ordinary craftsmen. The influx of Karpathians was stimulated by the traditional tendency of Greeks to hire their own countrymen (Hiotis 1984: 330-333, 346; Natsoulas 1977: 138).

The most important of the first Karpathian contractors/subcontractors in the Sudan were the following:

- *Ioannis N. Hatziantoniou* from Aperi, the capital of Karpathos, who undertook the construction of governmental buildings at Port-Sudan in 1908. He also built the Ministry for the Army at Khartoum (1920-22). Likewise attributed to him, in collaboration with his nephew Nicolaos Petritis (or Petridis) (1877-1954) (Municipal Register of Aperi: a/a 1535/A/242; *Panellinios Emporikos Odigos*, 1933: 142; Information from his daughter R. Petridi-Papanikita),⁶ is the construction of the Medical School and the State Chemical Laboratory at Khartoum and the Halfayia Bridge (Photograph 1), which links Khartoum to Northern Sudan [*Karpathos*, no. 49 (5 April 1908): 2; Hiotis 1984: 332, 369, 370]. He also founded a construction company with his fellow villager Nikolaos P. Pothitos and it is mentioned that they built, among other things, the Observatory at Khartoum (Information by A. Ladis).

- *Nikolaos P. Pothitos* from Aperi (born in 1870) (Municipal Register of Aperi: a/a 1509/A/216), who arrived in Khartoum in 1902. He erected the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation in the Sudanese capital (1908)⁷ (Photograph 2) and the English Military Hospital at Omdurman (1928). The construction of the Greek School at Khartoum (1923-24) (Photograph 3) [*Karpathos*, no. 17 (8 March 1908): 2, 63 (20 Nov. 1908): 1. *Panellinios Emporikos Odigos* 1933: 142; Hiotis 1984: 331, 345, 346, 369; Kamitsis 1967: 57-58] is similarly attributed to him. He also founded a construction company, as mentioned above, with Ioannis N. Hatziantoniou.

- *Polychronis E. Zavolas* (born in 1850) from the village of Volada (Municipal Register of Volada: a/a 2632/Γ/253), who came

to Khartoum in 1907. He erected the Anglican Church there (1912) (Hiotis, 1984: 331, 353, 357; Methodios, 1974: 115).

- *Constantinos G. Batis* from the village of Messochori, who is said to have been the first contractor to establish quarries for extraction of granite and other types of stone. He founded the Greek School at Port-Sudan (1925-6) (*Panellinios Emporikos Odigos*, 1933: 161; Hiotis, 1984: 332, 337, 345, 358; Idem, 1957: 29-31, 47).

- *Polychronis E. Hiotis* (1882-1954), from Aperi (Municipal Register of Aperi: a/a 1639/A/346), who came to Khartoum in 1908. He worked for a long time on various construction projects in the Sudanese capital, notably on the preservation of the Governor General's Palace and the offices of the English Banks [*Karpathos*, no. 63 (20 Nov 1908): 1; Hiotis, 1984: 343, 360; Information from his son M. Hiotis, and from N. Philippidis].

