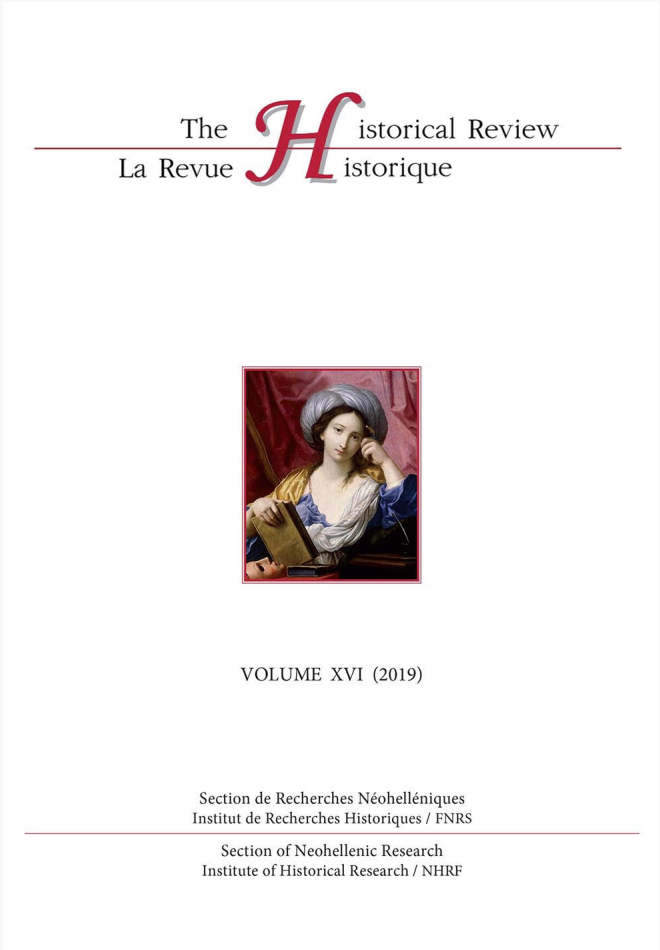
The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 16 (2019)



Roots ancient or medieval? Nikolaos Politis, modern Greek folklore studies and ancient Greek religion

Agis Marinis

doi: 10.12681/hr.22824

To cite this article:

Marinis, A. (2020). Roots ancient or medieval? Nikolaos Politis, modern Greek folklore studies and ancient Greek religion. *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, *16*, 167–186. https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.22824

ROOTS ANCIENT OR MEDIEVAL? NIKOLAOS POLITIS, MODERN GREEK FOLKLORE STUDIES AND ANCIENT GREEK RELIGION

Agis Marinis

Abstract: The question posed by the title can be reformulated in the following manner: to what extent has it been possible or desirable to connect modern Greek customs with ancient ones? Not customs in general, but more precisely religious customs. Greek folklore studies typically begin with Nikolaos Politis, professor at the University of Athens, the first to introduce the term *λαογραφία* (meaning "folklore studies") towards the end of the nineteenth century. Yet, we need to revert to at least as far back as the time prior to the Greek Revolution, that is, the period of the Greek Enlightenment, in order to trace the beginnings of the shaping of the ideological framework of modern Greek folklore studies. It is well known and has aptly been pointed out, also in connection with Greek folklore studies, that for the Greeks the Enlightenment movement went hand in hand with a specific form of romanticism. The Greek idea of the nation developed within the framework of the Romantic movement and on the basis of the connection between "us" and "the ancients". How, then, were modern Greek folk customs that were not firmly related to the Orthodox Church incorporated in this new cultural narrative?

The central question of this article relates to the ideological complications of drawing parallels between modern Greek folk customs and ancient Greek religious practices in early modern Greek folklore studies.[1] To what extent has this been possible or desirable? The methodological and ideological challenges are scarcely negligible; indeed, we ought to take into account that folk customs that lend themselves to a comparison with antiquity may not merely be small-scale or anodyne ritual reminiscences but also large-scale, complicated ritual acts such as modern Greek animal sacrifice, to which I make a succinct reference in the Appendix. A considerable part of this article is dedicated to Nikolaos G. Politis (1852–1921) and the foundation of modern Greek folklore studies. As a

[1] This essay stems from a talk given at the conference entitled "An Immortal Debate: Philosophy and Ideology between Late Byzantium and Modern Greece", organised by the Centre for Hellenic Studies of King's College London (9 June 2012). I wish to thank Niketas Siniossoglou for the invitation to speak there; I have profited much from our exchange of views on the issues treated here, as well as from the scholarly discussion held at that conference. I equally wish to thank Sophia Matthaiou for her valuable feedback on this paper.

The Historical Review / La Revue Historique
Section of Neohellenic Research / Institute of Historical Research
Volume XVI (2019)

professor at the University of Athens, he was the first scholar to introduce the term *λαογραφία*, which would soon become established as the Greek equivalent of the English *folklore* and the German *Volkskunde* towards the end of the 19th century.[2] However, we need to revert to at least as far back as the time prior to the Greek Revolution, that is, to the period of the Greek Enlightenment, in order to trace the emergence of both the systematic study of modern Greek folklore as well as the shaping of its ideological framework.

The Study of Greek Folklore in its Nascence

It is well known and has aptly been pointed out, also in connection with this issue, that for the Greeks the Enlightenment movement went hand in hand with a specific expression of Romanticism. The central figures of the Greek Enlightenment combined, thus, in their thought the rationalistic elements of the Enlightenment (for instance, development of science, independence from religious thought) with a clearly Romantic construal of history. Indeed, the Greek idea of the nation developed within the framework of the Romantic movement and on the basis of the connection between "us" and "the Ancients".[3] However, to

[2] On the establishment of the term *λαογραφία*, see Dimitrios S. Loukatos, *Εἰσαγωγὴ στὴν ἑλληνικὴ λαογραφία* [Introduction to Greek folklore studies], Athens: National Bank of Greece Cultural Foundation, 1977, pp. 65–67; Alki Kyriakidou-Nestoros, *Ἡ θεωρία τῆς ἑλληνικῆς λαογραφίας: Κριτικὴ ἀνάλυση* [The theory of Greek folklore studies: critical analysis], Athens: Moraitis Foundation, 1978, pp. 148–154; Stephanos D. Imellos, *Ἱστορικὰ καὶ μεθοδολογικὰ τῆς ἑλληνικῆς λαογραφίας*, fasc. 1, *Ἀπὸ τὴν προδρομικὴ φάση μέχρι τὴν ἐπιστημονικὴ αὐτοτέλεια* [Historical and methodological issues in Greek folklore studies, fasc. 1, From the phase of the precursors to scientific self-sufficiency], Athens: Society for the Dissemination of Profitable Books, 1995, pp. 10–15; Minas A. Alexiadis, *Ελληνική και διεθνής επιστημονική ονοματοθεσία της λαογραφίας* [Greek and international nomenclature of folklore studies], Athens: Kardamitsa, 2010[2]; also, of course, the original essay by Nikolaos G. Politis, "Λαογραφία" [Folklore studies], in *Λαογραφικὰ σύμμεικτα* [Folklore miscellanea], vol. 1, Athens: Paraskevas Leonis, 1920, pp. 1–13. On the term folklore, in relation to the relevant Greek terminology, see Walter Puchner, *Δοκίμια για τη λαογραφική θεωρία και τη φιλοσοφία του πολιτισμού* [Essays on the theory of folklore studies and the philosophy of culture], Athens: Herodotos, 2014, pp. 32–50.

