

# First Russian Imperial Residence in the Crimea

## Perception and Architectural Program Aspects

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**Abstract**—This article is devoted to aspects related to the perception of the architectural program of the first royal residence in the Crimea. A contemplation of the first owner links Oreanda with the world of St. Petersburg suburbs. The author analyses two architectural projects of K.F. Shinkel and A.I. Shtakensneider.

**Keywords**—the first imperial residence in the Crimea; Oreanda; Alexander I; Nicholas I; Alexandra Fyodorovna; K.F. Shinkel; A.I. Shtakensneider

### I. INTRODUCTION

This report will focus on Oreanda, the first Russian imperial residence in the Crimea. The idea of building it occurred to Emperor Nicholas I and his spouse Alexandra Feodorovna in 1837, design took from 1838 to 1840 and construction was finished in 1852. My interest is primarily in how the clients perceived the new residence, what meanings were invested in its architectural programme and how the clients and contemporaries interpreted them.

Ten years had passed from the start of the construction of the first residence of Nicholas I in Peterhof to the purchase of Oreanda in the Crimea. The period was full of events that, beyond doubt, influenced the clients' disposition. The most important of them were the end of the Russo-Persian war in 1826 with a peace treaty in Russian favour and the Russo-Turkish war of 1828-1829, which brought Russia even greater success. Russia gained possession of most of Transcaucasia and enjoyed practically undivided control over the Black Sea. Largely owing to the efforts of Nicholas I the Holy Alliance of European powers was revived in 1833. It was perhaps the most spectacular decade in the reign of Nicholas I.

Nicholas inherited Oreanda after the death of Emperor Alexander I and Empress Elizabeth Alexeevna. The last days of Alexander I were connected with Oreanda, where he had purchased a large plot of land during his trip across Southern Russia in the autumn of 1825, two weeks before his death.

For Nicholas and Alexandra Feodorovna it meant a lot that Oreanda was the last place which had attracted Alexander I. "With its very name Oreanda evokes sad memories of Emperor Alexander! He wanted to build a house for himself there because he liked the location. How

many thoughts are awakened by this intention of the sovereign, who went through so many trials and saw all the glories of the world at his feet... Of course, Alexander's favourite estate could not have landed in better hands!"[1] Thoughts about the first owner of Oreanda bring to mind the environs of Saint Petersburg, in particular the Tsarskoye Selo residence, to which Alexander I was so attached. Seeing Oreanda as the last estate of Alexander I, Nicholas and his wife treated it not only as a part of an alien world of the Crimea, but also as a part of their own, Baltic world.

The architecture of the Petersburg environs, namely, the Alexandrova Dacha outside Pavlovsk and the Alexander Palace and Park at Tsarskoye Selo, create a certain image of Emperor Alexander I. A special touch is added by the Church of Alexander Nevsky, built in Peterhof in 1832 and dedicated to the patron saint of the late Emperor Alexander I and the son of Nicholas I and future heir Alexander Nikolaevich.

The image of the late emperor is also associated with the Gothic Revival chapel. This connection may seem surprising at first glance because most structures built in honour of Alexander I are in the Classicist or Empire styles. However, the chapel was commissioned by Alexandra Feodorovna, who was close to the emperor in the last years of his life, when he went through a spiritual crisis. The choice of the Gothic style for the Peterhof chapel may in part be explained by this fact. It revives the memory of Alexander I as a person trying to find support in the spiritual field rather than the emperor who had overpowered Napoleon and sought to remake Europe.

His Crimean trip had in part to do with the crisis he went through in the early 1820s. During that time members of the Russian Bible Society, "leaders of that mystical party which so strongly influenced the will of Emperor Alexander the Blessed — Prince A.N. Golitzyn, Princess A.S. Golitsyn and Baroness Krüdener" — were buying land in the Crimea. They looked for a temperate climate and seclusion "needed for health and truly Christian life devoted to virtue and charity" [2]. Iconodule monks who had fled to the Crimea from Byzantium in the 8th century were after the same things and founded many monasteries on the southern coast that were revived in the 19th century. Contemporary historians dated Christian structures and settlements in the

Crimea back to much earlier times than their colleagues do today.

