

WOMEN, SERPENTS AND WATER. “PARADISE LOST” AT MOURGANA IN THESPROTIA OF EPIRUS (GREECE)

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In this paper we analyse certain legends dealing with the formation of the physical landscape of the area of Mourgana in Thesprotia, Greece. Such legends depict the mythological thought and ideology of gender held by the inhabitants of the village of Milea (formally Kostana) in the province of Philiates belonging to the Prefecture of Thesprotia. Our approach is structural-functionalist with emphasis upon structuralism. In particular, our research reveals the following: 1. A negative attitude towards certain female imaginary beings. 2. A positive attitude towards snakes as bearers of life, fecundity and fertility of the earth. 3. Our interpretation relies upon the imaginary and in general, the symbolic system of the inhabitants of the area. The paper employs data deriving from ethnographic fieldwork carried out in the summers of 1982 and 2002.

Keywords: tradition, legend, women.

Introduction

In 1982, when I carried out ethnographic/folklore fieldwork in the village of Milea (former Costana), in the district of Philiates, I recorded a very strange legend, which on first impression seemed to have much in common with the Bible story of Eve and the serpent, but in reverse. Here, the character of the serpent is positive, associating the tradition with water and fertility, while that of the woman, as in the Bible, is negative/catastrophic. In other words, this tradition denotes a gender-based hierarchy at the expense of women, who are thus made guilty of the ills and hardships that happen, a usual canon in male-dominated/patriarchal societies (see Myth of Pandora, etc.). Furthermore, this story was also an etiological/symbolic myth, linked with the imaginery of the inhabitants (Alexakis 2008a, cf. also Buxton 1992), with regard to the formation of the landscape between Milea and the neighbouring village of Lista. Essentially, the place/landscape is a text that can be read and interpreted with the help of the ethnotexts, that is, the narratives. In fact, it is an inscription of narrativity in space (see Papachristophorou 2008, cf. also Chrysanthopoulou 2008).

More specifically, in terms of understanding the myth, Lévi–Strauss’s theory that when a myth is transferred to another people it is reversed, sprang to my mind. And so I had a theoretical tool, Lévi–Strauss’s structuralism, for approaching and

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interpreting the myth. The question is which myth had been transferred, by whom and when, since there is considerable debate as to whether similar myths, which are encountered all over the world, are independent or have received influence from the Bible, after various people's contact with Europeans (colonialism, conversion to Christianity, etc.) (cf. Graulich 1983).

I then went on to seek more data and legends connected with Milea. In the Research Centre for Greek Folklore of the Academy of Athens there was a handwritten document by Thomas Ioannidis, a schoolteacher who originated from the village, which contained a collection of legends, among them two in which there is reference to the serpent/dragon, always in relation to the formation of the landscape of the area, but this time with a negative role. In these tales, two saints of the Orthodox faith, Saint Donatos and Saint Cosmas the Aetolian, played a significant role, while one other similar legend, but of pan-Hellenic diffusion and not linked organically with the specific landscape, implicates Saint George. In any case, in the myths of dragon-slaying in various places, it seems that the dragon-slaying by Saint George, a tradition well known to all, exerted considerable influence. That is, the theological dimension, whatever this means, was also intertwined in the myths.

Thus, the situation was apparently more complex. The myth comprised various levels, which were in conflict. During the same period, I had progressed on the one hand in my more general research and study of the dominant symbols in Greece, such as the serpent/dragon and the secondary symbols associated with this, as well as dragon-slaying, dance, and so on (Alexakis 1982–1984, 2001a, 2001b, 2005), and on the other hand in the more specialized sociological and ethnographic study (family, kinship, spatial organization, ritual, etc.) of the village of Milea, with the resultant related publications (Alexakis 2007, Alexakis 2008d).

My question was whether these oppositions simply had as starting point the folk or theological substrate of their creation, or whether they were due also to a different composition of the population of the village. This should be taken seriously into account.

