

## *Introduction* *Imagined Continuity?*

Before focusing on the problem of Greek theatre history after antiquity as a story of discontinuities, we first have to look into the more general issue of the specific question of continuity in Greek culture from antiquity to the foundation of Greece as a nation-state in 1830. The publication of influential works including Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983, 1991) and Eric Hobsbawm's *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) inspired a wave of studies analyzing the construction of nationalist ideologies, modes of rewriting the past, and the manipulation of history. Subsequent studies identified and critiqued a variety of methods used to promote nationalism through the arts and sciences; only a few, however, recognized that there can be a legitimate need for this approach, or that the nation-state can in some instances play a positive role in shaping and developing modern society.<sup>1</sup> In the Balkan Peninsula during the period of national awakening, but also in recent history, there are numerous examples of fictionalized connections with a glorious past, the most recent example being the linkage of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) with Alexander the Great. The arts and sciences, literature and theatre are often appropriated as a part of an overall strategy for reconstructing the past along ideological lines, creating fictive models of the nation-state as an indigenous, homogeneous ethnic group. This pattern is especially prominent in countries of the former Habsburg monarchy and Ottoman Empire, which were both dissolved in the end by nationalist movements, beginning with Slovenia and Croatia, Hungary and Romania, and culminating with Albania, Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Among them the interesting comparative study of Jusdanis 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Puchner 1993, 1994.

### **Criticism of Continuity in Greek Culture as a Construction of Nineteenth Century Nationalistic Ideology**

Greece, however, is a special case because the culture of Ancient Greece is a reality, not an imaginary construction crafted for nationalist purposes. The link between the Modern Greek state and Ancient Greece is a given, primarily because of their common language. But this made the language question a prominent political issue throughout the nineteenth century<sup>3</sup>: The preference for *katharevousa* ('purified') and *dēmotikē* ('common') Greek, instead of more erudite varieties of Greek rooted in the Attic dialect of Ancient Athens, was strongly influenced by political considerations. Moreover the small, weak nation-state desperately needed recognition and aid from the great powers to survive. And the powerful Philhellenism movement, together with the renown of Greece's ancient Humanistic traditions, were helpful in generating public sympathy for this newly created country. As a result, Jacob Philipp Fallmerayer's theory that not a drop of Ancient Greek blood remained in the veins of contemporary Greeks met with often-vehement criticism.<sup>4</sup> Critiques like Fallmerayer's, however, were themselves a response to an exaggerated, romantic Philhellenism, based on a grandiose vision of historical philosophy, coupled with concerns that the nineteenth century Pan Slavist movement might present a new strategic threat for all of Europe.<sup>5</sup>

Fallmerayer's theory, published the same year Greece gained its independence, presented a clear challenge to official state ideology and to Greek political interests. It promoted in a most decisive way the concept of discontinuity, and a whole series of treatises and studies opposed to Fallmerayer's ideas were published by Greek scholars and foreign Philhellenists alike. The main goal of this academic activity, however, was the rehabilitation of the concept of continuity by means of scientific and pseudoscientific arguments, culminating some decades later in the official *National History* of Ioannis Paparrigopoulos (1860–74). This last study laid the groundwork for a history of the Greek *genos* as a kind of triptych: Antiquity, Byzantium, and Modern Greece.

### **Philhellenism and Antiquity**

Philhellenism was arguably the most popular mass movement throughout much of Europe during the Restoration period, between the Congress of

<sup>3</sup> There is a huge bibliography on the history of the language question in modern Greece; for an overview see Hering 1995 and for linguistic analysis see Niehoff-Panagiotidis 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Veloudis 1970, 1982.

<sup>5</sup> Skopetea 1997.

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Vienna 1814/15 and the revolutions of 1848.<sup>6</sup> That three traditions – religious, Humanistic and political – inspired this movement explains why it appealed to people of nearly all social classes. The first tradition attracted followers because of the Turkish question; the Ottoman Empire had been a religious enemy of Christianity for centuries, and much of central and Eastern Europe had suffered from Ottoman attacks since the fourteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, the Greek Humanistic tradition had formed the foundation of European education since the Renaissance,<sup>8</sup> and by the eighteenth century the importance of Greece had been further enhanced by historians of art, even at the expense of Rome. Last but not least Philhellenism was also a crypto-democratic movement, with Philhellenic committees organizing cultural events and gathering aid and money for the ‘Greek cause’. Students and intellectuals left their native countries to fight side by side with the Greeks, seeing in this revolution of a small country against one of the great powers, the Ottoman Empire, an act of resistance against tyranny and absolute monarchy and a blow for political freedom and self-determination. Philhellenic literature was dominated by the concept of indebtedness: it was Europe’s obligation to help the Greek uprising because of the ideals, culture and knowledge Greece had given to Europe. This idea was inevitably linked with the concept of continuity, and with the even grander concept that the old and new Greece were essentially the same.

