

# TRACES OF OLD LEGENDS IN A MODERN LOCAL TRADITION: PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS ON A GREEK INSULAR COMMUNITY

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**Abstract:** A local legend recorded in several variants during a fieldwork research on a small East-Aegean island is the crux of the present paper. The legend discusses the habitation of the island by two brothers, Elias and Nicolas, about 200 years ago; the population of the island still includes their descendants. The recorded variants of this particular legend are usually considered more or less reliable historical sources; in this sense they touch upon oral history and contribute to the construction of a consistent identity of the island's inhabitants.

A closer and more attentive approach to a group of legends connected to the abovementioned one reveals a second semantic level with obvious connotations: the cavern inhabited by the two brothers, the symbolic load of their first names, the fraternal conflict underlined by the opposition of land cultivation and animal husbandry, accompanied by the division of the grounds, etc.

The principle questions this paper attempts to answer are how the story corresponds to real events and facts and to which degree does it convey and mute pre-existing mythological elements, which are related either to the surrounding Modern Greek mythological tradition or the possible mythological remnants of a remote (local) past, the latter partially revealed in archaeological research.

In this paper it is argued that the position of this legend draws heavily from the limited local cultural context. Although being an "independent" narrative describing precise historical facts and personae, it has nevertheless developed in consistent exchange with other narratives, beliefs and representations. It is thus proposed that the story of Nicolas and Elias is part of a whole, though limited, mythological system inside the boundaries of the minute island.

**Key words:** beliefs, cults, Greece, history, identities, legends, mythology, orality

## INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses how oral tradition is being created in a modern, but at the same time highly traditional, non-urban social context. The material I am going to refer to comes from a fieldwork research which was started in 2000 and is ongoing.<sup>1</sup> It concerns a miniscule Dodecanese island of about 13 square

kilometres (Divani & Konstandopoulou 1996: 279) in the southeast Aegean Sea.<sup>2</sup> The population of the community is 700 and is very active in several domains: the economic activities, besides tourism and recently real estate, are agriculture, stockbreeding and fishing. Cultural activities are either local, like wine festivities, or supra-local, like congresses, cultural exchanges with other municipalities and the publications funded by the municipality itself (see also Papachristophorou 2006).

The island, situated far away from the major urban centres of Greece, with irregular maritime connection, especially in winter, is to some extent dependent on the *Sacred Monastery of Saint John Evangelist and Theologian* on the neighbouring Patmos island; the dependence involves either the use of lands or the management of ecclesiastical affairs. The island, along with the rest of the Dodecanese archipelago, was incorporated into the Greek State in 1948.

The case study under discussion catches upon several aspects raised by previous assumptions. It has been widely demonstrated that an exchange among distinct narrative genres – such as legends, life stories, oral history or simply underlying beliefs – clearly affects taxonomic borders themselves contesting the imposition of any kind of law (Dégh 1995, Ben-Amos 1976, Honko 2000).

This is likely valid also for the island's oral tradition which is rich and still functions as a living communication system. The first stories I heard, well before I started to transcribe them, were narrated in the social context of spontaneous conversations. According to my field data the rather thick corpus of recorded narratives can be thematically subdivided into four wider units: (i) origins and genealogies, (ii) miracles and hierophanies, (iii) treasures and topography, and (iv) jokes and life stories which to a certain degree project and incorporate the collective imagery of the community (cf. Siikala 1990: 172–177).

## A STARTING POINT

Today's inhabitants consider that their ancestors first inhabited the island some 200–300 years ago, during the Ottoman rule. The archaeological relics, although visible, remain largely silent; they certainly constitute prominent objects attesting a distant past, which, according to the oral tradition of the island, is widely considered as interrupted.<sup>3</sup> The relics do not receive any direct historical projection, at least as far as I have observed.