Twenty years later, in the summer of 2002, I visited the village once again and stayed there for three weeks. This time, I was interested mainly in the organization of built space, as well as in collecting more information or legends that might shed light on the first legend. The results were positive.

So, this paper is based essentially on ethnographic fieldwork and, to a lesser extent, on unpublished and published literature. From the theoretical standpoint, it adopts a structural-functional approach with emphasis on structure and ideology. On the other hand, particular weight is attached to the process of appropriation and humanization of wild space, its transformation into place and eventually into landscape.

History of the village, society and population

Milea is a new village. Before it was declared officially an autonomous community, it consisted of the folds for the livestock of the neighbouring village of Lia, which is why its earlier name was Kalyvia (= Huts), before the name Costana, (it is said to have been named after the widow (Costaina) of a freedom-fighter named Costas) prevailed. However, because the name Costana was erroneously considered to be of foreign origin, it was replaced in 1961 by the name Milea, taken from the many apple trees (Gr. *milies*) in the village. This last name is not to the inhabitants' likening. Today the village is a municipal district subject to the widened Municipality of Philiates.

The population of the village has always been small. During its heyday, in 1940, there were 234 inhabitants, whereas in 1991 there were only 95. Today that number has dwindled to barely 40. Originally, the villagers were small agriculturalists (barley-growers) and small stock raisers (more goats than sheep, because of the terrain), since possibilities for farming on a larger scale were limited, due to insufficiency of land for cultivating and for grazing. So, they turned to crafts and to migration. There was mass migration after the fratricidal battles fought there during the Civil War and the defeat of the Democratic Army, in 1949, in the famed battle of Mourgana (Tsantinis 1989). In their new places of settlement, the villagers were employed primarily as tanners, and secondarily as coopers, although there were also a very few cobblers among them, and in recent years bakers. Their places of settlement were Thessaly, Athens, the Peloponnese, while several have made their home in South Africa.

The village is rather sparsely built. Its provenance from stock-raising installations (*katounes*) is conspicuously obvious. For this reason, the ideology of the community is being continuously doubted, since the installations (houses, huts, etc.) are surrounded by private/familial space, the *giourtia* (gardens, fields). Each installation is at the same time a patrilineal multinuclear family, or, more rarely, a small patrilineal lineage (*fara, seiria*), with analogous name: Nanates/Nanatika, Liontates/Liontatika, Sbitates/ Sbitatika, Genates/Genatika, etc. (Alexakis 2007). Each such family group had a patron saint, whose feast day was commemorated by its members. Moreover, in late summer (8 September), a major religious feast was celebrated in the main church, which is dedicated to the Birth of the Virgin (of Lambovistra, because they brought her icon from Lambovo in Northern Epirus, Albania). The church of the Virgin has a long history. The first church, which had been built low on a hill (*Diarracho*), was swept away by the waters of the *Chorianiko* torrent and the icon of the Virgin was saved in the nick of time, after a dream of one of the faithful. A new church was built exactly on the top the same hill, where the village graveyard was also established (Alexakis 2008).

In earlier times, there was a very strict division of labour between the two sexes. However, this was broken after the migration of the men, because the

women who stayed behind had to be at once cultivators and herders. Today, old men and old women who have remained in the village are not involved with agriculture, but only with gardening. However, old men and old women tend their few livestock, which graze in the surrounding area. This gender-based division has remained in the communal singing, which is antiphonic. The men begin the song and the women repeat the words, in a form of dialogue.

Today, the population of the village is entirely Greek-speaking. The mountainous space and the refuge of many Greeks from the plains contributed to the Hellenization of any non-Greek linguistic element that existed there earlier. Nonetheless, from the surnames and the place names there is an obvious Albanian, Arvanitovlach and even Slav earlier influence.

Before moving to my analysis, I have decided to cite the description of the physical space of Milea, by the schoolteacher Ioannidis, so that we may appreciate how this is perceived through the eyes of an indigenous inhabitant (emic approach).

