

**The Oral Traditions  
of Modern Greece:  
A Survey**

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**Description**

There are several overlapping but distinct traditions whose medium is the modern Greek language and which can lay claim to consideration as “oral.”<sup>1</sup> The most widely known and studied of these traditions is undoubtedly that of oral song, conventionally known in Greek as *dimotiká tragoúdia*, and variously rendered by outsiders literally as “demotic songs,” “folk poetry” or “folk song,” “*chansons populaires*,” “*Volkslieder*,” and so forth. This tradition of oral song, which I have elsewhere labeled “the demotic tradition” (Beaton 1980:2-3), comes closest to fulfilling the Parry/Lord criteria for oral poetry: it is composed of formulas and a finite range of themes in variable combination; until collected and published in the nineteenth century the “texts” of this tradition had no existence outside of performance; and composition and transmission have so far as one can tell never been the special prerogative of professional “minstrels.” Although signs of interaction with literary tradition exist (and are thought by some to go back to the literature of antiquity), there is no indication of *direct* literary interference at any earlier point in the tradition. That is to say, although the subject matter of books has often enough been assimilated into the corpus of orally composed material, there is no sign that writing as a technique or the concept of the fixed text played any part in the development of the tradition prior to the circulation of printed editions and the spread of education in the last one hundred and fifty years.

The modern Greek “demotic” tradition differs from the

Parry/Lord model in two important respects: songs rarely exceed a hundred lines in length and in consequence elude the definition of “epic narration,” and the same thematic and formulaic corpus is equally employed in lyrical and in narrative genres. Modern Greek oral song is in many respects comparable to the ballad and lyrical traditions of other cultures, but lacks an epic genre. Narrative songs of the ballad type evoke a heroic milieu, either specifically that of the social bandits (*klefts*) of the Ottoman centuries (*kléftika tragoúdia*) or more sporadically recalling memories of Byzantine-Arab conflict in the Middle East between the ninth and eleventh centuries (*akritiká tragoúdia*); alternatively they may move in a more domestic world, in which indications of time and place are absent altogether, to dramatize conflicts within the family group, often abnormally accentuated by the involvement of the supernatural (*paraloyés*). The demarcation between narrative and lyrical genres is frequently blurred: many songs of the *klefts* are in the form of laments, as are all of the small group of songs conventionally known as “historical” (*istoriká tragoúdia*) which take the form of laments for the loss of cities to the Ottomans—and chiefly of course the loss of Constantinople in 1453. In all of these, it has often been noticed, a dramatic structure takes the place of a narrative line, with frequent use of stylized dialogue in order to set a scene, and juxtaposition of highly-drawn tableaux or vividly depicted episodes taking the place of narrative transition.

Songs whose function is primarily lyrical are devoted to three central preoccupations—love/sexuality, exile, and death; and one reason for the surprising homogeneity of a tradition spanning different genres and subjects is a parallelism and a range of mutual allusion among these three themes which apparently goes very deep in Greek culture.

A second and generally separate tradition, which like the “demotic” tradition of oral song seems to have lived until recently exclusively in the realm of oral performance, is the folktale (*paramýthi*). Although verse fragments are frequently worked into these oral narratives, the world of the Greek folktale is far removed from that of the songs. The human setting is neither one of warfare nor one of domestic conflict, but belongs rather to the familiar fairytale world of handsome princes and beautiful princesses, of magical transformations and encounters with supernatural beings. Some of these, like the tale of the Cyclops, seem at first sight to emanate directly from the ancient world, but

closer inspection reveals an interaction with the world of the book (which, like that encountered in the demotic” tradition of song, does not necessarily interfere with the oral style or technique of narration).

