

To Helene
Congratulating
on this + Bar Batz
Always + Bar Wiles
Nick Goufrendis

The Epic "Tragoudi tou Dascaloyianni"
by
Helene S. Pandelakis

A little epic, echoing in Homeric similes, immortalizes a heroic event that took place in Crete during the eighteenth century.

The poem, "Tragoudi tou Dascaloyianni" was authored by barba-Batzelios (Patzelios) and the youth Scordyles, son of Sifi. It is a tale of extreme heroism, containing a real hero, and characters, and historical occurrences.*

The "song" was related by Batzelis, who fought during the struggle for freedom, to Scordyles his cousin. Had the young lector not written down the sequences of events as expressed by this elderly heavy-hearted kinsman, this magnificent work would probably have passed into oblivion.

For this literary monument, "Tragoudi tou Dascaloyianni" we are indebted to barba-Batzelios the oral bard, and young Scordyles for their dedication and love of a hero and a land called Sfakia.

The poem reveals a humanistic outlook on life. The hero strives for Homeric 'areti', virtue, but he achieves it through Christian as well as Homeric ideals. His strong will is based on the right of a human being to be treated as a human being at all times...the eternal conflict of freedom versus slavery.

Scordyles tells us in the epilogue that others have composed poems commemorating this historical fact; they do not exist today.

To create the epic, barba-Batzelios recited and developed it through the years. His hair turned white, sixteen years after the event, he sits in the shade of the evergreen oak (prinos) on a field high in the lofty peaks, and relates his tale to the lector (anagnostis) Scordyles, who is keeping one eye on his father's milk-bearing herd grazing nearby and holds a pen and writes.

Batzelios spoke tenderly from memory, and Scordyles recorded the facts he heard adding his own poetry to the finished work.

The last 44 verses are Scordyles' own composition, and it is believed that he had poetic inclinations and contributed to the enrichment of the entire poem.

The esthetic value of the song makes it one of the noteworthy masterpieces of neo-hellenic literature. The truth of life breaths through its verse, and the innate wisdom of a simple cheesemaker joins the wisdom of the ages. The love for one person, his deeds, his honorable and agonizing death for his country, brought out the spirituality of this hard as it did for those other bards who would soon follow - Solomos, Makriyiannis, Mavilis, Papadiamandis - in the national cause of Greece.

The work is written in 15-syllable rhyming verse. This popular verse with a cesura after the eighth syllable is particularly adaptable to story telling. And, as with "Erotocritos"*, it is most suitable for recitation (tragoudicto) in the same tune accompanied by the Cretan lyra.

The epic, composed of 1,032 verses (reference is made to Emanuel Bardides's (1888) edition, the only authentic version) is written in the secular language peculiar to that region of western Crete being Doric in origin.

Greek has always been a perfect language for poetry, being flexible and sensitive, yet conservative and controlled. The greatest virtue of mature Cretan literature is its irreproachable language. These works were written in the vernacular of the day, a highly developed idiom, which became the literary language of Crete, i.e. Hortatzis' "Erophile". The puristic, highly refined and quite artificial idiom of the Phanariots had not become established in the Greek world of letters until the beginning of the nineteenth century (katharevousa).

The merit of Cretan writing lies both in its word-usage and its excellent form - the long, rhythmic, undulating verse.

The "Tragoudi tou Dascaloyianni" includes a number of repetitious phrases, a characteristic of oral songs, which aids the bard in reciting.

* Space does not permit the telling of this great historical and significant insurrection of 1770. There are many references to it in Greek historical texts. Also, a recent article in English, "The Profile of Dascaloyiannis: First National Matyr of Modern Greece" appeared in Crete (March, 1970) by Helene S. Pandelakis.

* "The Erotocritos", by Helene S. Pandelakis, published in Crete (March, and August, 1969).

The tragic spirit runs through the whole warp of the poem. The style of its poetic creation reminds one of an 'ancient rhapsody'. Its choice of words is rich and varied, and its expression lively. Its mood is exalting, enthusiastic, heroic. Overall, it is a composition of true artistry. *Its beauty is its utter simplicity and unsophistication.* It is also a rhapsody which is uniquely complete. It opens with an invocation, a full-bodied statement asking for inspiration, it announces the hero and the theme of the poem, records the events, and ends with an autresentation, an address to the listener, again as in the "Erotocritos". One notes the absence of the supernatural; and the unusual addition of verses by the dual author.