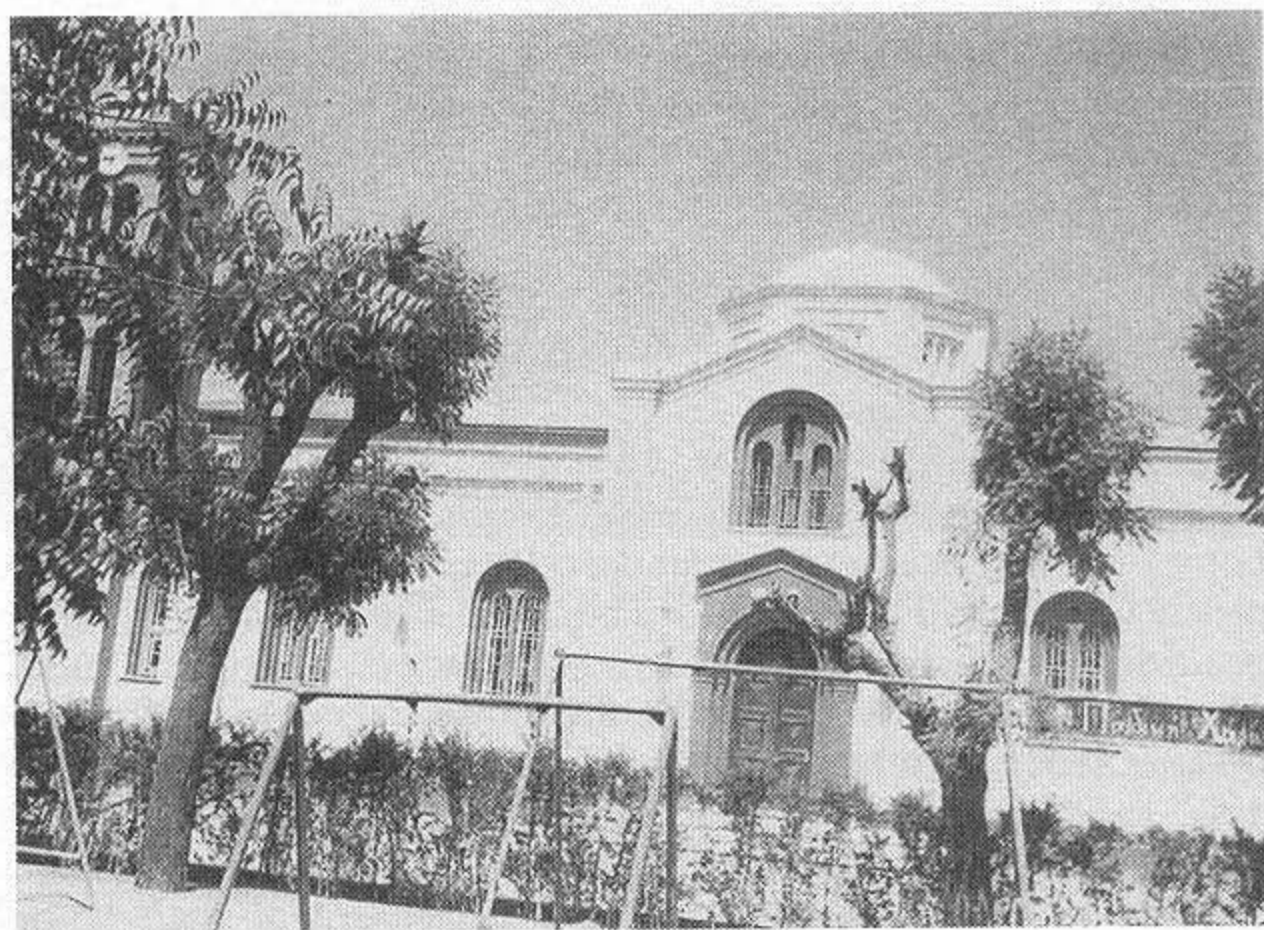
- *Ioannis P. Stavrakis* from Volada, who came to Khartoum in 1907. He was public works contractor in the town of Aroma in Kassala province, specializing in the construction of irrigation canals for cotton plantations. He worked together with his brother George. [*Panellinios Emporikos Odigos*, 1933: 144; Hiotis, 1984: 332, 339, 359; Information from A. Ladis].

- *Ioannis E. Moulakis*, from the village of Pyles (Municipal Register of Pyles: a/a 4702/H/77) who came to Port-Sudan in 1906. He worked together with the above-mentioned Ioannis Hatziantoniou and Ioannis G. Venetis and engaged in the construction of prefabricated houses (Hiotis, 1984: 343, 345, 346, 358; Idem, 1957: 16).

There is also mention of the presence in Sudan, for a certain period, of the Lausanne-educated architect or civil engineer Iordanis E. Petritis from Aperi. He came from Morocco, where he had been engaged in public works. He worked with his brother Nikolaos and his uncle, the above-mentioned Ioannis Hatziantoniou. In 1925 he drew up the plans for the Greek School in Port-Sudan. He later left for Indochina, where he died (Hiotis, 1957: 31, 47; Idem, 1984: 332, 342, 359; Information from R. Petridi-Papanikita). His brother George Petritis (1874-1935) had also immigrated to Sudan. He was a building contractor and worked together with the other brother, Nikolaos. He later went into the hotel business (Municipal Register of Aperi: a/a 1537/A/244; Hiotis 1984: 342, 359; Information from R. Petridi-Papanikita).