The fact that the Crimea had already given refuge to true Christians once meant a lot for the Russian noblemen who were purchasing new estates in the Crimea. As the local mode of life had changed little in the course of centuries, the new colonists had the impression that they found themselves in the land of early Christians. The Crimea served to regenerate religious sentiments.

That was why when Alexandra Feodorovna first came to Oreanda, she had a cross raised there in honour of Emperor Alexander I. Thus, the theme of the Christian emperor in connection with the veneration of Alexander I started in the Peterhof residence was carried on in Oreanda.

Interestingly, it was Alexandra Feodorovna who commissioned that theme both in Peterhof and in Oreanda.

## II. PALACE AND IMAGE OF ALEXANDRA FEODOROVNA

Her personality makes it possible to consider Peterhof and Oreanda as related ensembles. Alexandria of Peterhof and Oreanda were gifted by Nicholas I to his spouse. The Oreanda palace construction project was largely caused by the fact that the empress could not live in Peterhof for long.

She usually went to Sicily to restore her health. However, during their tour of the Crimea in 1837 the imperial family discovered a “domestic Italy” for themselves. Neither nature nor climate of the southern coast was in any way inferior to those of the Mediterranean. Therefore, they decided to build there a palace as a summer residence where the empress could restore her health.

In 1838, Alexandra Feodorovna commissioned the architect Schinkel to design a tsarist residence in the Crimea and suggested the Charlottenhof villa built by Schinkel outside Potsdam as a model. It was a small Neoclassical palace built in the image of a Roman villa.

However, Schinkel designed the Oreanda palace à la Acropolis of Athens. In his drawing natural rock shelves become buttresses, the flat roof turns out to be a plateau and the palace itself comes across as the product of a mountain-forming process. The Acropolis produces the same impression of a mountain fortress on whoever looks at it from Athens streets below. The Oreanda palace looked even more aged than its ancient prototype because Schinkel placed it so that one could see the sea from it.

Ignoring the client’s wish that the palace be as modest as that of Charlottenhof, the architect apparently wanted to implement in the Crimean ensemble, if only in part, his unrealized project of a royal palace on the Athenian Acropolis conceived four years earlier. The palace designs that Schinkel offered to the King of Greece and the Russian imperial couple were done on the same grand scale. Open courtyards with columns of coloured marble were to serve as organizing centres, on which numerous rampants, stairs and enfilades converged. Just as in the design of a new palace on the Athenian Acropolis, architectural elements of the

Parthenon, Erechtheion and Propylaea were to be brought together there.

Alexandra Feodorovna’s residence was to be a free replica of the eternal model. The empress’ response to Schinkel’s design shows that she did not feel fit to own a “monument of world art”: “...one can grow old before it is built..., what is more, hardly anyone would enjoy living in it” [3].

According to Schinkel’s design, Greek and Oriental architectural traditions were to merge in the palace composition. Similarity to the architecture of ancient Egypt was ensured by the use of inner courtyards in the palace. Long shallow steps and hanging gardens suggested kinship with the Middle East ensembles while massive supports were reminiscent of vaults of Indian rock-cut temples. The Crimean history museum was to be accommodated in the centre of Alexandra Feodorovna’s residence.

The hostess was bound to feel she was the queen of ancient Tauride and lead a befitting way of life. Schinkel’s architecture assigned the Russian empress a role on the scale of Queen Hatshepsut or Cleopatra. The architect himself was hardly aware of the extent to which such a heroine matched the image of the Crimea as it had formed in ancient myths. Remember that the Virgin Goddess associated with the Greek Artemis was one of the presiding deities of ancient Tauride. The Virgin Goddess had her main sanctuary presumably on Cape Fiolent on the southern coast of the Crimea. In their time the Olympians brought Iphigenia there and made her the local priestess of Artemis. It was Tauride that the Greeks thought to be the land of the Amazons. The strong female element was characteristic of the mythological aura of the Crimean land. All of the above was in line with the spirit of the palace Schinkel had designed for the new tsarina of the Crimea.