[3] On the intellectual climate, prevalent in Europe prior to the Greek Revolution, which influenced Greek thinkers and led to the development of the systematic study of folklore, here with an emphasis on the study of folk songs, see Alexis Politis, *Ἡ ἀνακάλυψη τῶν ἑλληνικῶν δημοτικῶν τραγουδιῶν: προϋποθέσεις, προσπάθειες καὶ ἡ δημιουργία τῆς πρώτης συλλογῆς* [The discovery of Greek folk songs: prerequisites, efforts and the creation of the first collection], Athens: Themelio, 1984, esp. pp. 122-197; also Politis, "From Christian Roman Emperors to the Glorious Greek Ancestors", in *Byzantium and the Modern Greek*

a large extent, the Romantic turn meant for the Greeks liberalism, independence from the religious spirit, democracy and political equality. The relevant analysis has been carried out by Constantinos Th. Dimaras,[4] while, within the discipline of folklore studies, Alki Kyriakidou-Nestoros has placed considerable emphasis on this fact in her study of the theory of Greek folklore studies. Kyriakidou-Nestoros points to the institution of a unified, hierarchical state by the Bavarians and the abolition of the communities (*κοινότητες*) as a watershed for the emergence of a new form of folklore studies. Hence, she introduces a sharp distinction between a pre-scientific period of Greek folklore research, which bears the mark of Enlightenment ideas and, on the other hand, a scientific one, which was inaugurated within the climate of neoclassicism and was informed by the ideology of the modern Greek state.[5] As a prime example of the pre-scientific form of the discipline, she of course mentions the *Modern Geography* by Grigorios Konstantas and Daniel Philippidis. What this work exemplifies is a focus on locality; by contrast, the subsequent scientific study of folklore manifests

---

Identity, ed. David Ricks and Paul Magdalino, London: Routledge, 1998, pp. 1–14. For a concise sketch of the formation of folklore studies in modern Greece and its role as regards the establishment of the national ideology, see Alki Kyriakidou-Nestoros, "Introduction to Modern Greek Ideology and Folklore", *Journal of Modern Hellenism* 3 (1986), pp. 35–46. On the role of folklore in determining national identity, see Richard M. Dorson, "The Question of Folklore in a New Nation", *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 3 (1966), pp. 277–298. For a critical rethinking of folklore as "constitutive rhetoric", see Stephen O. Gencarella, "Constituting Folklore: A Case for Critical Folklore Studies", *The Journal of American Folklore* 122/4 (2009), pp. 172–196.

[4] Constantinos Th. Dimaras, *Ἑλληνικὸς Ρωμαντισμός* [Greek Romanticism], Athens: Ermis, 1982, esp. pp. 141–156.

[5] See analysis in Kyriakidou-Nestoros, *Ἡ θεωρία τῆς ἑλληνικῆς λαογραφίας* [The theory of Greek folklore studies], pp. 49–85. Michalis Meraklis qualifies, however, these views by underlining the fact that the *official* establishment of *λαογραφία* took place decades after the foundation of the Greek state and also in the aftermath of the modernisation programme implemented by the government of Harilaos Trikoupis. Hence, neoclassicism was not the sole, or perhaps not even the leading, force behind the inauguration of the scientific discipline of folklore studies in Greece; see Michalis G. Meraklis, *Λαϊκός πολιτισμός και νεοελληνικός διαφωτισμός* [Folk culture and modern Greek Enlightenment], Athens: Papazisis, 2007, esp. pp. 111–133; see also Meraklis, *Θέματα λαογραφίας* [Issues in folklore studies], Athens: Kastaniotis, 1999, pp. 109–121; Meraklis, "Γενεαλογικά της ελληνικής Λαογραφίας (ο διφυής χαρακτήρας της)" [Genealogical issues of Greek folklore studies (its twofold character)], in *Ο Νικόλαος Πολίτης και το Κέντρον Ερεύνης της Ελληνικής Λαογραφίας: Πρακτικά Διεθνούς Επιστημονικού Συνεδρίου* [Nikolaos Politis and the Centre for the Study of Greek Folklore: proceedings of the international scientific conference], ed. Aikaterini Polymerou-Kamilaki, vol. 1, Athens: Academy of Athens, 2012, pp. 57–77.

a predilection for thematic studies, an examination of delimited topics which are considered on a Panhellenic basis.[6] Indeed, it is important to always keep in mind that the creation of the modern Greek state was a most crucial factor in shaping Greek folklore studies, both *within* and *without* the borders of the state.[7]

Enter Fallmerayer: the study of modern Greek folklore, roughly until the beginning of Politis' career, that is, the 1870s, had as one of its main aims to overturn the well-known theory of Jakob Philipp Fallmerayer, professor at the University of Munich, as laid out in his *History of the Morea* (1830).[8] It is tempting to suppose that the study of continuities (in language and customs) would not have developed so vigorously had it not been for Fallmerayer's assault on what was naturally considered a national taboo: the Greekness of the Greeks. However, as Walter Puchner points out, Fallmerayer's theory ought to be evaluated within a specific political and ideological framework: the German scholar was reacting against what he regarded as an exaggerated, Romantic worship of everything Greek in Europe and Germany.[9] Hence, we find ourselves in a period, after the foundation of the Greek state, when the Hellenic identity of the state and its inhabitants had to be vindicated.[10] Three treatises were published, by Emmanouil Bybilakis, Anastasios Georgiadis Leukias and Kyriakos Pittakis, respectively, providing accounts of the "life", as Bybilakis prefers to call it, of modern Greeks, which was then connected with antiquity – without there being intimated the slightest amount of conflict

---

[6] Kyriakidou-Nestoros, *Ἡ θεωρία τῆς ἑλληνικῆς λαογραφίας* [The theory of Greek folklore studies], pp. 55–56; see Grigorios Konstantas and Daniel Philippidis, *Νεωτερικὴ Γεωγραφία* [Modern geography], Vienna: Thomas von Trattner, 1791; with a useful introduction by Aikaterini Koumarianou in her edition of this work (Athens: Ermis, 1988).

[7] See Alexis Politis, *Ρομαντικά χρόνια: Ιδεολογίες και νοοτροπίες στην Ελλάδα του 1830–1880* [Romantic years: ideologies and mentalities in Greece, 1830–1880], 3rd ed., Athens: Mnimon, 2003, esp. pp. 48–60 on the birth of folklore studies within the intellectual climate of Romanticism; also Kyriakidou-Nestoros, *Ἡ θεωρία τῆς ἑλληνικῆς λαογραφίας* [The theory of Greek folklore studies], pp. 17–47.

[8] Jakob Philipp Fallmerayer, *Geschichte der Halbinsel Morea während des Mittelalters*, pt. 1, *Untergang der peloponnesischen Hellenen und Wiederbevölkerung des leeren Bodens durch slavische Volksstämme*, Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta, 1830.

[9] Walter Puchner, *Θεωρητική Λαογραφία. Έννοιες – μέθοδοι – θεματικές* [Theoretical folklore studies: concepts–methods–themes], Athens: Armos, 2009, pp. 129–131.