The Philhellenic movement had its zenith in the 1820s, with an enormous outpouring of literature – dramas, epics, poems, pamphlets – not to mention performances of operas, ballets, folk plays, panoramas etc.<sup>9</sup> If you created any piece on Greek themes, it seemed, you were guaranteed success. Never again would Greece have so many friends throughout Europe; and this brand-new, Lilliputian state had to make good use of this widespread sympathy. Greeks had cultivated a consciousness of their glorious past down through the centuries, through their arts and literature. This helps to explain why the Philhellenistic concept that Ancient and Modern Greece were identical was accepted without any difficulty, the tradition of the Orthodox Church being the sole exception to this pattern.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The bibliography of European and American philhellenism is extensive. See Quack-Eustathiades 1984 for German philhellenism; for drama and theatre see Puchner 2007: 133–68.

<sup>7</sup> There was even a whole genre of popular religious prophecies, which reflected the fear that the Turks were a punishment from God for the people’s sinfulness (Goellner 1961–78).

<sup>8</sup> Pfeiffer 1968.

<sup>9</sup> See also Puchner 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Sherrard 1971: 13–77, 293–323.

### The Search for Surviving Traditions in Greek Folklore

The shock caused by Fallmerayer's theory was also a vital spur for numerous disciplines in the humanities, including historiography, linguistics and especially the study of Greek folklore (ethnography). To enhance the perceived identity between old and new Greece a sort of archaeological approach to folk culture developed, gathering evidence for traditions that appeared to have survived from antiquity and discovering parallels between the old and new cultural praxis. A series of studies were eventually published along the lines of J. C. Lawson's *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion* (1910).<sup>11</sup> The quest for evidence of surviving traditions was actually an international practice at that time, with Great Britain's folklorists collecting evidence that their own medieval and Renaissance customs had survived in modern, popular culture.

This retrospective approach, using the past to support the dogma of cultural continuity to modern times, was not the sole motivation for studying traditional folk culture. The nineteenth century also saw the publication of a whole series of collections of Greek folk songs, at a time when collecting and editing them were explicitly political acts. Gottfried Herder, in his influential *Die Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* (Leipzig 1778/9), had established a basic concept of political Romanticism: that the existence of oral folk poetry in a country is direct proof of the existence of an independent ethnic group; that it is distinguishable from other neighbouring peoples; and that as such it has a right to political independence and administrative self-rule. Herder's ideas were highly influential in the Balkans,<sup>12</sup> hence the long line of publications collecting Greek folk songs throughout the nineteenth century both before and during the revolution.<sup>13</sup> These collections had a strong sense of political *raison d'état*, testifying to the Greek people as a distinct entity in their small nation-state, and they served to justify subsequent irrendentist movements.

Given these circumstances, it is understandable that favourite subjects in these collections included burial rites and lamentations (*threnoi*), visions of the underworld and afterlife, and similar areas where it would have been

<sup>11</sup> Early German-language volumes on the same theme would include E. Bibilakis, *Neugriechisches Leben, verglichen mit dem altgriechischen, zur Erläuterung beider*, Berlin 1840; F. Suckow, *Der Beweis, daß die heutigen Griechen die echten Söhne der alten Hellenen sind*, Stralsund 1841; G. Wachsmuth, *Das alte Griechenland im neuen*, Bonn 1864; and B. Schmidt, *Das Volksleben der Neugriechen und das hellenische Alterthum*, Erster Theil, Leipzig 1871, to name but a few.

<sup>12</sup> Sundhaussen 1973.

<sup>13</sup> Politis 1984.

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easy to draw parallels with Classical antiquity. Another subject was proverbs: ancient collections of proverbs and sayings were copied in Byzantine *scriptoria* and monasteries, but were also circulated through the oral tradition via sermons, catechisms and other ecclesiastical instruction, so that modern folk proverbs were not only seen as similar to the ancient ones, but as *the same*, albeit expressed in a different linguistic register and style. Fairy tales, too, were collected mainly with an eye towards demonstrating their similarity with ancient myths<sup>14</sup> and performances of customs such as the *kalogeros* in Thrace were interpreted as surviving examples of a phase in the development of ancient theatre before Thespis.<sup>15</sup>