The recent (oral) history of the island starts when a man coming from Crete with his family, named Lios (that is Elias), asked refuge from the Turks at the Monastery of Patmos. The monks proposed that he settled on the opposite small island, which was then deserted:

The submission of Crete under the Turkish power in 1669 obliged many Cretans to leave their island and take refuge in the Dodecanese. One of these refugees, some decades after the above date, was old Lios (Elias) who arrived with his family on [the island]. He made a first habitat in the cave situated over Liendou.<sup>4</sup> Old Lios was the first inhabitant of the island who found a purpose in building the village on the hill, to its present-day location. (Koumoundouros 1994: 18)

Another version of the story describes Lios seeking refuge with his brother Nicolas. They were both settled on the same site of the island, but the two brothers subsequently quarrelled about the division of the lands. One of Nicolas' descendants, a man about 75 years of age in 2001, told me the variant known in his family:

So the brother, Nicolas, tells him, "My brother, we have left the Turks, we have revolted so that we can live in freedom, whatever, to rule our own properties, not to [...]" – "No!" Elias replied, "No, the monastery has supported us generously, we have our land here now." [...] – "But the land is not ours," [Nicolas replied], "it belongs to the monastery, they take what they want and they leave us almost nothing". Elias started to defend the monastery's interests. Nicolas replied, "No, I cannot live like that," and he gathered the countrymen and told them, "My brothers, these are no conditions to live in. Follow me if you want to". They followed him. Not everyone, but most of them did.<sup>5</sup>

Old Lios, as the first inhabitant is usually called, appears in another narration demanding with its shocking effect a certain level of familiarization between the narrator and his audience. This story talks about his involvement in a bloody conflict with the anchorites who were living on the island before. The conflict involved the appropriation of the lands and ended with the fair and miraculous punishment of the sacrilegious man:

The other one, the sly one, he who had the herd of thousand heads [...] out there in the forest, there was a little monastery and spring waters where the goats were going to drink. There also were some monks, but good ones. Real monks. And he slandered them that they were disturbing his animals, they were [defiling] them, killing and stealing them. The monks sorrowed, they were obliged to say, "Go to [...]!" they cursed him, "If it is true that we bother you, God will punish us. Otherwise, if it is a lie, your inside will draw down!"<sup>6</sup>

The main characteristic feature of Old Lios, his malice, has been preserved in the family name of his descendants.<sup>7</sup> Respectively, the family name of Nicolas'

descendants reminds of their ancestor's stature. We must note, at this point, that both versions are regarded as part of the island's history and have been included in local publications. Their main difference seems to be the active role of Nicolas, or the lack of it, in the habitation of the island.

I presume that the particular story outlined above constitutes in fact a local historical legend, which forms part of a wider local mythological system. Additionally, I would suggest that it has incorporated latent but specific mythological elements of older legends. The question thus arising is the following: to which degree is the habitation story true and to which degree does it convey and/or mute pre-existing mythological elements? In order to detect such paths of exchange, I am going to discern firstly, the facts that may have been memorized in the particular group of narratives, secondly, the historical context supporting them, and finally, some possible underlying mythological elements.

## **FACTS AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Certain elements in the particular tradition undoubtedly link the first (modern) inhabitants with life on the island today.

The family names of the descendants reflect main attributes of the personae involved in this specific group of stories. The first house attributed to old Lios stands as a starting point for the construction of the unique village on the island and since 1977, after having been completely restored, has housed the island's Ecclesiastical Museum.<sup>8</sup>

The "old Lios' cavern" overlooks the port and remains a clear reference point.

The population's composition, coming from the neighbouring islands, Crete, or the Asia Minor coast, is also reflected upon this very initial story. One of Elias' descendants, 80 years old in 2003, reported:

My grandmother was from Patmos. Most of the women were from Patmos, my child. My wife also, she may have come from Marathi, but her race was from Patmos. There weren't any women here. Step by step. We are all brought pieces; some come from Patmos, some from Leros, some from Crete, some from the Cyclades, we all are [...].

Nevertheless, the origins of people have ordinarily been amalgamated along the routes of the East Aegean Sea and the phenomenon is not exclusive to the particular island.