[10] See succinctly, Michalis G. Meraklis, "Ὁ Φαλμεράγιερ καὶ ἡ ἑλληνικὴ λαογραφία" [Fallmerayer and Greek folklore studies], in *Ἕνας νέος κόσμος γεννιέται: Ἡ εἰκόνα τοῦ ἑλληνικοῦ πολιτισμοῦ στὴ γερμανικὴ ἐπιστήμη κατὰ τὸν 19ο αι.* [A new world is born: the image of Greek culture in German science during the 19th century], ed. Evangelos Chrysos, Athens: Akritas, 1996, pp. 269–276.

with the church.[11] What interests Bybilakis – who, significantly, was addressing a European audience – is the "temperament" of the Greeks. For this reason, he does not shy away from asserting an extensive number of possible links between modern and ancient Greek "life". He even connects the religious fasting of the modern Greeks with the ancient traditions about Epimenides and the *μύσται* (initiates) of Euripides' fragmentary *Cretans*.[12] What he seeks to present to his audience is a continuous "folk life", or *Volksleben*. In a similar way, Georgiadis Leukias, in his book, composed in an archaising Greek idiom with a Latin translation alongside each page, begins with the assertion that modern Greeks, besides being Christian, have retained a great deal of their ancient customs.[13] Pittakis, on the other hand, attempts to exploit archaeological evidence, in tandem with elements of folkloric heritage, in order to counter Fallmerayer's assertions.[14]

Spyridon Zambelios (1815–1881) is the scholar who introduced the notion of the "Helleno-Christian civilisation".[15] As Pericles Vallianos points out, Zambelios

---

[11] Emmanouil Bybilakis, *Neugriechisches Leben verglichen mit dem altgriechischen: zur Erläuterung beider*, Berlin: W. Besser, 1840; Anastasios Georgiadis Leukias, *Ἀνατροπὴ τῶν δοξασάντων, γραψάντων καὶ τύποις κοινωσάντων, ὅτι οὐδεὶς τῶν νῦν τὴν Ἑλλάδα οἰκούντων ἀπόγονος τῶν ἀρχαίων Ἑλλήνων ἐστίν* [Refutation of those who have posited, written and publicly enunciated that none among those who currently live in Greece is a descendant of the ancient Greeks], Athens: Ch. Nikolaidis, 1843; Kyriakos Pittakis, *Ὕλη ἵνα χρησιμεύσῃ πρὸς ἀπόδειξιν, ὅτι οἱ νῦν κατοικοῦντες ἐν Ἑλλάδι εἰσὶν ἀπόγονοι τῶν ἀρχαίων Ἑλλήνων* [Material serving to prove that those currently living in Greece are descendants of the ancient Greeks], *Ἀρχαιολογικὴ Ἐφημερὶς* 30 (1852), pp. 644–664.

[12] Bybilakis, *Neugriechisches Leben*, 52–55.

[13] Georgiadis Leukias, *Ἀνατροπὴ τῶν δοξασάντων* [Refutation of those who have posited], p. 8.

[14] On these three scholars, see Loukatos, *Εἰσαγωγὴ στὴν ἑλληνικὴ λαογραφία* [Introduction to Greek folklore], pp. 56–60; also, analytical discussion of Fallmerayer's theory and the reaction of Greek scholars in Giorgos Veloudis, *Ὁ Jacob Philipp Fallmerayer καὶ ἡ γένεση τοῦ ἑλληνικοῦ ἱστορισμοῦ* [Jacob Philipp Fallmerayer and the genesis of Greek historicism], Athens: Mnimon, 1982; Elli Skopetea, *Φαλμεράνερ: τεχνάσματα του αντιπάλου δέους* [Fallmerayer: devices of the opposition], Athens: Themelio, 1997. It is also worth taking into account a relevant essay, which remained unpublished at the time, written in German, by Stephanos Koumanoudis, that focuses on linguistic arguments; see *Στεφάνου Α. Κουμανούδη ανέκδοτα κείμενα 1837–1845* [Unedited texts by Stephanos A. Koumanoudis, 1837–1845], ed. Sophia Matthaiou and Pantelis Karellos, Athens: National Hellenic Research Foundation, 2010, pp. 237–298.

[15] See Spyridon Zambelios, *Ἄσματα δημοτικὰ τῆς Ἑλλάδος, ἐκδοθέντα μετὰ μελέτης ἱστορικῆς περὶ μεσαιωνικοῦ ἑλληνισμοῦ* [Folk songs of Greece, edited with a historical study on medieval Hellenism], Corfu: Ermis, 1852, esp. pp. 462–581; Zambelios, *Βυζαντιναί μελέται: Περὶ πηγῶν νεοελληνικῆς ἐθνότητος ἀπὸ Η΄ ἄχρι Ι΄ ἑκατονταετηρίδος μ.Χ.* [Byzantine studies: on the origins of the Neohellenic nation from the 8th to the 10th century AD], Athens: Nikolaidis Philadelpheus, 1857, pp. 43–46. Among a large array of scholarly discussions, see

has no real interest in classical antiquity; his main focus is rather on the medieval past and the Orthodox tradition, specifically the religious attitudes stemming from it.[16] A next important watershed was the publication of the famous *History of the Greek Nation* by Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos (1815–1891), with its tripartite schema (Ancient Greece–Byzantium–Modern Greece), a historical conception which provides a means to connect the ancient Greek world with the modern Greek state and its culture.[17] Notwithstanding that, as one may easily suspect, the rehabilitation of Byzantium did not always and necessarily guarantee a neater schema of Greek history; much elaboration was needed in order to

---

Anna Tabaki, "Η μετάβαση από τον Διαφωτισμό στον Ρομαντισμό στον ελληνικό 19ο αιώνα: Η περίπτωση του Ιωάννη και του Σπυρίδωνα Ζαμπέλιου" [The transition from Enlightenment to Romanticism during the Greek 19th century: the case of Ioannis and Spyridon Zambelios], *Δελτίον της Ιστορικής και Εθνολογικής Εταιρείας* 30 (1987) [=1989], pp. 31–46; Ioannis Koubourlis, *La formation de l'histoire nationale grecque: L'apport de Spyridon Zambélios (1815–1881)*, Athens: National Hellenic Research Foundation, 2005; Michael Herzfeld, *Ours Once More: Folklore, Ideology, and the Making of Modern Greece*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982, pp. 39–42; Evangelos Gr. Avdikos, *Εισαγωγή στις σπουδές του λαϊκού πολιτισμού: λαογραφίες, λαϊκοί πολιτισμοί, ταυτότητες* [Introduction to the studies of folk culture: folklores, folk cultures, identities], Athens: Kritiki, 2009, pp. 63–66; and Pericles S. Vallianos, "The Ways of the Nation: Messianic and Universalist Nationalism in Renieris, Zambelios and Paparrigopoulos", *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique* 15 (2018), pp. 163–194: 176–183.

[16] Vallianos, "Ways of the Nation", esp. p. 178.