Photograph 1. *Khartoum. The Halfayia Bridge* (V. Ladis Archive)



Photograph 2. *Khartoum. The Greek Orthodox Church* (V. Ladis Archive)

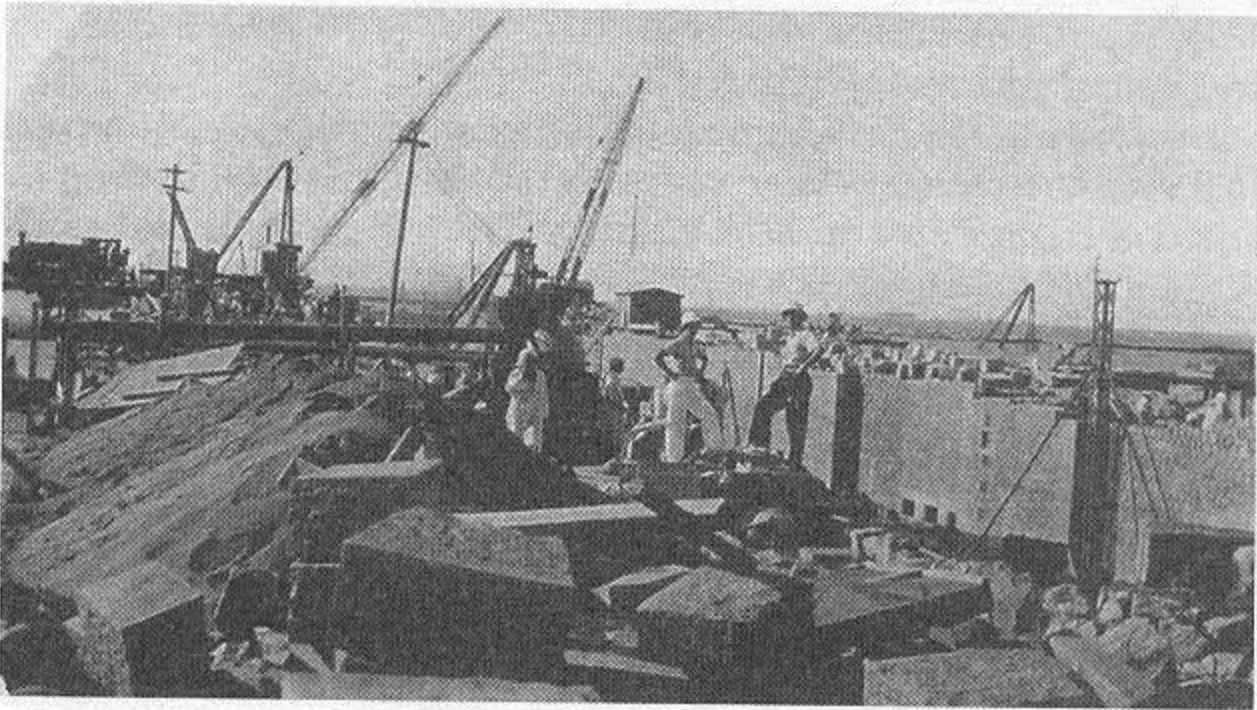
As for the Karpathian craftsmen who came to Sudan, many of them worked in Khartoum and/or Port-Sudan as builders or carpenters,⁸ and also on construction of the railway connecting Port-Sudan to Verver,⁹ completed in 1906 [*Karpathos* no. 63 (20th Nov. 1908): 2; Hiotis 1984: 350-352]. Many of them were also employed on projects undertaken by fellow countrymen contractors [*Karpathos* no. 49 (5 April 1908): 2; Hiotis 1984: 333; Information from A. Ladis and R. Petrudi-Papanikita].¹⁰ Typically they were temporary labourers who moved to wherever they heard work was available. Working conditions were not, however, always favorable; sometimes there would be a downturn in the amount of work going on at a particular place, and apart from that the wages were not always up to expectations. They were thus obliged to leave and go to some other place where they had heard they could find work [*Karpathos*, no. 49 (5 April 1908): 2, no. 63 (20 Nov. 1908): 2; Hiotis 1984: 350-351]. The prevailing conditions and the anxiety afflicting these men are vividly described by the *Karpathos* newspaper (20 Nov. 1908):

