

Anglo-Turkish Society / Royal Anthropological Institute lecture, 20 September 2017, 5.30 pm

Speaker: Erol Sağlam

Venue: Royal Anthropological Institute, 50 Fitzroy St, Fitzrovia, London W1T 5BT

Title: The Romeika of Trabzon: Discretion, Memory, and Treasure Hunts in Contemporary Turkey

Drawing on an ethnographic study in Trabzon, northeastern Turkey, this research explores dynamics of memory through the public invisibility of Romeika, a relatively unknown variant of Greek that is discreetly spoken by communities who identify as Turkish and practice (Sunni) Islam. Departing from the intriguing amalgam of Romeika heritage with the staunch Turkish nationalism in the Valley, I first explore the “discreet” status of Romeika through which the language is preserved in the privacy of communal encounters despite the strength of Turkish nationalism and state participation. I then trace this communal privacy in locals’ relations to the landscape to account for the pervasiveness of treasure hunts and narratives they instigate. I argue that, rather than simply being quests for material riches, these hunts have an intricate relation to the discreet preservation of Romeika, which in turn haunts the local geography through cryptic signs. These quests and narratives, I claim, might be read as another modality of remembrance through which those collective memories, which are abruptly banished from the public sphere to forge a national identity, are accommodated and retained in material and corporeal forms. Through these hunts, locals can both “remember” the past, I conclude, without antagonizing the state and nationalist ideology.

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