However, the empress had a different idea of that royal image thinking of it in a lyrical vein. She found the image of Iphigenia created by Goethe closer to her than that depicted by Euripides. Grand Duchess Olga Nikolayevna wrote in her memoirs that the Oreanda palace construction project was in part a product of literary impressions of the empress: “...I have received a letter from Mama breathing with delight: she is in the country which is the land of the classics. She was carried away by reading Goethe’s *Iphigenie* and wrote to the famous architect Schinkel in Berlin asking him to design for her a plan for a palace in Greek taste...” [4]

Of course, the empress did not intend to have her palace built as stage sets for Goethe’s drama, all the more so since the text offered no practical guidance for the construction project: Goethe had described neither the structures nor the landscape in which the action took place. Just the same, the client apparently wanted her future palace to match the spirit of Goethe’s interpretation of the ancient story. And his image of Iphigenie was at variance with Schinkel’s royal mansion. “Goethe readily likened his heroine to a Christian saint. Thus, standing in Bologna before the painting of Saint Agatha attributed to Raphael, he remarked: ‘I have well remembered her image and will imagine my Iphigenie that way and will let her say nothing that this saint could not say’ ” [5].

Goethe's Iphigenia accordingly mollifies the barbarous mores of wild Tauride and sees to it that the murderous law of sacrifice is abolished and brings consolation to the disenchanted soul of Thoas, King of Tauris.

Quite possibly, Empress Alexandra Feodorovna saw in those changes, brought about by the heroine's mild nature and benevolence, a certain ideal for her participation in governing the empire.

It is noteworthy that, wishing to come into contact with ancient history and the cultural image of the Crimea, the empress turned precisely to Goethe rather than to authors of the Antiquity. That way she explored the new land through the native tongue of German culture. Goethe added new accents to the well-known story. The spiritual twists and turns of his characters are determined by the laws of Christian rather than antiquity ethics. For instance, Iphigenia prefers to throw herself on the mercy of the conqueror rather than deceive while King Thoas sacrifices his love by letting the fugitives go. Such image of Christianized antiquity must have been close to the new owners of the Crimean land, where everything bespoke a connection between those epochs. However, that image was absent from Schinkel's design: quite the opposite, in his interpretation powerful Oriental despotism crowned antiquity.

The architect A.I. Stackenschneider amended Schinkel's design to suit the client's desires. He retained the general idea, style and layout, but changed the scale cutting the number of inner courtyards, passageways and terraces, reducing the size of the palace and forsaking everything grandiose. According to Schinkel's design, the palace was to have a caryatid portico. Stackenschneider carried on the idea and produced three such porticos. This makes his structure look even more like an "inflated" Erechtheion than any palace and temple complex of Egypt.

Already in 1842-1844, when the Oreanda palace construction project was at the initial stage, Stackenschneider demonstrated his ability to create an antique environment in which the empress felt at ease. I mean the Tsaritsyn Island pavilion in Peterhof, which the architect had built in the Pompeian style that was indeed reminiscent of the Charlottenhof palace in Potsdam. That environment was of a small domestic scale that dictated the choice of orders. That was why, instead of Schinkel's Tuscan and polygonal columns, Stackenschneider opted for feminine Ionic and Corinthian columns.

The uniform scale gave rise to an integral image of Alexandra Feodorovna that developed in time and became reflected in the architecture of her residences: the hostess of a cozy Tsaritsyn Island pavilion in Peterhof effortlessly transformed into the owner of a huge yet open Crimean palace of human scale.

There was more to the Oreanda palace commission than just the desire to have a new architectural "portrait" of the empress.

Let it be remembered that the Peterhof residence of Nicholas I was a sort of European patchwork. Every piece of the ensemble was arranged so as to emphasize its origin: the

English Cottage was placed close to the sea, the Swiss House amid the ponds and the neo-Greek Belvedere Palace on the hill. European type ensembles were modelled at Peterhof. The Nicholas' Hut was the most "Asiatic" type house there. The Crimean residence representing the many faces of the East was to complement Peterhof with its European diversity.