### The Criticism of Continuity as Dogma of Social Anthropology

Distrust for theories of cultural *longue durée* is, to some degree, justified; folklorists in many countries have tended to rely on sentimental generalizations, stretching back to their imagined distant origins in prehistory without sound archaeological, linguistic or even historical evidence.<sup>16</sup> But as mentioned before, Greece's case is different and altogether unique. In 1982, the American anthropologist Michael Herzfeld published *Ours Once More: Folklore, Ideology and the Making of Modern Greece*,<sup>17</sup> in which he examined the prefaces for numerous collections of Greek folk songs and confirmed that most of them were used for nationalistic purposes. As we have seen, the goal of such collections is self-evident, since folk songs were collected and published elsewhere in Europe for the same purpose. Herzfeld takes his title from a verse in the prophecy of Panagia, the 'All-Holy' Mother, in the traditional 'Song of Hagia Sophia'. In this verse, Mary comforts the Greek people on the day of the Fall of Constantinople, saying that in time the Church of Hagia Sophia will again be theirs.

Herzfeld sees a deliberate attempt at manipulation in this verse when the pronouns change between 'yours' and 'ours,' as in Nikolaos Politis' version of the song published in 1914.<sup>18</sup> Herzfeld then charges Politis, the founder of Greek 'laografia', with inserting a nationalistic emendation into an orally transmitted lyric, a change that pointed towards the

<sup>14</sup> For the fate of the different categories of folk culture in this quest for survivals see Puchner 1999, 2009: 621–36.

<sup>15</sup> The work of Georgios Vizyinos (1888) and Richard Dawkins (1906) came to be cited by ethnologists and classical philologists worldwide (Puchner 2002).

<sup>16</sup> See the critical contributions in Bausinger/Brückner (eds.) 1969.

<sup>17</sup> Herzfeld 1982.

<sup>18</sup> Politis 1914.

irredentist *megali idea*, or ‘great idea’, which dominated Greek foreign policy throughout the nineteenth century: the re-conquest of Constantinople and the restoration of the Byzantine Empire. This turns out to be an over-interpretation: the Panagia is speaking to her ‘chosen’ people<sup>19</sup> and the pronouns ‘ours’ and ‘yours’ are used interchangeably through all the variants of the song, depending on who is giving the prophecy, and whether the speaker is using direct or indirect speech.<sup>20</sup> For Herzfeld, however, this is just the starting point in an extended criticism of how Politis manipulated his oral source material,<sup>21</sup> a criticism that extends to alleged ideological manipulations by folklorists in general.<sup>22</sup>

Many accusations of this kind, centred on methodology, have given way to more objective treatment and re-evaluation today. Politis, for example, was also a principal exponent of comparative ethnology; he was well acquainted with the methods folklorists practiced internationally, as a discipline that preserved traditions and drew parallels between contemporary practices and the past.<sup>23</sup> Most criticism of this ‘archaeological’ approach to folklore in the nineteenth century, however, is based on a lack of real knowledge of cultural history as well as an ignorance of specific conditions in the Balkans during this period of national awakening. Characteristic of the problem is the question of how the Greeks referred to themselves: as ‘romios’ (Roman or Byzantine) or ‘hellene’ (Greek). Herzfeld is of the opinion that the name Hellas was an import of the Philhellenes and that ‘hellen(as)’ was only the official mode of national identification, with the more private and familiar one being ‘romios’. But the formula ‘Romios is to Ellinas as inside is to outside, as female is to male, as self-knowledge is to self-display’<sup>24</sup> cannot begin to describe the controversy over the national name of the Greeks that erupted around 1900;<sup>25</sup> Herzfeld’s theory has no solid basis in terms of Greece’s historical consciousness and it was vehemently rejected by other social anthropologists.<sup>26</sup>

Field data without historical verification usually cannot create models to explain some of the more vexed questions of traditional cultures like this; and in any case, the folk culture of the historic peoples of Europe is

<sup>19</sup> On the idea of the ‘Romans’ (Byzantines) as the chosen people of God see Ivanka 1968.

<sup>20</sup> For detailed criticism see Puchner 1996a: 223–94, esp. 252–7 and 2004–6: 305–14.

<sup>21</sup> See also Beaton 1980: 1 ff., Kyriakidou-Nestoros 1978: 111 ff. and 148 ff., Sifakis 1988: 135 ff.

<sup>22</sup> Danforth 1984, Kyriakidou-Nestoros 1986, Alexiou 1984/85.

<sup>23</sup> Avdikos 2009: 61 ff., Nitsiakos 2008: 13 ff.

<sup>24</sup> Herzfeld 1987: 113, in less abstract form 1982: 18 ff. For criticism see Puchner 1996a: 253 ff.

<sup>25</sup> See the bibliography on the topic by Mantouvalou 1983.