[17] Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos, *Ἱστορία τοῦ ἑλληνικοῦ ἔθνους* [History of the Greek nation], Athens: Anestis Konstantinides, 1860–1876. Again among many studies, see Paschalis M. Kitromilides, "On the Intellectual Content of Greek Nationalism: Paparrigopoulos, Byzantium and the Great Idea", in Ricks and Magdalino, *Byzantium and the Modern Greek Identity*, pp. 25–33; Kitromilides, "Η ιδέα του έθνους και της εθνικής κοινότητας στην ελληνική ιστοριογραφία" [The idea of the nation and the national community in Greek historiography], in *Ιστοριογραφία της νεότερης και σύγχρονης Ελλάδας 1833–2002* [Historiography of modern and contemporary Greece, 1833–2002], ed. Paschalis M. Kitromilides and Triantaphyllos E. Sklavenitis, vol. 1, Athens: National Research Foundation, 2004, pp. 37–50. Specifically on the way Paparrigopoulos deals with ancient Greek religion, see Michael Konaris, "Αρχαία ελληνική θρησκεία και εθνικός χαρακτήρας στο έργο του Κωνσταντίνου Παπαρρηγόπουλου" [Ancient Greek religion and national character in the work of Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos], in *Ελληνικότητα και ετερότητα: Πολιτισμικές διαμεσολαβήσεις και "εθνικός χαρακτήρας" στον 19ο αιώνα* [Greekness and otherness: cultural negotiations and "national character" in the 19th century], ed. Anna Tabaki and Ourania Polycandrioti, vol. 2, Athens: University of Athens and National Hellenic Research Foundation, 2016, pp. 267–282.

present a unified conception of Greek history.[18] We would naturally proceed now with Politis, and the founding of Greek folklore studies, but before that it is worth taking a brief look at the foreigners who produced book-length studies comparing ancient Greek religion with modern Greek folklore.

Foreign Scholars on Greek Folklore

Obviously, the "problem" of tracing analogies between ancient Greek religion and modern Greek folklore was felt, in ideological terms at least, as such primarily by Greek scholars, and scarcely by people who were not part of the society of the newly founded state. The example of the Romanian princess Dora D'Istria (1828–1888) is eloquent:[19] in her writings she connected modern Greeks to their ancient forbears and regarded the Byzantine Empire as a foreign growth on true Hellenism. Simultaneously, as Michael Herzfeld notes, "perhaps because she felt no need to 'justify' Christianity, she dismissed the church as a destructive foreign influence too".[20]

A book which exerted considerable influence was Bernhard Schmidt's *Das Volksleben der Neugriechen*.[21] Schmidt's key aim was to uncover the worldview of the people, for which he employs the rare coinage *Anschauungsweise* (to be loosely translated as "worldview"). In studying this "worldview", he could well be outspoken about the parallels between Orthodoxy and paganism (*Heidenthum* is the term he uses). For instance, contrary to ecclesiastical dogma, the simple people (*das einfache Volk*) supplicates the saints as if they were "real gods" ("wie zu wirklichen Göttern").[22] Interestingly, Schmidt goes on to trace a direct parallel between the worship of holy icons with the veneration of statues in ancient Greece.[23]

A comparable approach is adopted by Rennell Rodd, the following programmatic statement being indicative of his outlook:

> In this and the following chapters I propose to deal with a number of ideas and superstitions which constitute the real spiritual equipment

---

[18] Specifically on Paparrigopoulos' and Zambelios' reception of Byzantium, see Roxane D. Argyropoulos, *Les intellectuels grecs à la recherche de Byzance (1860–1912)*, Athens: National Hellenic Research Foundation, 2001, pp. 37–60.

[19] Born Elena Ghica and of Albanian descent; she was later granted Greek nationality by parliamentary decree. See especially Dora D'Istria, *Excursions en Rumélie et en Morée*, Zurich: Meyer et Zeller, 1863.

[20] Herzfeld, *Ours Once More*, pp. 55–58, here 58.

[21] Bernhard Schmidt, *Das Volksleben der Neugriechen und das hellenische Alterthum*, Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1871.

[22] Ibid., p. 35.

[23] Ibid., pp. 49–55.

> of the people in Greece. In the greater number of them the connection with the old pagan mode of thought will be sufficiently apparent. Some are disguised under a thin veil of Christian assimilation, but many still wear the classic garb unaltered.

He subsequently adds the following – striking a tone that would certainly sound provocative in Greece:

> That the Church in Greece to-day still has a strong hold upon the people, there is no doubt; but it is rather as a disciplinary and national institution than as a spiritual force. The ignorance of the clergy is so great that it would be idle to expect of the people even a rudimentary understanding of the intent of doctrines to which they all subscribe. The result is a curious mixture of Christian symbolism with pagan tradition, an unconscious effort to harmonize inherited superstition with the dogma of authority.[24]

It is self-evident that such a manner of expression would be unthinkable for a Greek of the time and would certainly be out of tune with the effort to consolidate a common cultural identity, distinct from but nevertheless connected with earlier phases of Greek history.

We may now move on to John Cuthbert Lawson, whose work *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion* essentially remains the most widely read book on this topic.[25] What Lawson focuses on is the "national character" of the Greeks, a character which, as he believes, has been broadly inherited from ancient Greece, not as a racial but as a temperamental inheritance. Significantly, speaking about modern Greeks, he does not reserve only compliments for them but also points to faults in their "national character", faults which may equally be attested in antiquity. Still, the description of this "national character" is merely a minor issue, an introduction to the wider vista opened up by the study of customs. It is in the multifarious customs that he discerns what he terms "the survival of Hellenic tradition". He, as a Briton, is not of course primarily interested in proving that modern Greeks have inherited ancient Greek customs, but is up to something more promising and prima facie less self-evident: namely, to shed light on *ancient* Greek religion, by uncovering relevant parallels in modern Greece. Modern Greek life shall effectively serve as a depository of living testimonies, of precious fossils.[26] What is his rationale? In Lawson's view,

---

[24] Rennell Rodd, *The Customs and Lore of Modern Greece*, London: D. Stott, 1892, p. 106.

[25] John Cuthbert Lawson, *Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion: A Study in Survivals*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910.

[26] It is of interest to consider how the established discipline of Classics, with its anthropological forays at that time, received Lawson's study. Characteristically, Jane Ellen

Christianity easily prevailed in an area of life where it did not encounter any real competition: namely, morals. Ancient religions, he remarks, include no moral code, the moral life of society being no part of them. The Christian Church, therefore, was bound to encounter strong opposition not in the area of morality, but in the area of practiced religion. What was the outcome? Lawson surprises us by offering hardly a historical account, but a charmingly psychological one:

> Indeed the real difficulty of the Christian Church was the tolerant spirit of the Greek people. They would not acknowledge that any feud existed. They were ready to worship the Christian God: but they must have felt that it was unreasonable of the Christian missionaries to ask them to give up all their old gods merely because a new god had been introduced […] Tolerant themselves, they must have resented a little the intolerance of the new religion.[27]

We suspect that Lawson here gives voice to thoughts and opinions, even humour, that a Greek scholar could not easily afford. He then proceeds to declare that despite the prevalence of what he terms "external Christianity", modern Greeks "are as pagan and as polytheistic in their hearts as were ever their ancestors".[28] He supports his view with testimony from Dimitrios Kambouroglou:[29]

> In Athens, down to recent times, there was a fine old formula of blessing in vogue – and who shall say but that among the simpler people it may still be heard? – which combined impartially the one God and the many: – *νὰ σ' ἀξιώσῃ ὁ Θεὸς νὰ εὐχαριστήσῃς θεοὺς καὶ ἀνθρώπους*, 'God fit thee to find favour with gods and men!'[30]

Nikolaos Politis and the Foundation of Greek Folklore Studies

Turning to the founding father of modern Greek folklore studies, Nikolaos Politis,[31] it is of note that his academic chair in Athens was initially that of Greek

---

Harrison, in her review of the book (*Classical Review* 24 [1910], pp. 181–183) offers high praise, but she also expresses certain reservations, juxtaposing Lawson's "study in survivals", as she terms it, with her own preferred "comparative method". Namely, in her view, the detection of survivals within a specific culture may not always prove the most fruitful way of explaining instances of mythological and religious tradition.