The physical environment

Geophysical view of the village: Costana lies in the northwest part of the Prefecture of Thesprotia. Its territory continues in the east with that of the village of Agios Georgios (former Gardiki), northeast with the village of Plagia or Kephalochori (former Glousta), north with Lia, south with Anavryton (former Vortopia), west with Vavouri, and southwest with Limbovo. Its area is approximately 10 sq. km., while the hydrometric difference by localities is approximately 350–360 m.

Morphology of the terrain: The village has a complex vertical dismemberment. Many factors – geological, climatic – have had an impact on the area, leading to the creation of small ranges of mountains and hills, ravines, many forests and torrential streams. The area is dominated by three hills – Megali Rachi, altitude 860 m., Agia Marina, altitude 569 m., Veneti, altitude 460 m. – and countless hillocks, which the inhabitants call ‘*Tsoumbaria*’. Also, five big ravines and many gorges, as well as a rich stretch of trees (heather, arbutus, oak, plane, etc.), give the whole picture of the village. A picture that is vivid and striking, with the stamp of nature much in evidence. The configuration of the ground and the beauty of the verdant landscapes class the village among the loveliest in the region, in terms of natural beauty.

Rivers: The village has four dry rivers, which in the summer months have no water, excepting one, and in the winter months flood due to the torrential rainfall in the area: 1) *Tirgia* or *Tigria*. According to Ioannidis, the name derives from the great rushing of the water in the winter months, which in the perception of the inhabitants is like the anger of the tiger (Gr. *tigris*). 2) *Choriano*. The name derives

from the fact that its source is in Megalo Chorio, Lia (Chorio-Chorianiko). 3) *Niantsa*. The only river in which water flows all year round, because the waters are from a wellspring. According to Ioannidis, the name is due to the fact that it has the cool freshness of ‘*nia*’ (a young woman) in all seasons of the year (*nia-Niantsa*). 4) *Pinikario*. Again according to Ioannidis, the name is related to the drowning of two individuals (*pinikan dyo, Pinikario*).

Lakes: There is only one lake, which is mentioned traditionally by the inhabitants, in the now wooded area that is called ‘Limni’ (Gr. *limni* = lake).

Plains: Only one small valley is formed along the length of the four dry rivers.

Legends

1st Legend

According to one legend, once upon a time, at the point where the torrent turns and becomes the River Kephalovryso of Lista, a woman saw a large serpent which proceeded in front, and behind followed the rushing water, the river. When the woman saw the serpent she was terrified, and in her fright cried out ‘Ou, Ou’! Then the serpent turned and went towards Lista. There it became the river and from here on the torrent. They say that, at the point where the river turns, a crone [old woman] with big breasts comes out and whoever she throws milk on goes blind (Alexakis 1982, village of Milea).

2nd Legend

Here at village Gardiki they call it Kastro [castle] of Monovyza (= one-breasted woman). Water from village Glousta went there in pipes and they did not know it. And a horse was thirsty and realized it. It beat its hooves, showing there was water. And they dug and they found water-pipes. Water was going from Glousta to the castle. And there Monovyza was suckling the child, at Mavrokampos. And they call it Mavrokampos (= Black plain) because there the child of Monovyza died (Alexakis 2002, Milea, informant Spyros Sorogas).

3rd Legend

If it weren't that [crone], we would have our water. They say that she had a big breast. If she flung it behind her, the milk flew out and whoever it went on, it killed (Alexakis 2002, Milea, informant Angelos Sbitas).

4th Legend

Further down is Lialia, where they killed the Turkish tax-collector who was going to collect the tithe. The myth of Monovyza is heard frequently here. But her kingdom was not down here ... Those are fibs. They speak about Nianitsa, in the

river, where the water flowed out in springtime and not in winter. The crone had one breast, that is, they confuse the crone with Monovyza (Alexakis 2002, Milea, informant Makis Sbitas).