There is hardly any work at Port-Sudan. Almost all the workers who were staying here have left. The Terselam and Djibouti railway lines are not yet under way. Only at Massawa is there work, at a daily wage of 9 francs for builders, but they do not work regularly, because it is constantly raining.

At any rate, a considerable number of these Karpathians remained in the Sudan and later others also came, mostly their relatives or fellow villagers. Between 1900 and 1920 there were almost 800 Karpathians working in the Sudan. Some returned home or immigrated to other lands; others remained there permanently (Hiotis 1984: 333, 361). They were also employed in other positions: as teachers, physicians, pharmacists, engineers, businessmen and employees in banks or commercial companies. Some became active members of the country's Greek communities. In 1907 the Karpathians of Khartoum formed an association called "The Concord Karpathian Educational Association," which engaged in philanthropic activity for the benefit of their home island and in 1912 donated its entire property to Greece for the advancement of national aims [*Karpathos*, no.17 (8 March 1908):



Photograph 3. *Khartoum. The Greek School* (V. Ladis Archive)



Photograph 4. *The Gebelauli Dam on the river Nile (1934)* (A. Ladis Archive)

2, no. 48 (22 March 1908): 1, no. 55 (3 July 1908): 2, no. 63 (20 Nov. 1908): 1; “*Avgi tis Karpathou*” [Dawn of Karpathos], no. 35 (20 Nov. 1912): 2; Hiotis 1984: 333-350, 353-356, 366].

During the 1930s there were a number of Karpathians in the Sudan engaged in technical projects of various kinds. Most of them were building contractors. Some, too, had adapted to the trends of the age and gone into engineering. Some worked for private com-

panies; others for the public sector. The majority lived in Khartoum. (*Panellinos Emporikos Odigos* 1933).¹¹

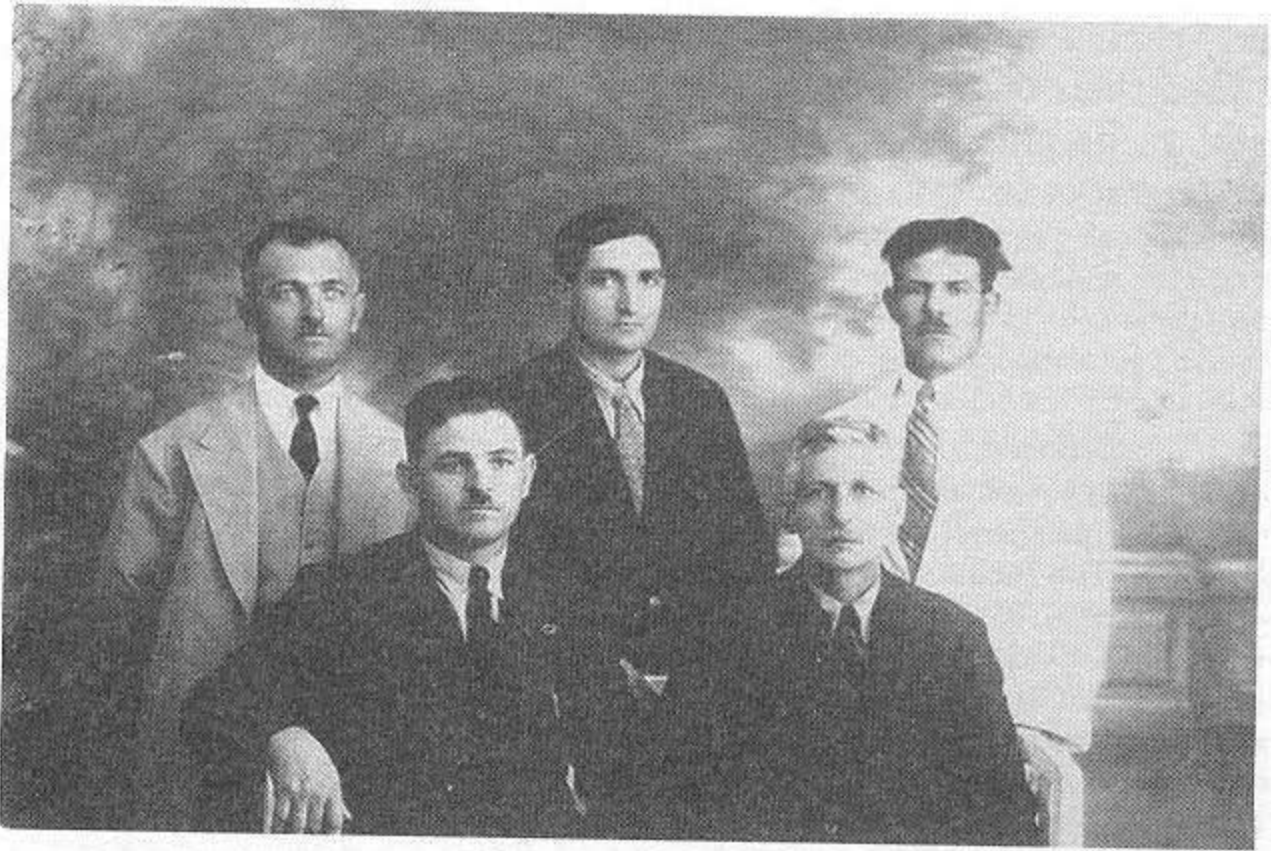
During the same period, and particularly between 1933 and 1936, many Karpathians worked on the Gebelauli Dam, one of the biggest irrigation dams on the river Nile (Photograph 4). They included not only established residents of the Sudan but also newcomers who had come there to work, and many of whom stayed on¹² (Photographs 5, 6).