As with Homeric poetry, this epic, blends narrative with dramatic speeches in a setting with the background of the eternal beauty of nature.

The dramatic dialogue is contained in the hero's farewell address to his wife, Sgouromallini, in his discussions with the Vizier, and in the subsequent dirge uttered by his wife.

The climax comes with the death of the hero, and the lamentation for the beautiful world and way of life lost forever.

Barba-Batzelios was born and lived in the villages of the White Mountains (Levca Ori) in the Eparchy of Sfakia; he was of the family branch of Stratiki from Kalo Lako. A cheesemaker by vocation, this oral bard was illiterate. He sang of the fateful event of 1770 with deep compassion. He could not forget his lost comrades and the once beautiful and now devastated towns of Sfakia. Freshly dug graves of his countrymen were to be seen everywhere.

Scordyles was educated and layreader to his father the priest of Mouri; the same Papa-Sifi of the "Alidakis" epic. Scordyles had six brothers all of whom became priests. The young writer probably was born after this insurrection. His paternal uncle, Captain George Scordyles played a strategic role in the uprising; he was the leader of the contingent from Mouri who successfully attacked the lowlands to the East, and the defender at the Battle of the Gorge of Samaria. With his ship (caïque) prior to the fighting, he had brought messages from the Bey of Mani, Mavromichalis to Dascaloyiannis.

The Scordyles family is a great and old family of Crete. Originally Byzantine royalty, the head of the clan Marinos S. was sent in the twelfth century by his uncle, Alexius Comnenos, Emperor of Byzantium to rule the upper regions (ano poleis) as a Duke of Crete. Two historical novels immortalizing this family are Antoniades' "Chrisomalousa ton Sfakion", and Zambeliou' "Kritikoi Gamoi". There are many other literary and historical works about this family, whose archives are filled with illustrious names, running concurrently with the history of Crete.

The Eparchy of Sfakia is the setting of the song. This mountainous, southwestern district of Crete is constructed of numerous magnificent gorges, many rivers, and wooded slopes. In this geographic isolation, its inhabitants dwell in many towns and villages near the violet-blue sea. In the summer they seek the cooler hamlets on the mountainsides. This region prides itself as being ancient, with the ruins of Tara, Phoenix and Appolonia; and pure with the Doric origins of its people, language, and traditions. Other people, as the Byzantines, who settled there later, submitted to this culture.

Several interesting parallels may be drawn from the text of this epic. The answer the Pasha receives from Dascaloyiannis is similar to that formerly given to Xerxes by Leonidas. The stirring farewell message to his wife may be recognized from that of Hector to his devoted Andromache. When in hope of stopping the slaughter of his people, Dascaloyinnis surrenders himself in Christian grandeur; he is crucified in the manner of self-sacrifice we know so well.

One is also made sharply aware of the towns of Sfakia, as communities ruled excellently by hierarchy; and of the heroic aspirations of its people, who, as in ancient Greek states have pure trades, — and an awareness for their neighbors.

The aristocracy of Sfakis (kalosiroi), the families referred to over and over again, form a closed society based on the types in the archaic period in Greece. Their distinction from the rest of the Sfakians is both material and moral.

The earlier Doric tribes of ancient times worshipped their hero Heracles. His self-sacrificing struggles expressed the Doric virtues of courage, perseverance, and duty. The epic poems of Crete glorify the strongly ingrained Cretan ideal of gallant living and gallant dying. Several epic and heroic poems were written in the seventeenth century. "The Capture of Crete" written in 1681 by Marinos Tsanes Bouniales was one, but the most splendid 'chanson de geste' ever written in any language was the Byzantine epic "Digenis Acritas" (1050), an oral song of the ninth century. "Tragoudi tou Dascaloyianni", and "Alidakis" reflect the true tradition of the Greek classics. The epic as a spiritual climate and as a poetic form is still alive in Crete today.

Of all that Greece has bequeathed to the world, nothing is more important than the concept of the hero. This is one concept the Greeks regularly have in common, and can recognize in each other. When a heroic deed is done, they know it. The collective security of Greece is the community of heroic aspirations; and the essence of its culture is in the spiritual recourse of the hero, whose ultimate standard is death with honor.

Yiannis Vlahos, "Dascalos o Yiannis" foresaw his doom and approached it with fortitude and inner strength. He understood the extent of the sacrifice which would be required of him, and surrendered his soul out of deep love for country, bidding farewell to life as to something beautiful and beloved.

We are eternally indebted to barba-Batzelios and young Scordyles