The population of Peterhof and its environs was not ethnically homogenous: according to the Peterhof Palace administration, most of the Peterhof villages were inhabited by the Chukhna and the Izhortsy with a small scattering of Russians. In addition, there were German colonists. Nicholas I supported Peterhof's multi-ethnicity and stressed it by building English, Swiss or Roman pavilions. The town itself had quarters of English, Gothic Revival and Pompeian style houses. Architecture created the impression of Peterhof being inhabited by multi-ethnic residents speaking different tongues. Apparently, that "Babylon" coloring was a requisite element of the desired variety.

### III. PALACE AND IMAGE OF THE CRIMEA

In the Crimea there was no need to produce specially the effect of a mixed population. It was indeed mixed. When Emperor Nicholas I was on holidays for 45 days at Oreanda in 1852, "...deputations of local residents: Greeks, Tatars and Karaites..." [6] paid him visits. When he left his residence, Nicholas I himself enjoyed visiting places where people of different faiths and nationalities lived together.

One such place was the environs of Bakhchysarai. Three kilometres away from the capital of the Crimean Khanate was the Karaite city-fortress of Chufut-Kale. At its walls stood the Orthodox Monastery of the Dormition. Nicholas I visited it twice and other members of the royal family several times.

Chufut-Kale attracted visitors as a place of peaceful coexistence of Muslims, Karaites who were considered Jews, and Christians. The fact that they had lived side by side from antiquity was proof of the common nature and profound similarity of monotheistic religions. "There you are three religions in close vicinity of each other. Amazing people! Living in the same conditions, needing, loving and fearing the same things... and nevertheless for nearly two thousand years disagreeing on what signs to make and what words to say when praying" [7].

The Peterhof ensemble offered the royal family a chance to live the way the English, Swiss, Russians and Italians do, compare their lifestyles in all those small "parts of Europe" and find something in common in all their variety. Every one of those houses, be it the small Swiss chalet, the Russian hut hidden in greenery or the Italian pavilion standing on an island, in a different way asserted man's right to private life. Among other things, the Crimea gave a chance to be exposed to ancient religions.

There were, presumably, different reasons behind the royal family's interest in the ethnic groups inhabiting Peterhof and the Crimea. The multi-ethnicity of Peterhof showed that the ruler of the vast empire resided there.

Whereas the multi-ethnicity of the Crimea demonstrated that the place was sacred to a person of any faith.

The combination of Judaic, Muslim and Christian shrines in the hot rocky land made the Crimea look like Palestine in the eyes of Russian travellers.

...Steep slopes and naked clifftops,  
The savage beauty of Nature  
Reminded him of the holy sites  
Of the land of Palestine.  
He was looking there for a dear  
Likelihood of his bemoaned home,  
He fancied he heard the Lord  
Still talking to him from Sinai... [8]

This poem of Vyazemsky about Chufut-Kale has a Jewish exile for the main character who has found a holy land in the Crimea since time immemorial. Russian travellers found it there in the mid-19th century and the Crimean journey becomes a pilgrimage for them for the time being. It was no accident that the valley near Chufut-Kale was called the Valley of Josaphat, as in Jerusalem. Many travellers say that the landscapes in the environs of Bakhchysarai, in particular the view of Chufut-Kale from the east gate, bring to mind pictures of biblical sites. These stable associations are confirmed by the fact that in 1871 the artist Kramskoi went there to make studies for his *Christ in the Wilderness*.

The land where the royal residence stood was inhabited by different peoples. In Peterhof it took the emperor special efforts, whereas in the Crimea it was due to historical reasons. The multi-ethnic local population imparted a special coloring to the royal ensembles. It let feel the presence of a vast empire around the residence in Peterhof and the closeness of the distant holy land in Oreanda. That created the feeling that the royal residence was in a historical spot, at an ancient crossroads of civilisations.

