In addition to the Jewish Diaspora, the Greek-Orthodox diaspora is one of the oldest traditional diasporas in world history. But in contrast to the Jewish diaspora, it was, up until fairly recently, a relatively understudied case. For example, neither Cohen’s (1997) influential book nor Curtain’s (1984) historical study of commercial diasporas cover the Greek-Orthodox case. The genre of diaspora has penetrated Greek historical writing relatively recently—with the last 15 years witnessing a renaissance of studies on this subject. Coverage of particular diasporic groups is quite uneven with the Greek Americans being the most popular research subject.

For the purposes of the discussion in this chapter and in order to chart a middle course between the traps of modernism and primordialism (Smith, 1998) and hence to address successfully the relationship between diaspora and nationalism it is further necessary to draw a distinction between the existence of diasporas in the era of multinational empires and the new transnational national communities that have emerged in the modern world of nation-states. The existence of “scattered people” (the original meaning of the word “diaspora”) has been a major feature in world history, and certain ethnic communities (including the Greek) have had a long history of living scattered throughout the Eurasian continent (Reis, 2004: 44).

In sharp contrast to the multi-ethnic or multi-national empires of earlier times, modern nation-states are not content with taxation and submission to the Emperor. Their goal is to nationalize their citizens, thereby transforming them into culturally homogeneous members of their respective imagined communities. Under these conditions, old and new diasporas alike have a limited set of choices: they might acculturate into these nations; or they might develop a hybrid
identity that combines the identities of host and home nations; or they might develop a minority identity constructed by reference to their own external national homeland (Fitzgerald, 2004; Brubaker, 1996; Safran, 2007). When diasporic communities choose this last route, then, they are transformed into transnational national communities. These are defined as national communities connected to a real or imagined national homeland that lies outside the boundaries of the nation-state they inhabit. Their connections to their national homeland can take various forms. Their members are primarily concerned with the articulation and reproduction of common, ethnic and national interests, economic linkages and cultural similarities. The ties among community members connect those based in the homeland with those members dispersed across specific national host territories. Membership is mainly or perhaps entirely defined in terms of common ethnic or national origins. There also exist more widely dispersed and probably older national and ethnic migrant groups constituting a diaspora whose attachment to a homeland is more symbolic in nature and whose members have become assimilated to various degrees into one or more host societies (Kennedy and Roudometof, 2002: 21).

When considering the socio-historical experience of living in dispersion the Greek-Orthodox (Rum) diaspora is among the oldest historical examples of people living in dispersion. Its existence dates back to the intertwining of Orthodox Christianity with the Greek culture of the Hellenistic and Roman eras—while its social and cultural milieux and its historical trajectory have been affiliated with the two major empires (the Eastern Roman [i.e. Byzantine] and Ottoman) that occupied most of the Eastern Mediterranean region for nearly 2,000 years. In contrast, when speaking of the historically far more recent reality of transnational nationalism, transnational Hellenism is of relatively recent origin, although certainly older than the most recently publicized examples of contemporary transnationalism (Roudometof, 2000; Reis, 2004; Prevelakis, 2000).

This chapter addresses the transformation of the communities of the Greek-Orthodox diaspora into transnational Greek communities. Given that at least 140 countries worldwide are serving as hosts to diasporic and/or immigrant communities of Greek descent and/or origin (Roudometof, 2000: 378), it is quite plain that this chapter could not possibly provide a comprehensive treatment of the Greek diaspora. Space restrictions alone make it unrealistic to attempt even a detailed bibliographical survey. Therefore, for this chapter's purposes, emphasis