5th Legend

There are no castles and towers in the area. Only at village Gardiki, which is near Costana, is there a tower, which refers to the empress Monovyza ... This tower, which is visible on Diarracho of Gardiki, is the 'Pyrgos tis Monovyzas' [Tower of Monovyza]. They say that she had her palace there, but she didn't live there all the time. She had other palaces too, in many places. Sometimes she stayed in the one and sometimes in the other. In the Tower of Gardiki she had an army, they say, and it guarded the villages around. That's what I've heard, that's what I know, that's what I say (Ioannidis 1963:259, Milea, informant Thomas Ioannidis).

6th Legend

On Mount Bistriza, which is opposite Mourgana, there was neither tree nor shade, as the say. Saint Donatos passed by and there where he put his foot, an oak tree sprouted. It grew bigger, day by day. People were waiting for it to have acorns, to fall to become many trees. But the dragon did not want this. He says 'if the mountain fills with trees, how will I see the men, in order to eat them?'. When the oak tree was laden with acorns, your good one goes and gives a shake so mighty it cannot be described. He eats the acorns one by one, and, as an extra precaution, he also uproots the oak tree. The people were poisoned by their sorrow, but what could they do. Who has what it takes to confront a mighty dragon. Quite by chance, Saint Cosmas was passing that way. He learnt about the situation and, to cut a long story short, he took a wineskin and he filled it with flames, and he threw it into the dragon's mouth. The dragon grabs and swallows it, and its vitals catch fire. It vomits and instead of throwing up the flask, it threw up the acorns. What could it do? It went to the sea, in order to be saved. And it was throwing up acorns all the way, until the mountain was covered, which later became oak trees. Don't ask about the dragon, it drowned in the sea and the people were at peace. If you climb to the top of Mourgana, you'll see its forest ...'. (Ioannidis 1963:256–257, Milea, informant Thomas Ioannidis).

7th Legend

In the parts where Saint George lived, there was a terrible dragon, like no other in the world. It had captured the water-source of the land and let not a single drop of water flow, so they say. They had to send him a beautiful maiden as a gift. And don't think anyone would do. An aristocratic maiden and from a good family. The rich, I don't say, they had their possessions and their wealth, but what are these, my child, in the face of the horrendous ordeal they passed each year. I forgot

to tell you, they drew lots and whoever drew the fateful lot sent his daughter. That year, the lot fell to the beautiful princess. The king rent his hair, you see, for she was his only child. You'll say, he was a king and he could send some other maiden in place of his daughter, but what would the people say? He thought about this way and that way, and against his will he sent his daughter to the dragon's fount. When his daughter reached there, she waited with her heart in her mouth, as we ordinary folks say. All of a sudden, the dragon appeared, ready to swallow her. At that moment, a young man appeared, riding on a white steed. In his right hand he was holding an enormous spear, and he began to battle with the dragon. The rider was Saint George. He struggled for some time, and in the end he was victorious and rescued the beautiful princess (Ioannidis 1983:257, Milea, informant Vasilis Lontos).

Analysis of the legends

I shall begin by describing the personae in these stories, starting with the women and their particular behaviours. As will become clear, the phenomenon of transformation, of metamorphosis and of substitution of situations and persons, which we observe in the variations of a myth, are encountered here too. In the first tradition, there is reference to a woman of unspecified age, who with the cry uttered in her fear (fetishism and inculpation of female speech/voice in communities in which women are silent groups) (Alexakis 2006, Drettas 2008), on beholding the enormous serpent that was leading the water. It prevented the water from following its course towards Milea, and so it flowed towards Lista, while that point where the woman appeared it became an arid place and a torrent. That is, this woman is linked with the dryness and, as we have seen in the physical description of the village, there are several torrents and dry rivers, due to the natural gradient of the terrain of Mount Mourgana. In the same legend, there appears at this same point an old woman, who is called a crone, that is, an evil woman, and logically she should be identified with the first, who has big breasts (symbol of magical power) and blinds men with her milk. The motif of blinding by a supernatural being, such as a dragon, is very common in Greek tradition (see Alexakis 1982–1984) and corresponds symbolically and structurally to a kind of castration, in which the rivalry comes to signify symbolically also a war between the sexes (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1959). This is always a case of symbolization of space, here demonization, and its conversion into place (see Hirsch E. – O'Hanlon M. 1995).