[27] Lawson, *Modern Greek Folklore*, p. 2.

[28] Ibid., p. 47.

[29] Demetrios G. Kampouroglou, *Ἱστορία τῶν Ἀθηναίων* [History of the Athenians], vol. 3, Athens: A. Papageorgiou, 1896, p. 160.

[30] Lawson, *Modern Greek Folklore*, p. 48.

[31] On Politis, see brief introductions and further bibliography in Imellos, *Ἱστορικὰ καὶ μεθοδολογικὰ τῆς ἑλληνικῆς λαογραφίας* [Historical and methodological issues in Greek folklore

Mythology and, subsequently, that of Mythology and Greek Archaeology. One of his best-known works is the two-volume *Modern Greek Mythology* (1871, 1874),[32] which bears the influence of *Mythologie* in the sense in which it was employed by the Grimm Brothers.[33] In 1908 he inaugurated the Greek Folklore Society and in 1909 the periodical *Λαογραφία*. In 1914 he published a compilation of modern Greek folk songs.[34]

Politis' study focuses on *survivals* (which he translates as *περιλείμματα* or *ἐγκαταλείμματα*; now usually called *ἐπιβιώματα*), that is, on customs and other cultural instances which are attested in modern Greece and can be traced back to the ancient Greek civilisation; as characteristic instances, he took customs connected with wedding rituals or with death rites. Politis borrowed the theory of survivals from the British pioneering anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917). Tylor was a prime exponent of cultural evolutionism: he believed that when a society evolves, certain customs are retained that are unnecessary in the new society, "like outworn and useless baggage", as he was wont to say. He even asserted that belief in God is itself a survival from a rather undeveloped, pre-scientific stage of evolution.[35]

---

studies], pp. 80–84; Minas Al. Alexiadis, "Μνήμη Νικολάου Γ. Πολίτη, θεμελιωτή της ελληνικής Λαογραφίας" [In memory of Nikolaos G. Politis, founder of Greek folklore studies], *Λαογραφία* 39 (1998–2003), pp. 23–29; now a rich array of essays on many facets of his career and scholarly work, in Aikaterini Polymerou-Kamilaki (ed.), *Ο Νικόλαος Πολίτης και το Κέντρον Ερεύνης της Ελληνικής Λαογραφίας: Πρακτικά Διεθνούς Επιστημονικού Συνεδρίου* [Nikolaos Politis and the Centre for the Study of Greek Folklore: proceedings of the international scientific conference], 2 vols, Athens: Academy of Athens, 2012. For a positioning of Politis within the ideological climate of the nineteenth century, see Walter Puchner, "Οἱ ἰδεολογικὲς βάσεις τῆς ἐπιστημονικῆς ἐνασχόλησης μὲ τὸν ἑλληνικὸ λαϊκὸ πολιτισμὸ τὸν 19ο αἰώνα" [The ideological basis of the scientific engagement with Greek folk culture in the 19th century], in Chrysos, *Ἕνας νέος κόσμος γεννιέται* [A new world is born], pp. 247–268. On the foundation of Greek folklore studies, see also Georgios K. Spiridakis, "Ἡ ἐπιστημονικὴ θεμελίωσις τῶν λαογραφικῶν σπουδῶν ἐν Ἑλλάδι" [The scientific foundation of folklore studies in Greece], *Ἐπιστημονικὴ Ἐπετηρὶς τῆς Φιλοσοφικῆς Σχολῆς τοῦ Πανεπιστημίου Ἀθηνῶν* 16 (1965–1966), pp. 473–495.

[32] *Μελέτη ἐπὶ τοῦ βίου τῶν νεωτέρων Ἑλλήνων*, vol. 1, *Νεοελληνικὴ μυθολογία* [Study on the life of the modern Greeks, vol. 1, Modern Greek mythology], pts. 1–2, Athens: Perris Brothers, 1871, 1874.

[33] Characteristically: Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, Göttingen: Dieterichsche Buchhandlung, 1835. See Puchner, *Θεωρητική λαογραφία* [Theoretical folklore studies], pp. 137–138.

[34] *Ἐκλογαὶ ἀπὸ τὰ τραγούδια τοῦ ἑλληνικοῦ λαοῦ* [Selections from the songs of the Greek people], Athens: Estia, 1914.

[35] See Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, London: J. Murray, 1871; useful analysis in Timothy

It is worth looking more closely at how Politis dealt with the survivals of ancient Greek religion. He wrote a number of still valuable, classic essays on various areas of folklore, where his privileged point of focus are "odd", "strange" customs, that do not conform to the accepted rationale of the rite in question, but instead require explanation precisely as *survivals*.[36] This becomes particularly clear in his study of the custom of the breaking of pots at funerals.[37] It was a widespread custom to throw on the grave some water from a pot, along with some earth, and then to toss the pot to the ground and break it. Politis remarks at the beginning of his essay that this rite, which effectively no Greek priest omitted during the entombment, had not been ratified by the church, because no mention of it is made during the funeral rite. He then proceeds to adduce various parallels from all over the world and to declare this custom a worldwide one. After mentioning explanations proffered by contemporary Greek priests and learned people, he rejects them all in order to construe this ritual practice as a survival of a primordial belief in the pollution carried by the pot, owing to its use at the grave ritual, which in turn creates the need to destroy it. This is an eloquent instance of Politis' methodological approach. We can sense his scientifically optimistic view that not merely the past is able

Larsen, "E.B. Tylor, Religion and Anthropology", *British Journal for the History of Science* 46 (2013), pp. 467–485, esp. 474–475.

[36] On Politis' method in folklore studies and the notion of "survivals", see now Avdikos, *Εισαγωγή στις σπουδές του λαϊκού πολιτισμού* [Introduction to the studies of folk culture], pp. 85–111; Eleftherios P. Alexakis, "Η συγκριτική εθνολογική μέθοδος στη Λαογραφία ή ο Νικόλαος Πολίτης μεταξύ εθνισμού και ανθρωπισμού" [The comparative ethnographic method in folklore studies or Nikolaos Politis between nationhood and humanism], in Polymerou-Kamilaki, *Ο Νικόλαος Πολίτης και το Κέντρον Ερεύνης της Ελληνικής Λαογραφίας* [Nikolaos Politis and the Centre for the Study of Greek Folklore], vol. 1, pp. 61–82 [=*Λαογραφία ή ανθρωπολογία οίκοι; Ζητήματα μεθόδου και θεωρίας* (Folklore studies or domestic anthropology? Issues of method and theory), Athens: Herodotos, 2015, pp. 107–127]; Evangeli A. Datsi, "Διαφωτισμός και εξελικτισμός: Οι θεωρητικές και ιδεολογικές συντεταγμένες του Νικόλαου Πολίτη", in Polymerou-Kamilaki, *Ο Νικόλαος Πολίτης και το Κέντρον Ερεύνης της Ελληνικής Λαογραφίας* [Nikolaos Politis and the Centre for the Study of Greek Folklore], vol. 1, pp. 633–645; Georgia Gotsi, "Οι Νεοέλληνες στον καθρέφτη του ξένου: Συμβολή στη μελέτη των ελληνοβρετανικών πολιτισμικών δικτύων, 1870–1900" [Modern Greeks in the mirror of the foreigner: a contribution to the study of Helleno-British cultural networks, 1870–1900], in Tabaki and Polycandrioti, *Ελληνικότητα και ετερότητα* [Greekness and otherness], vol. 1, pp. 95–116, here 102–103.