In terms of old Lios, the bloody conflict story mentioned afore implies some eremitic presence on the island. This can be viewed as a historical fact, at least

according to the records of the Monastery of Patmos: the hermits belonging to the monastery's community are identified by name, geographical origin, date of birth and date and conditions of death (Florentis 1980: 2; 6; 15; 23; 43; 45; 49–50; 66; 84; 103; 107; 126; Papachristophorou 2006: 38–39).

The main occupations of the first inhabitants, such as agriculture and stock-breeding, are also confirmed by historical research: the island provided the Monastery cereal and wine<sup>9</sup> (Miklosich & Müller 1890: 41), while people from Patmos had already had land properties on it in 1667 (Papadopoulos & Florentis 1990: 23).

The origin of the first inhabitant can be associated with a population movement from Crete to Patmos which has been widely attested during the last phase of the wars between the Ottoman Empire and Venice from 1645 to 1669<sup>10</sup> (Olympitou 2002: 89).

More indirectly, the refuge offered by the Monastery of Patmos to the rebels against the Ottoman regime, and pirates' incursions into the Aegean islands from the 11th up to the 14th century, constitute a reference connected with the specific historical period for the particular geographical area (Olympitou 2002: 29, n. 20).

My efforts to acquire further information about the island's recent history, without being a historian myself, brought quite small, though significant, results. I was sent to interview old people who told me variants of the same story, or to inquire books presenting written versions of the narration examined in this paper. The research in the monastery's archives has brought some dispersed information either about the island's properties, especially in the 19th century, or about the hermits who retired on the island. A forthcoming full translation and publication of Ottoman manuscripts could possibly clarify several points of this research. Bibliographic references on the island are very scarce in general and they are normally connected to historical information concerning the Dodecanese archipelago.

Archaeological information about the remote history of the island, on the contrary, is potentially richer, even though no extensive archaeological research has been carried out on the island. According to several indices, old Lios' cavern has been used as a shelter during prehistoric years, and probably as a sanctuary (Volanakis 2002: 42). The relics north of the village testify to the existence of an acropolis and an extensive necropolis in the classical period, as well as building remains of Apollo's official veneration; other finds date back to early Christian times. Again, the information is neither continuous nor coherent.

Paul Thompson (2002: 29–31) has argued that the void of historical information forms a supplementary factor encouraging the construction of history

-serving the community's purposes and helping the perception of self-identities. We can further suppose about the case in question that the historical shortcomings excite collective imagery, since people are continuously faced with visible and tangible relics of a silent and unknown past. The historical shortcomings consequently demand to be filled in by a variety of oral narratives. The creation and the perception of possible explanations are, in turn, affected.

## **POSSIBLE MYTHOLOGICAL ELEMENTS**

Besides the elements that can be attested in a historical or realistic context, there are others that could be considered as vehicles of a mythological content. The first names of the first settlers, Elias and Nicolas, automatically allude to the well-known and mutually quarrelsome Orthodox Saints Elias and Nicholas. The habitation of the island itself carries a considerable semantic weight, being an important fact defining symbolically a starting point and an origin. The cavern, constituting a first habitat and bearing a new population, would participate in the same symbolic construction as equivalent of a universal womb giving birth to a new life.<sup>11</sup>

By using the names Elias and Nicolas as a starting point, I shall try to show how modern Greek mythological traditions present the two saints always in comparison with the two brothers of our story. According to the general modern tradition, St Nicholas is the patron saint of sailors. St Elias, on the other hand, is more associated with higher landscapes and the churches dedicated to him are normally constructed on hill summits. The two saints are very often represented in a condition of permanent conflict:

St Elias was a mountain man and was always wondering on the mountains, on the summits. They also argued with St Nicholas – they were friends in the beginning – and they arranged it so that one of them went to the sea and the other one to the mountains. (KEEL<sup>12</sup>, manuscript 2301: 403. Recorded in Karditsa, by D. Loukatos in 1950)

The representations of St Nicholas focus on a clement personality and a great activity in thaumaturgy, normally assuming the shape of a kind old man. St Elias depicted as an old sailor who abandoned the sea like Ulysses, is often represented as a shepherd:

