



Under the Spell of a Myth: Empress Sisi in Greece.

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DOI: 10.21039/rsj.511

Abstract: Review of Stefan Haderer, *Under the Spell of a Myth: Empress Sisi in Greece*, (Independently Published, 2022).



***Under the Spell of a Myth: Empress Sisi in Greece.* By Stefan Haderer. Independently published, 2022. ISBN 979-8844219504. 247 pp. €27,59.**

Austria's penultimate empress, Elisabeth, widely known in German-speaking countries by her familial nickname "Sisi," continues to capture the imaginations of many in Europe. Sisi-mania continues to grow as her life is repeatedly re-told on screen (most recently in *The Empress* on Netflix). The desire for English literature on Empress Elisabeth develops with each screen re-telling, particularly in research, which is accessible to the general public. As Martina Winkelhofer's 2021 biography on Elisabeth has not yet been translated into English, readers have been somewhat restricted to books which, while fundamental to anyone interested in the empress (such as Brigitte Hamann's biography), may now be viewed as somewhat out of date. Stefan Haderer's book not only fills the gap in English, but also German literature on Empress Elisabeth's sojourns in Greece. Elisabeth, like many European aristocrats at the time, was swept up by Philhellenism. Feeling unwelcomed and alienated at the Viennese court, a place she perceived as oppressive, she sought both physical and intellectual refuge in Greece.

Due to the myth-making, which started during Elisabeth's lifetime (the title of the book may also be seen as a recognition of this, as well as the Greek myths which fascinated her), the historian has to be wary not to repeat the tired tropes that make for the cornerstones of the various screen adaptations of her life. Haderer states early on how he sets out to avoid this: "Today Elisabeth's many journeys and not her public appearances are key to understanding her personality, her thoughts, and her emotional life" (11). In fact, Elisabeth herself made clear that Greece was a vital part of her, claiming that "it's not wrong to call her a Greek, as she already owns some pieces of land and will soon have a palace there" (80). Evidently, her connection to Greece is not just part of the often repeated "restless empress" myth, but was truly essential for her own self-understanding.

Haderer utilises Elisabeth's poetry as a key source to better understand how her stays in the Mediterranean impacted her inner life. Even though they are not translated into English, her poems (specifically the *Nordsee Lieder*, *Winterlieder*, and *Drittes Buch* written between 1885 and 1888), which often directly relate to Greece, are analysed in the context of her stays throughout Haderer's book. These poems are, as the author claims, "her true legacy" and the place where she could "secretly express her true feelings" (12). Hamann also sees poetry writing as a form of therapy for Elisabeth, a fact recognised by the empress' favourite daughter, Archduchess Marie Valerie. Elisabeth was careful to ensure that nobody at her time would be affected by her poems and instead wrote them for "future souls" as well as under the condition that the box they were stored in not be opened until 1950. In any case, Haderer makes convincing use of them throughout his book.

What makes Haderer's book particularly special is that it closely examines "the lives, personalities, and the relationship of young Greeks with the Empress" in their socio-

political context (13). The author is the first to examine and publish many of the sources utilised thanks to his own language skills. *Under the Spell of a Myth* is not just a compelling re-telling of Elisabeth's journeys, in which her readers and the guides who showed her around are merely side characters. Instead, the latter are vital to the narrative as their destinies after their time with the empress are covered—she was the “springboard for their future careers and also helped to shape their personalities” (195), as Haderer argues. A key figure likely known to those familiar with Elisabeth is Constantin Christomanos, her Greek teacher. Some of his diary entries are already published in book form in German, but in his appendix, Haderer allows the English reader to come face-to-face with Christomanos' adoration for Elisabeth by including the second part of his diaries (which have been lost in their original form, but come down to us in copies). Haderer approaches the topic cleverly, showing the ambiguity of the empress' persona to many of those she encountered. Additionally, the author makes the key context easy to grasp for those not previously familiar with Greece at the time, leaving the reader better equipped to understand Elisabeth's journeys.

The style of the text itself is compelling and easy to follow, though the use of the present tense may be agitating to some. It is thoroughly researched but not burdened by a dry narrative. Haderer's clear passion for his topic shines through, meaning that the reader cannot help but engage with the book pleasurably. There are times, however, where more vigorous referencing may be desired, as the reader sometimes wonders about the exact sources behind the author's assertions. How do we know, for example, that Elisabeth had “great sympathy for those first Greek freedom fighters right from the beginning” (17)? Further, the illustrations bring Elisabeth's journeys and world to life. It is truly commendable that Haderer has been able to pull together many aspects so tightly; the book covers wide terrain, but it is not confused about what it is or what it is trying to do.

Overall, *Under the Spell of a Myth* is a work to be commended. With a broad scope of materials covered, it will be of interest not just to those wanting to learn more about Empress Elisabeth, but also to those searching for more information about nineteenth-century Greece. It sheds new light on a figure who many claim there is nothing else left to write about. Instead of being a simple chronological, narrative re-telling of Elisabeth's travels, this study grapples with her interior life and the circumstances in which she and her companions were operating. The book is both useful to academics and accessible to the interested public. It is a refreshing approach, not suffocated by the Sisi-myth cultivated by the empress herself. One can only hope that the seemingly never-ending screen adaptations of her life will take note.

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