In both cases, the women cause evil, initially to the natural landscape and subsequently to the humans. In the mythical thinking of the inhabitants, women, especially old women, have a negative position. In reality, elderly women in this region of Epirus have considerable social and supernatural power (both among the Grecophones and among the transhumant Arvanitovlachs: Alexakis 2009). In general, however, in Greek legends old women have a particularly negative

behaviour towards water, and consequently towards the people who need it to water their crops. That is why they are presented as holding the water of rivers, blocking them with cauldrons filled with wool, or by other means. On the contrary, in Greek ethnography – as well as international – young women are associated with fresh running water, with humidity and fertility (they bring the water from the source), while old women, who are no longer of reproductive age, are associated with fire (they tend it in the house) and sterility (cf. Frazer 1969). For this reason the Lamias (ogresses, she-demons), who are usually considered to be old women, are identified in many traditions with stagnant water (pools, swamps, dry rivers, etc.), which are also called Lamnomas, a combination of the word Lamia and the Greek word for lake (*limni*). It should be noted that stock raisers consider stagnant waters, which are also called *varka*, as hazardous for their livestock, since they cause diseases that are difficult to cure. However, they are also dangerous for diseases that affect humans (malaria, etc.). It is not fortuitous that in the traditions, the Lamias, who too assume the form of a large serpent (dragon), also impede the flow of water, and the hero must kill them in order to release the water (dragon-slaying). I should mention, furthermore, that in the perception of the semi-nomadic stock-raisers, the Arvanitovlachs of Kephavryso in Pogoni, the Lamia is a malevolent creature that causes sterility. That is why, contrary to the general pan-Hellenic custom, they did not take the bride after the wedding to the fountain where they believed the Lamia lurked. Only in narratives (fairytales, legends) of the neighbouring region of Pogoni, and in particular of the village of Vissani, is the Lamia presented as queen of the Underworld (which is described as paradise) and as a benevolent being who guards the ‘immortal water’ (see Alexakis 2001a, with relevant bibliography).

One other female persona is Monovyza. She is a mythical personality who interlopes into the first legend. In reality, somewhere she is identified or confused with the female (crone) who prevents the flow of water or who causes men harm (2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th legend). She is described as a woman with one big breast, which she flings onto her back and from which issues poisonous milk. Nikolaos Politis, in his *Legends*, gives many elements concerning these myths. This description suggests that we have here a ‘phallic mother’ (a mother with male characteristics, because the breast is associated symbolically with the penis) (cf. Strathern 1990: 211, 373, n.21, Stewart 1991:181), specifically signified as unique, as a martial instrument and as super-sized, while the poison carries the connection even further, also with the serpent. In the second legend, moreover, Monovyza is also related to water, which she controls through water-supply works, and has as seat the neighbouring village of Gardiki (pres. Agios Georgios), where her castle is located. It should be noted that in this legend the water is brought from the village of Glousta, which is located directly above the turn in the water-course, between Milea and Lista, where the water back-tracked with the large serpent, as we saw in the first legend.

We come now to the animal and the plant kingdom. These are represented mainly by large serpents (dragons, both theriomorphic and anthropomorphic) and by oak trees, respectively. In the first legend, the large serpent leads the water. That is, it has a positive character, because water is essential for growing crops and for men's life in general. In Greek folk tradition, the serpent is frequently presented as guide or guardian, for example of the house (*oikouros ophis* = household snake) (household *Vitora* etc.), of humans (personal *Vitora*), of flocks (among stock raisers), of treasure troves (gold sovereigns) and usually of water (cf. corresponding legends about water in Central Greece, but with symbols/guardians the bulls: Alexakis 2001c). In addition, the snake is related symbolically to sexuality, that is, to conception and pregnancy (Alexakis 2005, 2008d, cf. Also Cooper 1992:531, s.v. serpent).