In the following years some Karpathian craftsmen worked for foreign companies¹³ while others were employed in commerce or established their own businesses.¹⁴ Improvement in their living standards gave many of them, and many Sudanese Greeks generally, the chance to educate their sons, who branched off in different directions (Makris 2001). Some of them, following family traditions, pursued higher studies in technical subjects,¹⁵ thus distinguishing themselves from earlier immigrants, the majority of whom were practical skilled craftsmen. Very few had ever had any specialized education.¹⁶

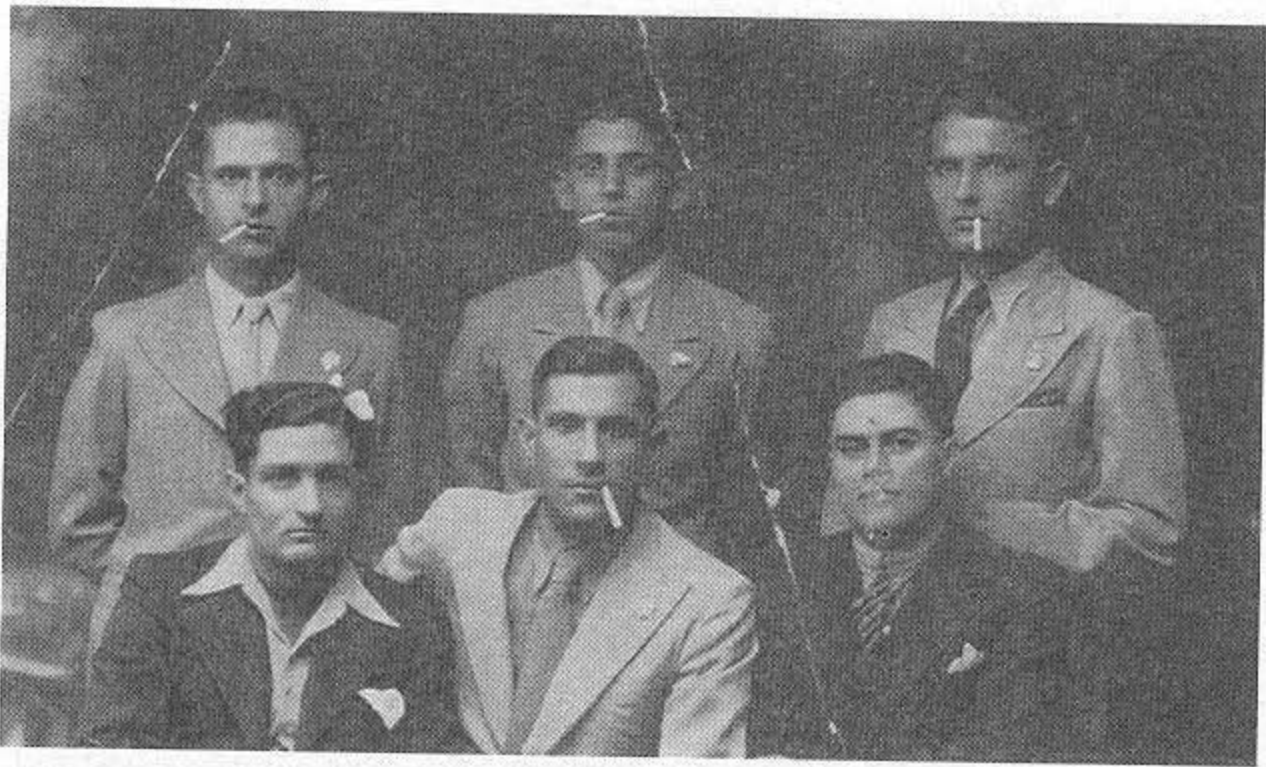
Following the Sudan's acquisition of independence, however, in 1956, and the successive coups d'état that followed, the imposition of Islamic Law and the ensuing civil war created conditions unfavorable for the Greeks of the country, including the Karpathians, and obliged most, with very few exceptions, to leave (Makris 2001).

Conclusions

It emerges from the above research that there were numerous Karpathian tradesmen working in the Sudan from the beginning of the twentieth century up to around the 1960s. They were mostly practically-oriented skilled artisans, used to working with relatives and fellow countrymen in accordance with the custom of traditional Greek craftsmen. Some of them stayed only temporarily in the Sudan, for as long as they could find work, but many made the country their permanent home. They adapted successfully to local financial and social realities, participating in the construction of important public works and buildings and applying modern construction methods in a wide variety of projects.¹⁷ Some continued for life with the skill that they had learned while oth-