St Elias was a sailor. But he got sick of the oar and went on the mountain. He stayed there and looked at the sea from the opposite side. He

became a shepherd afterwards and set his tent there. (KEEL, manuscript 1446: 118. Recorded in Lesbos, by D. Loukatos in 1940)

Characterized as irritable and querulous, St Elias was believed to provoke violent climate phenomena, such as thunders or storms. While St Elias destroys, St Nicholas saves. Several contradictions and conflicts interconnect both saints, with an obvious projection of their worship on the landscape, which includes the mountain/sea opposition. Several of the aforementioned characteristic features are reflected in the characters of the two homonymous brothers under discussion.

St Nicholas was imported into the Greek tradition as the patron of sailors from Lycia in Asia Minor, replacing St Phocas from Pontus, in the 8th century. It is possible that this replacement was due to a shift in geopolitical interest towards the rising coasts of southern Asia Minor, including Lycia with its skilful sailors (Kountoura-Galake 2004: 103–106). It has been suggested that St Nicholas conveyed into the popular cult elements of the cult of Dioscuri, the main patrons of sailors in the Greek antiquity, venerated especially along the coasts of Asia Minor (Kountoura-Galake 2004: 96–99). In terms of Greek imagery, this means that St Nicholas did not replace Poseidon, the Greek sea god. At this point, it is interesting to note that the two conditions – mortality and immortality – were attributed to the twin sons of Zeus. St Elias is etymologically associated with Helios, the sun, whereas his involvement in the causing of climatic extremes echoes Zeus's anger.

A significant detail in the structure of the local imagery is that both saints have in common the function of the dragon slayer, just like the Dioscuri, the possible precursors of St Nicholas. Apollo, the Greek solar god, but also a dragon slayer at Delphi had an official cult on the island, as shown by the excavated finds (Papachristodoulou & Dreliossi 2003).

Additionally, in connection with the space management on the island, two observations about the veneration of St Nicholas and St Elias can be made. The unique church dedicated to St Elias is dominating on a hilltop, on the East, overlooking the only village of the island and the port.<sup>13</sup> Three churches have been built to St Nicholas: two are constructed on the two capes surrounding the entrance of the port. In both churches, on the left and on the right of the entrance, there are two icons of worship (*proskynimatikes ikones*) representing St Nicholas (cf. Psychoyou 2008: 227–229). Even though one of these churches is quite recent, I would suggest that we are faced with a relic of the cult of Dioscuri and the protection of the sailors, simulated under double spatial representations. The third church dedicated to St Nicholas is located at the cemetery, which goes in hand with his representation as a psychopomp;

there is no double icon for the saint, which possibly means that his dominant function in this context is the leading of souls to the other world, and no longer the protection of sailors.

I presume that all these silent associations with a dragon-slaying hero, masked as a saint are not coincidental. I am tempted to argue that in fact they convey a mythological reminiscence of dragon slaying, creating a latent mythological web of representations and narratives, free of any direct use of the dragon slaying motif itself. As for my own fieldwork experience on the particular island, I have not encountered any story concerning dragons or waters kept by a demon. In spite of this narrative shortcoming there is a cavern called “the serpent’s cave” (*Spilia tou Fidi*) on the island, neighbouring an underground spring, named Fountana, and a site named “cistern” (*sterna*). Another spring, not far from the previous one, with the odd name “wild water”, is located near the hermitage.

## DETECTING A WIDER MYTHOLOGICAL CONTEXT

A possible underlying tradition of dragon-slaying leads to a second consideration of several mythological elements that can be connected to it. And this is despite the fact that they independently contribute to the plot of other local legends.

The main thematic axis in the mythological traditions of dragon-slaying is the release of the waters and their purification from the smutty demon soiling them (cf. Politis 1913). In ancient Greece the serpent /dragon was associated with water, fertility, the earth, vegetation, hidden treasures, the ancestors and fallen heroes (Politis [1904]1994: 243–251; Alexakis 1984: 98). Thus it is attributed, on the one hand, chthonic characteristics and it may be a part of a wider chthonic cult; while on the other hand, at a more symbolic level, dragon-slaying translates, in general, the Manichean conflict between good and evil, between the sacred and the profane.

