

Hugh J. MASON: “You are a brave Hellene.” Vasilis Arvanitis and cultural identity on Lesvos

When the narrator’s father praises Vasilis for his first brave act, he calls him an *antreiomenos Ellenas*, a brave Hellene (Myrivilis 1990, 27). In pre-liberation Lesvos, the use of *Ellenas* rather than *Romios* for a Greek-speaking Christian would mean either (1), a citizen of the new Greek kingdom, or *Palioelladitis*, or (2), an ancient “pagan” Greek. Neither meaning initially seems appropriate, but Vasilis will later receive the favour of the Crown Prince for his services in Macedonia, while his acts of bravery recall ancient narratives about Herakles and Alexander. Myrivilis’ portrayal of Vasilis as “Hellene” is also affected by his narrative of Vasilis’ ambiguous relationship to the National Struggle, and by the implicit comparison with other “Hellenes” on the island, such as the teacher Anagnostou and the painter Theophilos.

Vasilis’ surname, which means both “stubborn” and “Albanian,” (i.e., an Albanian speaker in Greece, not a citizen of Albania) points to a little-discussed aspect of multiculturalism in 19th century Greece, although there was no Albanian-speaking minority on Lesvos.

When Myrivilis’ portrait of inter-communal hostilities is compared with Panasilinos’ claim (1970: 30) that “to tell you the truth, there wasn’t much hostility between Mytileneans and Turks before the Liberation,” we have a context for Vasilis’ curious relationship with the Turks. Vasilis and his Turkish rival Sabri, like many inhabitants of the island, were comfortable in the other’s language; Vasilis’ code switching serves as a marker of his many changes of allegiance (from the Macedonian resistance to the Young Turks, for and against the tobacco monopoly of the *Regie*). The representative of the *Regie*, Michel, a *Frankolevantinos* from Smyrna, reminds us of another feature of pre-liberation Mytilini; according to Tériade, the town provided him with enough French culture at home and school that he had no difficulty studying at the Sorbonne or participating fully in *avant-garde* French artistic circles. Vasilis’ fight with the priest, and the “unbelievable” presence of two *zeibeks* leading the funeral of a Christian (Myrivilis 1991:111), reveals a religious environment that went beyond the Christian/Islam opposition. Besides the unorthodox sect of Zeibeks, Lesvos was also home to a nomadic, non-Islamic population called the Yuruks; while the fight (1877-1883) over control of the Leimoniada School shows that Vasilis was far from the only figure on the island who opposed the power of the Orthodox Church.

References

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