[37] Nikolaos G. Politis, "Τὸ ἔθιμον τῆς θραύσεως τῶν ἀγγείων κατὰ τὴν κηδείαν" [The custom of breaking pots at the funeral], in *Λαογραφικὰ σύμμεικτα* [Folklore miscellanea], vol. 2, Athens: National Printing House, 1921, pp. 268–283; English translation: "Greek Folklore: On the Breaking of Vessels as a Funeral Rite in Modern Greece", *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 23 (1894), pp. 28–41.

to shed light on the present, but also that the present may equally shed light on the past.

In a way akin to Lawson, Politis believes that through the study of modern Greek folk customs and beliefs we shall gain privileged access to the ancient Greek beliefs in their primordial, pre-philosophical form. This tendency becomes clear in Politis' essay on folk cosmological narratives.[38] He clearly states there that the study of modern Greek folk beliefs will help us uncover primordial Greek cosmological myths, unelaborated and unadorned: "[π]ρὸς ἐξεύρεσιν τῶν ἐξ ἀρχῆς κοσμογονικῶν μύθων τῶν Ἑλλήνων, τῶν ἀπερικοσμήτων καὶ ἀμεταπλάστων". As he explains, especially when we find folk traditions that exemplify "clearly childish and naive beliefs", we can assume the survival of a form that can be traced back to the depths of antiquity. He subsequently states that the aim of this quest shall be to discover the true *essence* of ancient myths; that is, their primordial form, devoid of later accretions and embellishments.[39] Remarkably, in the same essay he also adopts a comparative viewpoint, considering mythical narratives from Polynesia.[40]

A prime locus where we may find Politis' theory of survivals and cultural evolution expressed is his inaugural academic speech on mythology.[41] He first invokes there the authority of the renowned classical scholar Karl Otfried Müller, in order to assert the view that in mythology we may discover the roots of both the external and the inner life of the Greek people. Next, he proceeds to name an adjacent discipline, specifically the "study of the history of Greek religion" (ἱστορία τῆς ἑλληνικῆς θρησκείας), which, as he promises to demonstrate, is closely connected to the study of mythology.[42] He considers the study of (ancient) Greek religion as a prime means in order to reconstruct the intellectual world of the ancient Greeks and to interpret the birth of ideas (philosophical ideas, obviously) in the Greek world ("προσφυεστάτη οὖσα ἀφ' ἑνὸς εἰς ἀναπαράστασιν τοῦ διανοητικοῦ κόσμου τῶν ἀρχαίων καὶ εἰς ἐξήγησιν τῆς γενέσεως τῶν ἰδεῶν παρὰ

[38] Nikolaos G. Politis, "Δημώδεις κοσμογονικοὶ μῦθοι" [Folk cosmogonic myths], in *Λαογραφικὰ σύμμεικτα* [Folklore miscellanea], vol. 2, Athens: National Printing House, 1921 [1894], pp. 77–109.

[39] Ibid., p. 91.

[40] Ibid., pp. 94–95.

[41] Nikolaos G. Politis, *Λόγος εἰσιτήριος εἰς τὸ μάθημα τῆς Ἑλληνικῆς Μυθολογίας* [Inaugural lecture for the course of Greek mythology], Athens: Aion, 1882.

[42] Note the absence of "ancient": namely the fact that the need for such a qualification/temporal delimitation – with the concomitant ideological ramifications – was not felt at that time.

τοῖς Ἕλλησι καὶ τοῦ βίου καθόλου αὐτῶν").[43] He then proceeds to foreground the fact that ancient Greek religion did not possess a dogma, and hence did not hinder the free workings of the human intellect, but rather profited from it. He seems here to understand religion not merely as a practiced form of worship, but in the wider sense of worldview. He then adds that in the Greek world the inherited Indo-European religious system gradually evolved. He goes as far as to state that other religious systems may be more elevated in terms of inner clarity of moral strength, but none can be equated with it in terms of beauty and harmony in the whole of history. We sense here the balance effected: he ascribes beauty and harmony, but withholds moral strength and inner clarity, obviously reserving it for Christianity, but without expressly declaring it. Simultaneously, however, the whole speech gives the impression that he credits all religions with a certain moral dimension, tending to perceive morality as effectively a basic and innate human need.[44]

If we are to draw a conclusion from this programmatic speech, early in his career it seems that Politis generally managed to evade potential accusations of overvaluing ancient Greek religion by offering an evolving model of Greek religiosity – and of every religion for that matter: it evolves along with civilisation and has both its heyday and its period of decline. He posits, in fact, a cyclical schema, whereby the decline of religions is marked by the predominance of superstition. Hence, the science of comparative mythology can supply us with useful conclusions, useful, that is, for mankind and the spiritual dangers it may face.[45] This circular schema, by involving a period of decline, affords a clever way of exalting the past without leading to a clash with the clerical establishment.

It is clear that Politis wanted to establish a *scientific* study of folklore and was eager to draw from the emerging discipline of anthropology, as it becomes evident in his second inaugural speech, this time in the chair of archaeology.[46] As he characteristically states:

> On the basis of this [material stemming from anthropological and ethnographic study] we can proceed with the tracing of the psychological causes of the phenomena we are concerned with, in other words to seek those phenomena that derive from human nature, being common to all people.[47]

---

[43] Ibid., p. 3.

[44] Ibid., pp. 4–5.

[45] Ibid., p. 15.

[46] Nikolaos G. Politis, *Λόγος εἰσιτήριος εἰς τὸ μάθημα τῆς Ἑλληνικῆς Ἀρχαιολογίας* [Inaugural lecture for the course of Greek archaeology], Athens: Bart and Hirst, 1890.

[47] "Ἐπὶ τῇ βάσει δ' αὐτοῦ [τοῦ ἀφθονωτάτου ὑλικοῦ ἀνθρωπολογικῶν καὶ ἐθνογραφικῶν παρατηρήσεων] δυνάμεθα νὰ προβῶμεν εἰς τὴν ἐξιχνίασιν τῶν ψυχολογικῶν αἰτίων τῶν

Earlier in the same speech he acknowledges the role of the changes in ancient life, brought by "Christianity and the hellenisation of the Roman Empire", in shaping "the character of the Greek nation".[48] In this respect, it becomes clear that Politis accepted the Helleno-Christian historical amalgam propounded by Zambelios – and subsequently elaborated by Paparrigopoulos – while at the same time adapting it to his own scientific approach and method.[49]

It should be remarked here that Lawson, as well as Politis and the early scholars of Greek folklore in general, have been accused of placing too much emphasis on the diachronic axis, on privileging the past and, thus, obscuring the present. The principal objection is that Greek folklore studies did not focus on the way customs function within a given context, which is of course Christian, but on what they remind us of. My aim of course here is not to ponder the scientific validity of pioneering Greek folklore studies; my focus is rather on their ideological framework. Despite that, it is worth mentioning the work of Michalis Meraklis and Walter Puchner,[50] who have mitigated the rather harsh criticism inflicted on Greek folklore studies by scholars such as, for instance, Loring Danforth, and also by Kyriakidou-Nestoros, who is, however, less scathing in her assessments.[51]

ἐπασχολούντων ἡμᾶς φαινομένων, ἐν ἄλλοις λόγοις ν' ἀναζητήσωμεν ὅσα τῶν φαινομένων τούτων ἀπορρέουσιν ἐκ τῆς φύσεως τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, κοινὰ ὄντα πᾶσι τοῖς λαοῖς." Politis, *Λόγος εἰσιτήριος εἰς τὸ μάθημα τῆς Ἑλληνικῆς Ἀρχαιολογίας* [Inaugural lecture for the course of Greek archaeology], p. 14.