<sup>26</sup> Sant Cassia/Bada 1992.

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too complicated for such abstract formulas.<sup>27</sup> Modern Greek folklore, for example, cannot be analyzed without considering Byzantium; in fact, the eminent Byzantinist Peter Schreiner has recently made an argument for creating a distinct Byzantine 'Volkskunde'.<sup>28</sup>

**Ignoring the Retrospective View of Byzantine Culture**

As noted previously, the Greek tradition cannot be compared with the rest of Europe; nor can it be restricted to the territory of the nation-state of Greece. Greek culture survived three empires: it was highly valued in the Roman Empire, it dominated the Byzantine Empire and it survived even the Ottoman Empire. In spite of the vast scope of its dissemination throughout the historical Diaspora, its dynamic is distinct from the West's *latinitas*, which endured from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment (via the Reformation and Counterreformation). Central to this unique dynamic is an understanding that Byzantium was primarily a retrospective culture, to some extent imitative, struggling with a consciousness of inferiority because of its status as merely an heir and descendent of Antiquity.<sup>29</sup>

Byzantium was not identified by Western scholars and positioned as a field of study that bridged Greek antiquity with Modern Greece until the mid-nineteenth century; even then it was widely used as an argument in favour of continuity. The nationalistic use (and abuse) of Byzantium, however, cannot overshadow the historical reality of an empire which lasted more than one thousand years and had Greek language and culture as its hallmark. Likewise, criticizing Modern Greek arts and sciences because they support a national ideology is a historical; it ignores the nature and function of Byzantine culture, which was oriented towards the past, and it fails to account for the role that Ottoman administration played in preserving Greek culture; this is why numerous issues in Modern Greek folk culture actually have their roots in the Hellenistic or even the Classical period. As Margaret Alexiou pointed out in her brilliant monograph on Greek lamentation, there is a continuous tradition from antiquity onward in the lament's eschatology; its concept of Hades; its mourning rituals; its graveside customs, images and other rites which could not be extinguished or even absorbed by Christian eschatology and

<sup>27</sup> This understanding is practiced today, for instance at the School of Historical Anthropology of the Balkans at the University of Graz (Kaser et al. 2003).

<sup>28</sup> Schreiner 2001. See also my review in *Laografia* 40 (2004–6) 813–26.

<sup>29</sup> This is marvellously demonstrated by Hans-Georg Beck in his monography of Theodoros Metochites (Beck 1952: 50–75 and pass.).



church traditions.<sup>30</sup> Byzantium's images of the afterlife are not lighted by the hope of *anastasis* for all mankind, but by Charos (a transformation of ancient Charon), the archon of the underworld.<sup>31</sup> The same holds true for wedding rituals and symbols, but also for a whole series of motifs in Byzantine and post-Byzantine religious iconography.<sup>32</sup> Christ, in his *descensus ad inferos*, has to descend to the dark underworld to free Adam and mankind from death, an apocryphal motif immediately linked to the many heroes of *katabasis* in antiquity.<sup>33</sup> Judas Iscariot, in his apocryphical biography, performs the same crimes as Oedipus, killing his father and marrying his mother; this transformation into a double figure, Oedipus/Judas, took place during Byzantine times.<sup>34</sup>

### A Counter-Ideology in the Making: Nothing to Do with Antiquity?

As fashionable as it may be to reject the concept of continuity in Greek culture as an invention of national ideology, there is an equal tendency to create a diametrically opposite construction of absolute discontinuity. As can be easily demonstrated, however, with the long evolution of the Greek language and the development of distinct registers and levels of style, the Greek cultural tradition and its dynamics are unique and cannot be evaluated using theoretical models designed for other countries and cultures. Some Modern Greek practices from the nineteenth century may have different ages and origins, but to deny any connection with the Hellenistic period (or earlier) because other countries have appropriated the past for their own nationalist agenda would ignore a number of basic facts.

Consider animal sacrifices, for example, which are practiced to this day for religious and secular purposes and with the blessing of the church; these can clearly be traced back to Antiquity.<sup>35</sup> Blood brotherhood (*adoptio in fratrem*), officially banned by the *Codex Iustinianus*, was practiced as a special ecclesiastical ceremony with a specific *akolouthia* throughout the Byzantine millennium and survived, in spite of numerous patriarchal decrees, in the Orthodox countries of the Balkans up to the twentieth century.<sup>36</sup> The week before Whitsuntide, called ρουσάλια, is linked to the

<sup>30</sup> Alexiou 1974, 2002.

<sup>31</sup> Beck 1979.

<sup>32</sup> Puchner 2009a: 301–41.