It seems that the chthonic elements are assigned a primordial role, which is always latent either in narratives or in representations haunting the collective imagery of the community examined here.

Besides various systematic references to caverns hosting particular actions, such as the ascetics or refuge offered, and others, there is a very popular group of legends referring to treasures buried in the ground. These treasures, revealed in a dream or a vision, are normally haunted and are bearers of evil, while at the same time they constitute “traces of the past in the present” satisfying the need of “historicization” we have mentioned above (cf. Stewart

2003: 487). Treasure revelations are normally connected with appearances of demons.

The appearances of demons are also connected with the wells and the springs of the island, a symbolic frame which could also include the presence of a well or cistern in the courtyard of several country churches. In addition, the importance given by the inhabitants of the island today to a mythical fertility, either in association with the soil's fertility<sup>14</sup> or with the first conflicts aiming to the division of the grounds can also be considered as carrying latent reference to a forgotten chthonic cult.

There is an entire parallel cycle of legends and beliefs referring to goddess Calypso, to whom people etymologically attribute their island's name. The citadel (*to kastro*), the popular name for the ruins of the ancient acropolis, is regarded as her palace; it is said that underground stairs connect it both with the cavern where Ulysses took refuge and with the bath in which she bathed. According to a 83-year-old lady informant in 2001:

[G]oddess Calypso was living here in the bath, that's how they call that yard [...] Inside there, on your way to Kousselio, around the Bath, that's where is the cave where Calypso hid Ulysses [...] that you have read about, haven't you?

The legendary habitation of the goddess was equally chthonic: "She was living in a profound cave, with many rooms, opening to natural gardens and a sacred forest with big trees and springs" (Grimal 1951: 77).

I would even venture to say that the miraculous matron of the island forms a part of the same semantic context of a forgotten chthonic cult, first of all with her peculiar local name, which literally means the Charon's "All Holy" Virgin. A remarkable icon represents the Virgin, calm and peaceful in her holy maternity, holding Jesus in her arms, with the only difference that Jesus is not depicted as the holy infant but as a miniature crucified adult. This iconographic particularity, offers a popular explanation for her peculiar denomination, in which Charon and death interact as synonyms in Modern Greek. This verbal interaction reflects here a more general popular perception of death/Charon who leads humans to an underworldly chthonic life (see Psychoyou 2008, Alexiou 2002, Saunier 1997, Seremetaki 1994, Danforth 1982). The icon is probably dated to the 18th century (Volanakis 2002: 81). The church where the icon is held is estimated to be considerably older and has probably been a cemetery church (Volanakis 2002: 69). It is dedicated to the Dormition of Mary, and celebrated on August 23.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the main miracle attributed to her grace is repeated every year and the event attracts believers from the surrounding islands: faded wild lilies, which were placed on her icon in April, bloom in

August, on the feast day. In the Greek tradition, April is connected with the fertility of the soil and the ritual exchange of birth and death, expressed especially by Easter celebrations (see Megas [1957]1992: 147–187).

Charon's Holy Virgin is also connected with an entire group of narratives, especially these concerning Marian apparitions and miracles.

## **CONCLUSION**

While exploring the above-delineated oral tradition, which I consider largely autonomous, I have used as a starting point the first names Elias and Nicolas, which correspond to historical personae in this local tradition. At a second level I have suggested that a symbolic background, projecting on the landscape the opposition of mountain/sea, probably associates Elias and Nicolas with the homonymous saints known in Modern Greece. The fact that in both cases the two pairs symbolically involve an inherent conflict, finally lead me to investigate more complicated interconnections since the two saints are bound in many legends known in several geographical regions of Greece and also share the function of a dragon slayer.