[48] Cf. "αἱ ... μεταβολαὶ εἰς τὸν ἀρχαῖον βίον διὰ τῆς ἐπιδράσεως τοῦ χριστιανισμοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἐξελληνισμοῦ τῆς ῥωμαϊκῆς κυριαρχίας μετέπλασαν οὐσιωδέστατα τὸν χαρακτῆρα τοῦ ἑλληνικοῦ ἔθνους." See Politis, *Λόγος εἰσιτήριος εἰς τὸ μάθημα τῆς Ἑλληνικῆς Ἀρχαιολογίας* [Inaugural lecture for the course of Greek archaeology], p. 9.

[49] It is worth noting that Politis' critical distance from the emerging Helleno-Christian ideological norm has left its potent trace in his contribution to the development of the educational programmes at the Ministry of Education; there he attracted the animus of both individuals and the official church for inserting "blasphemous" poetry (by Dimitrios Paparrigopoulos) in schoolbooks, as well as for tempering the catechetical character of religious education in schools: see Dimitris Th. Katsaris, "Ο 'άθεος' Νικόλαος Γ. Πολίτης" [Nikolaos Politis the 'atheist'], in Polymerou-Kamilaki, *Ο Νικόλαος Πολίτης και το Κέντρον Ερεύνης της Ελληνικής Λαογραφίας* [Nikolaos Politis and the Centre for the Study of Greek Folklore], vol. 1, pp. 455–476.

[50] Meraklis, *Θέματα λαογραφίας* [Issues in folklore studies], esp. pp. 11–36; Puchner, *Θεωρητική Λαογραφία* [Theoretical folklore studies], pp. 135–139.

[51] Loring M. Danforth, "The Ideological Context of the Search for Continuities in Greek Culture", *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 2 (1984), pp. 53–85; Kyriakidou-Nestoros, *Ἡ θεωρία τῆς ἑλληνικῆς λαογραφίας* [The theory of Greek folklore studies], esp. pp. 99–110.

It is also important to mention the early-twentieth-century criticism of Politis from the point of view of the language issue. This critique was mainly expressed by Yannis Apostolakis, who applauds Politis for his unearthing of the treasure of folk songs, but strongly opposes his antiquarianism, namely the ideology of continuity that Politis upholds.[52] He characteristically opines: "With ancient Greece in front of him, Politis slowly forgot the modern country, to the extent that he ended up not to be living in the present; his mind was wholly attracted to the ancient world."[53] Needless to say, these objections are almost fully determined by the language issue, since, of course, a hallmark of Politis' writing is his use of katharevousa.[54]

In the guise of a conclusion, may I assert that the theory of survivals, by dealing with individual customs, offers a way of escaping the need of supplying evaluations of ancient Greek religion as a system. What is more, by focusing on the past, at least in Politis' case, the temporal continuum is stretched farther than classical antiquity. The scholar moves on a diachronic axis whose beginning is not infrequently traced in the Proto-Indo-European phase of culture. Early Greek folklorists, predominantly Politis – in contrast with their European counterparts – hardly focus on "the Greek civilisation" (modern or ancient, folk or other) as a cultural whole, but instead on select phenomena. Further, by laying considerable emphasis on historical *evolution*, which is, moreover, conceived as non-linear, Politis spares himself from general, all-embracing judgements; hence, any favourable verdict on ancient Greek religion, for instance, explicitly refers to a specific historical period. Finally, by focusing on mythology as a category distinct from religion, he constructs a scientific discourse less ideologically loaded than if he were dealing with religion pure and simple. Kostis Palamas was well aware of this when he wrote his poem *Fathers* (*Πατέρες*),[55] in which he praises Politis for reviving Mythos, the personification of myth, imagined as an elderly king, enclosed in his musty palace, surrounded by manifold religions and cults.[56] One

---

[52] Yannis M. Apostolakis, *Τὰ δημοτικὰ τραγούδια*, pt. 1, *Οἱ συλλογές* [The folk songs, pt. 1, The collections], Athens: Kontomaris, 1929, pp. 274–325.

[53] Ibid., pp. 320–321.

[54] For a critical engagement with Apostolakis' arguments, see Meraklis, *Θέματα Λαογραφίας* [Issues in folklore studies], pp. 15–26; for a discussion of both Apostolakis' views and Meraklis' response, see Avdikos, *Εισαγωγή στις σπουδές του λαϊκού πολιτισμού* [Introduction to the studies of folk culture], pp. 98–101.

[55] From the collection *Βωμοί* [Altars] of 1915.

[56] Lines 41–49: "Χαῖρε, ὁ Πολίτης, ὁ Σοφός! – Ἡ αὐγὴ ροδογελοῦσε, / στ' ἀραχνιασμένο, στὸ κλειστὸ παλάτι βαρὺς ὕπνος / τὸ γέρο καταχώνιαζε τὸ βασιλιᾶ, τὸ Μῦθο, / καὶ γύρω του νυχτερευτὲς καὶ λιβανίστρες γύρω / θρησκεῖες, λατρεῖες· καὶ οἱ βωμοὶ λογῆς καὶ σὰ σβησμένοι.

may, thus, suspect that the use of myth turned out, for both Politis and Palamas, as a quite opportune means to bypass the opposition between ancient Greece and Christianity: Myth naturally invites its conceptualisation as something more primordial than individual religions.

University of Patras

/ Καὶ τὰ πορτοπαράθυρα τοῦ παλατιοῦ τ᾽ ἀνοίγεις / καὶ μπάζεις μέσα τῆς ζωῆς τὸ φῶς καὶ τὸν ἀέρα, / καὶ λὲς τοῦ Μύθου: – Ξύπνησε! – Καὶ λὲς τοῦ ρήγα: – Μίλα, / ξύπνα, καὶ νὰ ἡ Παράδοση καὶ νὰ ἡ νεράιδα· μίλα!" Hardly fortuitous is the fact that Palamas employs here decapentasyllabic verse, a metrical form intimately connected with folk culture. On the connection between Palamas and Politis, see Meraklis, *Λαϊκός πολιτισμός και νεοελληνικός διαφωτισμός* [Folk culture and modern Greek Enlightenment], pp. 30–35.