Photograph 4. *The Gebelauli Dam on the river Nile (1934)*. Standing: George E. Michaeilidis (engineer), Antonios N. Hatzantonis (engineer), George I. Diakomanolis (builder). Sitting: Michael E. Mihailidis (engineer), Iakovos Hatzantonis (turner). (A. Ladis Archive)



Photograph 4. *The Gebelauli Dam on the river Nile (1934)*. Standing: Alexandros V. Ladis (engineer), Michael Skordoulis (engineer, from Cephallonia), Ioannis Logothetis (watchmaker). Sitting: Antonios N. Hatzantonis, Ioannis G. Nikitiadis, Petros V. Vardaoulis (engineers). (A. Ladis Archive)

ers, having managed to accumulate the required capital, established their own businesses. Knowledge of a craft proved in general to be the most important element in the quest of these immigrants to "get ahead" in their adopted country.

Notes

¹Karpathos is a mountainous island, with very few areas of plain. Its history begins in ancient times, when it was part of the ancient Greek world. It was then conquered by the Romans and later became part of the Byzantine Empire. With the Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204 it came under Latin control and in 1537 fell to the Ottoman Turks. In 1912, along with the rest of the islands of the Dodecanese it was annexed by Italy. Only in 1948 was it united with Greece (Moutsopoulos 1978). Karpathos is renowned for its traditional art and culture (Alexiadis 2001).

²For the history of the Sudan, see, Holt and Daly 1986, Woodward 1990. For Anglo-Egyptian Sudan in particular, see Daly 1986, 1991.