The ensemble of imperial and grand ducal residences in the Crimea was to develop under that image sign up to the early 20th century. If we look at the southern coast of the Crimea before the revolution, we will see a host of closely related imperial and grand ducal estates designed in fundamentally diverse architectural styles. These include the Livadia palace built as an Italian palazzo, the Scottish house in Charax and the Church of St. Nina built there in the medieval Georgian style, Mauritanian Dulber and the Kokkozy palace of stunning Crimean Tatar architecture. This extensive architectural ensemble of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century built on the endless change of impressions and pervaded by a huge number of human and cultural ties came into being due to the imaginative groundwork laid in the Oreanda palace construction period.

#### IV. PALACE AND IMAGE OF ANCIENT TAURIDE

Let us go back to the mid-19th century and consider one more world view aspect that influenced the architectural image of the Oreanda palace.

The Black Sea, in the view of which the palace was placed, was perceived as a space separating Europe from the Oriental world. The Crimean coast was a border territory not only for one state, but for a whole part of the world. "It is terrible to stand on the last verzhok (inch) of land, with nothing but deep water for many hundreds of verstas. The last verzhok (inch) of Russian land – the last verzhok (inch) of Europe, and beyond that water already another part of the world, another family of nations!..." [9]

The borderline character of the residence was expressed in the architecture of the Oreanda palace. It manifested itself especially graphically in Schinkel's designs. The architect placed the palace on a rocky and practically inaccessible terrace 500 metres above sea level. In the initial design the palace walls had corner towers, which made the entire structure look like feudal castles of medieval England or Germany. In the second version the palace is stylized as the Greek Acropolis, yet continues to produce the impression of a maritime fortress. There were quite a few such fortresses on the southern coast of the Crimea, both antique as Chersonesus and medieval as Genoese Balaklava and Sudak. As interpreted by Schinkel, Oreanda would have been in line with the local tradition. The tradition had at its core the idea of an independent fortress city ready to rebuff sea pirates and indigenous tribes.

Stackenschneider softened the fortress nature of the palace by changing its location. He moved it from a mountaintop to one of the mountain terraces descending to the sea. Instead of the towers of Schinkel's first design, Stackenschneider planned to build two round Ionic Order gazebos. They are clearly visible in Stackenschneider's drawing kept in the Alupka palace museum archive. Eventually, only one rotunda gazebo was built. As a result of all changes that Stackenschneider made, the residence architecture became cheerful and open.

For historical reasons ever since antiquity representatives of diverse ethnic groups traded, robbed, fought and sought refuge side by side on the Black Sea. The seashore way of life developed in them the ability to co-exist and be tolerant of other cultures.

Schinkel's eclectic design of the Oreanda palace was in harmony with the Crimea's cultural poly-style. As has already been mentioned, on the outside the palace looked like the ancient acropolis, whose plan reflected Schinkel's impressions from Egyptian palaces and temples and whose interiors bore evidence of the influence of ancient Indian and Sumerian architecture. The palace was expected to have several storeys, hanging gardens, an atrium and swimming pools, with most of the interiors decorated with marble, mosaics and local stone. Schinkel did not stylise local Oriental architectural traditions in his design: he had no knowledge of Crimean Tatar and Karaite architecture. Nevertheless, his Oreanda palace design captured the very

spirit of the Black Sea area, the spirit of the meeting of European and Oriental cultures.

However, the imperial family chose to alter his design. The way Stackenschneider interpreted it, the palace “had a majestic appearance reminiscent of ancient Tauride with its rich structures and Greek colonies...” [10] This means that Schinkel’s idea of the polyphony of cultures in which antique motifs would find Oriental parallels did not materialize. The purity of the neo-Greek style of Stackenschneider’s palace design makes the traveller sharply feel the border: the Oriental world is across the Black Sea and before him is the European coast.

Perhaps, there were political reasons behind the choice of the purely Hellenistic style for the imperial palace. Let it be remembered that the liberation movement against the Turkish yoke started in Greece in 1821. Russia sympathized with the Greek rebellion, all the more so since it was religious in nature. At the congresses of the Holy Alliance Alexander I sought to convince the European monarchs to support the Greek rebellion. In 1824, they even held a conference on the Greek issue in St. Petersburg. However, the proclamations made by Alexander I met with no support among the allies. Then, Alexander I announced in 1825 that from that moment on Russia would be guided by her own decisions in Turkish affairs. Russia thus started preparing for war against Turkey.