APPENDIX

Modern Greek Sacrifice (*κουρμπάνι*)[1]

The performance of animal sacrifice within Greek folk cult is a well-discussed case within folklore studies. I do not intend to provide elaborate descriptions of instances of modern Greek sacrifice. What should be noted is that in a large number of, if not in most, cases, we clearly attest ritual slaughter, usually with the active participation of the priest, who is at times the person who deals the fatal blow to the animal. Additionally, an important part of the ritual is the distribution of sacrificial meat. In this ritual the participation of the lower clergy, mainly of the priest, is a standard element. The opinions of the upper clergy, namely of the metropolitans, varied: there was no uniform stance.[2]

The earliest signs of this controversy are attested in 1788, when Theophilos of Ioannina, bishop of Kampania, published in Venice the *Ταμεῖον Ὀρθοδοξίας* (*Treasury of Orthodoxy*), a comprehensive guide on the customs and ordinances of the church. It has a separate chapter "on the sacrifices, in the barbarian tongue *kourbania*". The author is outspoken in his condemnation of it.[3] He censures "some wretched Christians, who have abandoned true and unspoilt worship and have almost fallen into the level of idolatrous sacrifice. Thus they deny us [the theologians, obviously] theological supremacy over our enemies, Jews and pagans [Ἐθνικοί]."[4]

After expounding his theological arguments, he reconstructs the claim propounded by those who perform the sacrifices, the *κουρμπανισταί*: "we do not really sacrifice, we merely attend the *πανήγυρις* (festival) and our phratry slaughters a sheep and wants to share it". Yet, the questions are pressing: why

---

[1] A word of Turkish-Arabic root; see *Λεξικό της Κοινής Νεοελληνικής* [Dictionary of Common Neohellenic], Thessaloniki: Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 1998, s.v.

[2] As an instance, see the detailed description of *κουρμπάνι*, as a then living custom in northeastern Thrace, in Georgios A. Megas, "Θυσία ταύρων καὶ κριῶν ἐν τῇ ΒΑ Θράκῃ" [Sacrifice of bulls and rams in NE Thrace], *Λαογραφία* 3 (1911–1912), pp. 148–171. Also relevant descriptions and references by Nikolaos Politis, especially in *Λαογραφικὰ σύμμεικτα* [Folklore miscellanea], vols. 2 and 3, Athens: National Printing House, 1921, and Academy of Athens, 1931. respectively (see index, s.v. *θυσία*).

[3] *Ταμεῖον Ὀρθοδοξίας, πονηθὲν μὲν εἰς ἁπλῆν φράσιν, καὶ συντεθὲν κατ᾽ ἐρωταπόκρισιν ὑπὸ τοῦ πανιερωτάτου καὶ ἐλλογιμωτάτου Ἐπισκόπου Καμπανίας κυρίου κυρίου Θεοφίλου τοῦ ἐξ Ἰωαννίνων* [Treasury of Orthodoxy, written in simple diction and composed in dialogue form by the most holy and most learned Bishop of Kampania Theophilos of Ioannina], Venice: N. Glykes, 1788, pp. 134–141.

[4] Ibid., p. 134.

don't you simply buy one? Why do you insist in slaying it and distributing its meat, also later to people who did not take part in the festival? And why do you offer the hide to the monastery as a tribute? He continues by pointing out that the "wise men of the Greeks" did not share the same "error" with the rest of the people and condemned animal sacrifice.[5] In a similar manner, in the well-known book *Πηδάλιον* ("Rudder", namely of the church), written by St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain, which lists and interprets the decrees of the church, the *κουρμπάνια* are clearly regarded as "Hellenic error" and "Jewish superstition".[6]

Now, as regards the scientific study of folkloric testimony, we are lucky to possess a good doctoral dissertation on this topic by Georgios Ekaterinidis.[7] This dissertation does not focus so much on the possible interpretation of the custom, but is rather interested in stating the facts and offering descriptions of ritual proceedings. Regarding its interpretation, Ekaterinidis draws our attention to the Christian elements of the ritual; hence, he evaluates it as a hybrid one, which stems from ancient Greece, but is substantially conditioned by the Christian religion. Further, a valuable, article-length study of modern Greek animal sacrifice has been composed by Stella Georgoudi, who participated in the Parisian circle led by Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet. In her article, she focuses on the Jewish affinities of the custom and its manner of inclusion within Orthodox liturgical life: particularly on how the distribution of meat conforms with Orthodox mentality.[8]

Expectedly so, the tradition of *κουρμπάνι* does not merely involve descriptions of sacrificial rituals, but also folk narrations revolving around them. The moving

---

[5] Ibid., pp. 135–136.

[6] *Πηδάλιον τῆς νοητῆς νηός, τῆς Μιᾶς, Ἁγίας, Καθολικῆς καὶ Ἀποστολικῆς τῶν ὀρθοδόξων Ἐκκλησίας: ἤτοι ἅπαντες οἱ ἱεροὶ καὶ θεῖοι κανόνες τῶν ἁγίων καὶ οἰκουμενικῶν Συνόδων· ἑλληνιστὶ μὲν, χάριν ἀξιοπιστίας ἐκτιθέμενοι, διὰ δὲ τῆς καθ' ἡμᾶς κοινοτέρας διαλέκτου, πρὸς κατάληψιν τῶν ἁπλουστέρων ἑρμηνευόμενοι παρὰ Ἀγαπίου Ἱερομονάχου καὶ Νικοδήμου Μοναχοῦ* [Rudder of the metaphorical ship of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of the Orthodox Christians, or all the sacred and divine canons of the holy and renowned Apostles, of the holy Councils; as embodied in the original Greek text, for the sake of authenticity, and explained in the vernacular by way of rendering them more intelligible to the less educated, by Agapius, a Hieromonk, and Nicodemus, a Monk] Athens: K. Garpolas, 1841[2] (1800[1]), pp. 177–178.

[7] Georgios N. Ekaterinidis, *Νεοελληνικὲς αἱματηρὲς θυσίες. Λειτουργία – μορφολογία – τυπολογία* [Modern Greek blood sacrifices: function–morphology–typology], Athens: Greek Folklore Society, 1979.

[8] Stella Georgoudi, "Sanctified Slaughter in Modern Greece: the 'Kourbania' of the Saints", in *The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks*, ed. Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, trans. Paula Wissing, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp. 183–203.

story about the sacrifice of the deer, attested in several places in Greece, runs so: every year at a specific religious celebration, God or the saint honoured at it used to send a deer that simply turned up at the place and was then sacrificed, according to the custom. Once the deer came late and in a rush; before it could even take a breath and calm down, it was slaughtered right away. Never again did it appear. Stilpon Kyriakidis, who has studied this folk narration, refers in detail to ancient Greek traditions of deer sacrifice.[9] Yet again, regardless of the issue of provenance, one may add, in reflection, that an ancient Greek – but also universal – sense of *μέτρον* ("due measure", "restraint") is vividly felt here. The never-ending question of the universality or locality of folklore is bound to recur…

[9] Stilpon Kyriakidis, "Θυσία ἐλάφου ἐν νεοελληνικῇ παραδόσει καὶ συναξαρίοις" [Deer sacrifice in modern Greek tradition and in screeds], *Λαογραφία* 6 (1917), pp. 189–215; cf. Nikolaos G. Politis, "Ὁ ἥλιος κατὰ τοὺς δημώδεις μύθους" [The sun in folk myths], in *Λαογραφικὰ σύμμεικτα* [Folklore miscellanea], vol. 2, pp. 130–183: 175.