³See as well the Historical Archive of the Greek Ministry for Foreign Affairs, dossier 71.2/1948, dossier 88.1/1946, dossier 165.9/1946, and the newspapers: *O Soudanikos Kiryx* (Sudan Herald), no. 54 (5th Oct. 1912):2; *O Exo Ellinismos* no. 96 (15th Oct. 1951):1, no. 145 (1st Nov. 1953): 2, no. 237 (1st Sept. 1957): 2, no. 247 (1st Feb. 1958):1, no. 250 (15th March 1958):1, 3, no. 251 (1st April 1958): 1, 4.

⁴A parallel movement took place in nearby Ethiopia (Natsoulas 1977: 138-140).

⁵They included the building of the modern town of Khartoum, with wide roads and grandiose buildings, the construction of Port-Sudan, a railway and road network and bridges and other public works (*Panellinos Emporikos Odigos* 1933: 134-135, 158, 159; Kamitsis 1967: 31-32; Hiotis 1984: 329-330).

⁶He came to the Sudan in 1925 (Information from his daughter R. Petridi-Papanikita).

⁷The foundation stone for the church was laid on 21st May 1903, but owing to a number of different problems it was not completed until December 1908 (Kamitsis 1967: 57-59).

⁸Known names are: Michael Diakomihalis (builder), Panagiotis Logothetis (builder), Nikolaos Mavromatis (builder), Sakellis I. Minakakis [(1881-?) (Municipal Register of Menetis: a/a 3125/Δ/258)], Frangiskos N. Moutis, Michael G. Nikola (or Georgiou) [(1883-?) (Municipal Register of Menetis: a/a 2933/Δ/103) (builder)], G. Orfanos (builder), N. Perdikos, P. Foudis (builder) [*Karpathos* no. 63 (20th November 1908): 2; Hiotis 1984: 350-351], Spyridon N. Politis [(1869-1957), a carpenter who worked in Sudan between 1900 and 1906, employed by Konstantinos G. Batis (Municipal Register of Messochori: a/a 3901/E/19. Information from his son, G. Politis)].

⁹Another name known is Stamatis Venetis (Hiotis 1984: 350-352, 356). On Greek railway workers in Africa, see: Mantzaris 1987.

¹⁰The majority of Greek immigrants who arrived in the Sudan later were, on the other hand, relatives or fellow villagers of those already settled there (Makris 2001).

¹¹To be specific, there are twenty-three Karpathian craftsmen mentioned in the Panhellenic Commercial Guide of 1933 (Vol. II), which lists Greek professionals in Africa: seven self-designated "contractors" [Ioannis A. Voyatzidakis at Wad-Medani, Nikolaos E. Georgiadis in Khartoum, S. Georgiadis in Khartoum, Constantinos E. Zavolas (1897-?) (Municipal Register of Volada: a/a 2447/Γ/68) in Khartoum, D. Mastrandreas at El-Obeid, Constantinos Batis at Port-Sudan and Christos Economidis at Makwar]; four "builders" [Frangiskos Antimisiaris (1909-?) (Municipal Register of Volada: a/a 2384/Γ/5) in Khartoum, Stefanos Economidis at Gedaref, Nikolaos Hiotis and Savvas Hiotis in Khartoum]; two "building contractors" [Emmanuel P. Diakopoulos at El-Obeid and D. Papageorgiou at Kassala], two "architect-contractors" [Nikolaos Petritis (or Petridis) and Nikolaos Pothitos in Khartoum], one "engineer" (M. Economidis at El-Obeid), one "engineering contractor" (Demosthenes Economidis at Port-Sudan), one "engineering-transportations contractor" (E. G. Georgiadis at El-Obeid), one "fitter" (Nikolaos E. Zavolas at Khartoum), one "foreman" (Polychronis Zavolas at Barakat), one "turner" (Iakovos Hatzantonis at Atbara) and one "machinist" (Ioannis Aslanidis at Mirigian) (*Panellinios Emporikos Odigos* 1933: 136, 138, 142, 144, 146, 147, 148, 149, 152, 154, 156, 157, 161, 167; Hiotis 1984: 331, 332, 357, 358). There are also records of a carpenter, Nikolaos P. Hrysoheris [(1885-1944) (Municipal Register of Aperi: a/a 1681/A/388) working in the Sudan from approximately 1920 to 1940 and responsible for carpentry in public works projects (Information from his granddaughter I. Michaelidou, and from A. Ladis; Hiotis 1984: 360)].