<sup>33</sup> Diels 1922, Kroll 1932, Puchner 1979, 2006: 191–226.

<sup>34</sup> Puchner 1991, 1994a.

<sup>35</sup> Aikaterinidis 1979.

<sup>36</sup> Puchner 1994b.



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Roman *rosalia* through a complex tradition, in which the terminology (*rhodismos*, the fairies *rusalki*, *rosaliile* etc.) and rites (*symposia* at the graves of martyrs, processions with icons decorated with flowers, masquerades, etc.) may develop in different directions, but can all be traced from Antiquity down through the centuries.<sup>37</sup>

In other words, not every claim to continuity can be dismissed as a fictional, nationalistic construct; charges of ideological manipulation and misuse of the past should yield to hard evidence, and to the critical examination of specific historical sources. For many years social anthropology was not particularly interested in history; this was a legacy of the imperialistic past of the discipline, coupled with the fact that the historicity of aboriginals in many countries was unknown. So on the question of 'European anthropology' or 'anthropology at home', the methods of fieldwork have to be combined with historical methods, especially in regions along Europe's periphery.<sup>38</sup>

The question of continuity in the Greek cultural tradition requires that we differentiate among specific practices, and avoid falling into the trap of arguing over the alleged manipulation of evidence in service of ideologies, pro or con. Certain cultural practices may have different ages and origins which develop in diverse ways within the tradition, and as a result – being subject to different modes of change – their unique history is self-evident. What may be harder for scholars outside the disciplines of Classics, Byzantine and Modern Greek studies to understand, however, is that this is a unique European tradition; Greek culture cannot be treated adequately using models and concepts stemming from other cultures. Categorical, a priori doubts about continuity may be useful insofar as they help us to avoid committing acts of hermeneutical malpractice or ideological abuse of our sources; but these doubts are more appropriate for cultures with a shorter history and a less complex past. To analyze the Greek tradition requires a more nuanced approach because so many ages, dynamics, and cultural forces of various origins coexist simultaneously. There is an overwhelming richness and fascinating complexity to Greek culture which complicates every step of our research.

**The Special Case of Theatre in Continuity Theory**

The preceding discussion about the continuity question in the Greek tradition is necessary, in order to understand the uniqueness of the history

<sup>37</sup> Nilsson 1951, Puchner 1987.

<sup>38</sup> Puchner 2009: 19–46, 2009a: 42–97.

of Greek drama and theatre – which points in the opposite direction. In spite of clear evidence of continuity in many areas, certain phases of the Greek theatre's history are clearly marked by discontinuity. It is impossible to make ideological use of Greek drama and theatre for nationalistic purposes, although numerous scholars down through the years have attempted to do so.

As shall be discussed in Chapter 2, arguments for continuity in Greek drama begin with Constantine Sathas, who was the first modern scholar to propose a direct line of cultural transmission from Antiquity, through Byzantium to Venetian Crete. His theory had its critics, and was soon supplanted by George la Piana's Darwinian, ritual-to-theatre model of cultural development. The confusion generated by both approaches led, by the mid-twentieth century, to the creation of a 'shadow chapter' on Byzantine theatre which assumed continuity in Greek dramatic and theatrical practice in spite of a yawning gap in the evidence.<sup>39</sup>

The contrasting theory, discontinuity, is rooted primarily in a centuries-long lack of evidence for traditional theatre and dramatic literature in Greek culture; it is also rooted in the lack of evidence for their durability or for any traceable line of evolution. It must be stated at the outset that despite the enormous diversity of definitions we have for theatre and drama, for the purposes of this study these terms are understood as follows: theatre is an organized public event involving a scenic enactment or performance in front of an audience of spectators, where actors play roles based on a prepared text that is either written or established through improvisation. This event is understood to be embedded within a given culture as an institution, and performed with a certain regularity. Drama is a text with dialogue, either written or developed through improvisation, which is usually (but not always) intended for scenic presentation and enactment. The dramatic text is understood to have a dual status: a) as a genre of literature, it can be seen as an autonomous literary text; but simultaneously, b) it represents the verbal part of a theatrical performance, which is more or less encoded in the text (Puchner 2011).

What further strengthens the arguments for discontinuity is the fact that, in contrast to the traditional criteria of a culture rooted in a specific geographical location and based on stylistic and ideological consistency, in this case we find a widely dispersed and diverse population using the

<sup>39</sup> For continuity theory see Sathas 1878 and Cottas 1931; for criticism of this theory see for example Krumbacher 1897. For Darwinian theory see La Piana 1912, 1936. For more on this 'ghost chapter' see Puchner 2002a, 2006a. See also chap. 2 ('A Short Account of a Long Controversy').