That same year Alexander I came to the Crimea and took fancy to Oreanda as his private estate. Even though there were no antique monuments in Oreanda, the choice of the Black Sea area for his residence bespeaks the emperor’s interests in all things Hellenistic at that moment. Thus, the vector of his state policy in a way coincided with his personal aspirations. It is not known what his residence might have been, had Alexander built it. The Neo-Greek style was one possibility.

In the reign of Nicholas I relations with Turkey remained tense. By the early 1850s another conflict between the two nations had come to a head and led to the Crimean War. Under the circumstances the building of a palace in Greek taste in Oreanda opposite the Turkish coast looked as a foreign policy act.

The paradox was that, built for seclusion and rest, that residence of Nicholas I, which was farther from the capital than any of his other palaces, found itself in the epicenter of Crimean War developments. After the allied troops had landed in Eupatoria and Sevastopol came under siege, Nicholas I received nothing but bad news from the Crimea. The depression caused by the Crimean debacle resulted in the emperor’s death. Before the Crimean War the imperial family associated the Black Sea coast with holidays and classical antiquity. After 1854 it came to be associated with brutal modern history and the death of the emperor.

In the eyes of contemporaries, in particular members of the imperial family, the scale of the Crimean campaign was on a par with that of the great campaigns of antiquity. Diaries of Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolayevich bear witness to this fact. On his way to Oreanda he jotted down his impressions

of Sevastopol. “Examined the 6th and 5th bastions, the Schwartz redoubt at Peresypka, Budishchev’s battery and the Malakhov Kurgan. Terribly sad and terribly interesting, a perfect epic still awaiting its Homer...” [11] The diarist associated Sevastopol with Pompeii and Troy. In the 19th century the Crimea relived, as it were, the antiquity period of its history.

In the light of Crimean War events the style of the Oreanda palace even acquired an emotional charge. The antiquity-inspired architectural language of Stackenschneider served to immortalize the dramatic glory of that area in the 1860s-1870s.

## V. CONCLUSION

After the death of Nicholas I Empress Alexandra Feodorovna never visited Oreanda. The palace stood abandoned for a long time and burned down in 1882 soon after Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolayevich had inherited it. Symptomatically, on the owner’s order “parts of the burned palace threatening to collapse were dismantled, ...and what was left looked so much like ancient ruins that for years on end it was a park ornament...” [12]

Surprisingly, already the next generation after the clients lightheartedly saw the palace as an ancient ruin and took pleasure in touring the area. Judging by late 19th century photographs, the Oreanda portico ruins were even photographed in a manner reminiscent of the remnants of ancient Byzantine churches of Chersonesus.

In 1885, three years after the fire, Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolayevich commissioned the building of the Church of the Intercession of the Mother of God there to the design of the architect A. A. Avdeev. The Grand Duke had no funds to restore the huge palace inherited from his mother Empress Alexandra Feodorovna and to honour her memory he built the church. The “antique” ruins of the Oreanda palace were used as building material for the new church in the Byzantine Caucasian style. Two circumstances are worth noting: it was the first church to be built in this style in the Crimea between the 18th and 19th centuries, and a medieval style very much unlike the early Russian style was chosen as a form of address to the posthumous image of Empress Alexandra Feodorovna.

To sum up, by the 1880s what had remained from the first imperial residence in the Crimea was antique style ruins and a Byzantine church. Let it be remembered that when she first visited Oreanda in 1837 and climbed the Krestovaya cliff, Empress Alexandra Feodorovna personally put up a cross there and planted a laurel bush. The two pairs — the ruins and the church, on the one side, and the laurel and the cross, on the other — stand for the continuity of antiquity and Christianity. It must have been a similar image uniting the two cultures that Empress Alexandra Feodorovna sought when she tried to convince the architect Schinkel to see Goethe’s *Iphigenie* as the future palace hostess. The theme of the link between ancient Greece and Christian Byzantium so naively demonstrated by the first hostess of the Oreanda palace and carried on by her successor with such expertise

defined the beginning and the end of the existence of that architectural ensemble.

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