¹²Names known are Petros V. Vardaoulis [(1898-?) (Municipal Register of Volada: a/a 2388/Γ/9). (Information from A. Ladis, Photograph 6)], George I. Diakomanolis [(1888-?) (Municipal Register of Othos: a/a 4205/Z/29), builder (Information from A. Ladis, Photograph 5). Later he became contractor of public works at El-Obeid (Hiotis 1984: 332, 357)], Nikolaos E. Zavolas (Information from A. Ladis), Alexandros V. Ladis [(1912) (Municipal Register of Volada: a/a 2491/Γ/112), engineer (information from Ladis himself, Photograph 5)], George E. Michaelidis [(1899-1943) (Register of Othos: a/a 4281/Z/105), engineer (Information from A. Ladis, Photograph 5)], Michael E. Michaelidis [(1896-1928) (Register of Othos: a/a 4282/Z/106), engineer (information from A. Ladis, Photograph 5)], Ioannis G. Nikitiadis [(Hiotis 1984: 342, 358), engineer (information from A. Ladis, Photograph 6)], Antonios N. Hatzantonis [engineer (information from A. Ladis, Photograph 6). (Hiotis 1984: 343, 359)], Iakovos Hatzantonis [turner (*Panellinios Emporikos Odigos* 1933: 146) (information from A. Ladis, Photograph 5) and Polychronis E. Hiotis (information from his son, M. Hiotis).

¹³Such as: Alexandros V. Ladis [who worked as an engineer for the Sudan Plantation company at Wad-Medani and at Hassa-Heissa, and after 1948 as director of the Sudan Oil & Company factory at Khartoum (information from Ladis himself; Hiotis 1984: 343, 357)], Ioannis K. Matsagos [(1923-1987) (Municipal Register of Volada: a/a 2693/Γ/314) who worked as an engineer for big companies at Khartoum (Information from A. Ladis; Hiotis 1984: 358)],

Polychronis E. Stavrakis [(1920-?) (Municipal Register of Volada: a/a 2564/Γ/190) who worked as a contractor for the Sudan Plantation company at Aroma in Kassala province (Hiotis 1984: 332, 359)], Nikolaos I. Hatziantoniou [(1900-?) (Municipal Register of Aperi: a/a 1635/A/342) civil engineer, who worked for the Italian contractor Andrea Vescia and for the Sudan Plantation company at Barakat (after 1923) (Hiotis 1984: 342, 360)].

¹⁴Such as: Emmanuel P. Diakopoulos, building contractor and general representative in the Sudan of the fabrics house Groves & Lindey (*Panellinos Emporikos Odigos*, 1933: 136), Nikolaos Petritis (or Petridis), who established his own factory (information from his daughter R. Petridi-Papanikita), Polychronis E. Hiotis, who established his own business (Hiotis 1984: 343, 360), Pericles N. Hrysoheris (1914-1979) (Municipal Register of Aperi: a/a 1681/A/388: merchant), public works engineer, engaged in commerce in Khartoum too (information from his niece, I. Michaelidou).

¹⁵Such as: Ioannis Pothitos, son of the contractor Nikolaos P. Pothitos [(1906-1958) (Register of Aperi: a/a 1510/A/217)], civil engineer-contractor, engaged in building construction and public works, and also owner of granite quarries (information from A. Ladis), and Nikolas Hatziantoniou, son of the contractor Ioannis Hatziantoniou, civil engineer (see note 12).

¹⁶Such as: Alexandros V. Ladis [Graduate of the "Prometheus" technical-professional school in Piraeus (information from Ladis himself)], Iordanis E. Petritis (architect or civil engineer), Constantinos A. Hazandras [civil engineer (1905 - ?) (Municipal Register of Volada: a/a 2626/Γ/247); Hiotis 1984: 342, 360; Information from A. Ladis].

¹⁷It is mentioned that Greek craftsmen working in the Sudan transmitted their knowledge to the natives, contributing to the creation of local skilled craftsmen (Kamitsis 1967: 118).

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