The latent emphasis given on dragon-slaying and the related motifs, as indicated by the local narratives and beliefs, finds a possible explanation in the historical context which frames the installation of the first legendary modern inhabitants of the island. It has already been proposed that

on a popular level, the dragon-slaying symbolism indicates first the installation of a new population and consequently the refusal of nativity for this same population [...] A successful dragon-slaying constitutes a myth for the permanent settlement of people and the imposition of a new ideology (Alexakis 1984: 100).

However, the dragon-slaying also participates in the construction of the symbolic identity of the two saints, which in turn is reflected in the first names of the first two inhabitants. This issues a semiotic interconnection associating the two saints with the chthonic aspect of the popular cult: both saints are psychopomps; cemetery churches are often dedicated to St Nicholas – and this is also the case on the island under examination.

If we consider these chthonic aspects (which are consistently repeated in the tradition we have examined) as a principal thematic axis, then the wider units we have detected for the island's oral tradition are tightly interconnected. The same is valid for wider representations, such as the emphasis given on agriculture or the Virgin, matron of the island, which seemingly escape from the thematic taxonomy of these narratives.

Generally speaking, I would suggest that the oral corpus examined here belongs to a well-structured mythological system. The story about the habitation of Elias and Nicolas partially dates it to a particular period in history – from this aspect it obviously simulates oral history. Historicization offers prosperous conditions for the emergence of new narratives and the variation/mutation of older ones, while at the same time it meets the specific needs of this relatively novel community to affirm a solid collective identity.<sup>16</sup> However, this cannot be considered an independent process; a wider and older mythological context has seemingly provided the collected narratives with structural elements circulating in time, space and the changing cultures.

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## **COMMENTS**

<sup>1</sup> The present paper is based on field data collected until June 2005.

<sup>2</sup> The island belongs to the district of Kalymnos and is situated north of Leros island and east of Patmos island.

<sup>3</sup> However, according to archaeologists' estimations the habitation of the island must have never been interrupted (cf. Volanakis 2002).

<sup>4</sup> A small beach at a short distance of some 300 meters northwest from the island's port.

<sup>5</sup> A variant by the same informant was published in "[Our Island] Yesterday and Today", a report of 78 pages publishing the results of a workshop for high-school students in environmental training in 2000.

<sup>6</sup> The particular story was very popular in the informant's family. In 2001, when the story was recorded, the informant was 83 years old.

- <sup>7</sup> For obvious reasons, I am obliged to conceal the identities by paraphrasing family names, even though they act as structural narrative elements.
- <sup>8</sup> The museum collection consists of archaeological, religious and ethnographical objects.
- <sup>9</sup> A sweet wine “famous as far as in Vatican”, as people on the island like to point out.
- <sup>10</sup> This historical moment marks the end of the secular wars between Venice and the Ottomans; it results to the undoubted sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire in the East Mediterranean Sea.
- <sup>11</sup> Cavern, a humid and dark cavity, has been widely regarded in literature (also in psychoanalysis, folklore. etc.) as a place of gestation associated either with maturation and birth or with death, because of its darkness (Durand 1992: 275–277).
- <sup>12</sup> The abbreviation corresponds to the Hellenic Folklore Research Center’s Archives.
- <sup>13</sup> The church, constructed in the early 1970s, is one of the churches recently constructed on the island.
- <sup>14</sup> Old people like to talk about the soil’s fertility, which resulted in good harvests of fruit, grain and grapes in the old times.
- <sup>15</sup> According to the Greek Orthodox Church calendar, the Dormition of Mary is celebrated on August 15. An alternative celebration on August 23 marks the veneration of the cult of the Virgin in several areas, representing a clearly funeral celebration on the ninth day after a person’s death. Orthodox ceremonies to commemorate the dead take place on the 3rd, the 9th and the 40th day following death and after the passing of 3 and 6 months and one year. These intervals symbolically correspond either to a gradual departure of the soul or the decomposition of the corpse (cf. Dagrón 1984).
- <sup>16</sup> Sharing supernatural experience as an expression of profound faith also contributes, in essence, to the construction of a cohesive collective identity, as I have demonstrated elsewhere (Papachristophorou 2006).

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