In other words, at a folk level, the serpent is associated with the fertility of the earth and the fecundity of women. Consequently, the behaviour of the woman in the first tradition was a sin in reverse, in relation to the story of Eve in the Bible. In the Old Testament it leads to the loss of paradise, in the first tradition it leads to the loss of earthly paradise, to sterility of people and aridity of the soil, that is, to the loss of the gardens, the orchards and the arable land, which are all essential for the survival of the inhabitants of the village.

In the sixth and seventh legends, however, the image of the large serpent is completely reversed and in this respect these traditions are closer to the Bible story. The dragon impedes the water flow and destroys the forest (oak trees), which is a vital resource for the inhabitants (a source of timber, of fodder for goats, etc.). Essentially, it is identified with *Monovyza* and the crone. In the sixth legend the dragon is linked with the oak tree in an indirect manner: it devours the tree and its fruits. However, in Greek tradition generally, the dragon is always linked with the oak tree. In tales, oak trees sprout from the blood of a wounded dragon or from its hair, or, elsewhere, the dragon guards sacred oak trees (see Alexakis 2001a, 2001c: 245, n. 29). It seems that this tree has a sanctity, which in Epirus in particular, has a history that goes back over the millennia (cf. the sacred oak tree of Zeus at Dodone).

We come now to three other sacred persons and proceed to a theological level, which is patently clear. These persons are all male saints. Saint Donatos is venerated particularly in Thesprotia, where many churches are dedicated to him. Centre of his cult was and is *Paramythia*, which the Ottomans named ‘*Ai Donat Kalesi*’ (Castle of Saint Donatos). Indeed, a great patronal feast is held in this town on 30 April. In his *Vita*, this saint is linked with dragons, since he is reputed to have killed a dragon in the village of *Glyki*, in Epirus, which was poisoning the water in the river. Indeed, in his icon he is represented like Saint George, mounted on a white horse and slaying with his spear the serpentine *Lamia* (*koultsedra*). In the sixth legend too he is linked indirectly with the dragon, since from his footstep sprouts an oak tree. Essentially, there is an identification of the dragon with Saint Donatos, and beyond that with Saint Cosmas the Aetolian. That is, here too is

noted the general identification of dragon-slayer and dragon (Vernikos 1976, Alexakis 1982–1984). Because the dragon-slaying in the region is carried out by one other hero of the Orthodox Christian faith, Cosmas the Aetolian (for his activity see Giolias 1972), with fire, usual motif – as well as its analogues (lightning, gunfire, etc.) – in dragon-slayings in Greece. In practice, introduced into the myths is the regaining of the earthly paradise (whether this is life-giving water or the oak forest), through the slaying of the dragon and the action of saintly persons/heroes of Orthodoxy (cf. also du Boulay 2008). This is a de-demonization of the exotic space and its transformation into sanctified space, as is also the built space (the village, which is surrounded by field chapels), through the presence and the action of saints (see Stewart 1991:165, Lagopoulos 2002, Papachristophorou 2008:79,80).

In conclusion, clear from all the above is the interweaving of different traditions and ideologies in these narratives. Nonetheless, leaving the theological frame aside, the core is that this is a conflict of ideology between agriculturalists and herders. However, in this scheme, the ideology of the stock raisers is identified with the theological side of the legends. I believe that this is related to the Judaic starting point of Christianity. After all, we know that the Hebrews too were nomadic or transhumant pastoralists. The ideological conflict is possibly linked with the provenance of the inhabitants of Milea: Albanians, Arvanitovlachs, Greeks, etc., the symbolic/mythical thinking of whom is different. Moreover, several surnames indicate that a certain percentage of the inhabitants of the village are sedentarized transhumant Arvanitovlachs from Pogoni, because the village is right on the route of the flocks and herds moving from the mountains to the coastal winter pastures of Thesprotia (Igoumenitsa, Sagiada, Plataria, Lourida, etc.).

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