Closely related to the folktale is the topical, superstitious, or historical legend (*parádosi*, pl. *paradóseis*). As regards the absence of fixed form or influence of a narrative technique based on writing, the Greek *paradóseis* do not differ from the folktales. But there is a clear distinction to be drawn both in function and in genre. The *paramýthi* begins with an invitation (often in verse) to relax and enjoy an amusing story, and ends with a delightful variant of the “happily ever after” formula: “So they lived happily and [may we] be even happier; I wasn’t there myself and you shouldn’t believe it either!” The *parádosi*, on the other hand, is always much more concise in form, being limited to a relatively straightforward statement of what is regarded as fact, stating or explaining a local custom or belief. The following “legend” explaining the activities of the French archaeological team at Delphi in the nineteenth century aptly illustrates both the inventive power of this tradition and its difference from the folktale:

The milords aren’t Christians, because no one’s seen them make the sign of the Cross [i.e., in the Orthodox manner]. They’re descended from the old pagan people of Delphi, who kept their treasures in a castle and called it Adelphi [brothers], after the two princes who built it. When the Holy Virgin and Christ came to these places, and everyone all around became Christian, the Adelphians reckoned they would do better to go away; so they went to the West [*Frankiá*] and took all their wealth with them. The *milords* are their descendants, and have come now to worship those lumps of stone.

(Politis 1904:no. 108)

We frequently find some overlap in content between the “demotic” tradition of oral poetry and these legends, but none with the folktales.

The Greek shadow-puppet theater, named after its hero Karagiozis, must also be mentioned as an oral tradition. This form of humor has probably not had a very long tradition in Greek—its

immediate origin is the Turkish puppet-theater of Karagöz, and it is probable that the Greek plays go back no further than the nineteenth century—but it has acquired a distinct character and style of its own and was for about a hundred years enormously popular with audiences. Texts attributed to famous players (in prose, with some incidental songs) began to be recorded and published in the early years of this century, but the art of the Karagiozis performer remains one of extempore oral performance, and written texts have never served as the basis for performing. In the Karagiozis tradition, the sly underdog of the Ottoman Empire has become the sly *Greek* underdog, who like his Turkish counterpart always manages to win through despite, or even because of, an outrageous disregard for authority. The Greek Karagiozis has also developed a large cast of character parts, based on the idiosyncrasies of regional dialects, styles of dress and even songs; and some of the plots, like that of “Alexander the Great and the Accursed Snake,” draw their inspiration from oral *paradóseis* and a centuries-old tradition of popular (written) literature.

Each of the traditions described so far can be regarded as “oral” in the sense that writing and (sub)literary techniques have played no part in its formation or transmission. That is to say, each tradition already existed fully formed when it was first committed to writing, and that committal to writing was entirely extrinsic (in the end even perhaps harmful) to the continued development of the tradition. With these traditions, however, there coexist others which possess oral features but do not seem to be wholly independent of writing or recording in their composition and transmission. These are: the folk songs of semi-professional itinerant minstrels who were once active in Crete (*rimadóri*) and still are in Cyprus (*piitárides*) which I have elsewhere described as comprising a “historical” tradition of folksong (Beaton 1980:151-78); the urban folk songs of the Ottoman and later Greek cities (*rebétika*); and some of the many partisan songs of the Second World War and Civil War in Greece (1940-49) which draw on the “demotic” tradition of oral poetry rather than on contemporary popular song (*andártika*).

The principal characteristics of the “historical” tradition which differentiate it from the “demotic” are the evidence for personal composition, linked to a semi-professional or entrepreneurial status of the composer-singer, and the use of rhyme, from which is

derived the name by which these songs have been known in Crete: *rímes*. We also find the practice, of which the first known instance is in Crete in 1786 and which is still common among the *piitárides* of Cyprus, whereby the non-literate poet *himself* commissions a written transcription of his work, which today he may sell printed in the form of a broadsheet (*fylládio*). These “historical” poems are lengthy narratives on subjects of topical or local importance, sometimes of important events (such as the Cretan “Daskaloyannis” which tells in over 1,000 lines the story of the abortive revolt of the Sfakiots of western Crete against their Ottoman rulers in 1770), but more often not (such as the lingering death of a young man called Christofoudis from the village of Lefkara in Cyprus from an accidental gunshot wound, recorded in 318 lines in a manuscript of 1803). Generally these texts aim at (or ape) historical precision in the frequently awkward attempt to versify the precise date of an occurrence, and their narrative style is quite different from that of the oral songs of the demotic tradition, in that, in place of dramatic juxtaposition, direct speech, and tersely presented scenes, it tells “one thing after another,” often interspersed with remarks by the narrator/singer himself.

The tradition of urban folk song (*rebétiko*) also places considerable importance on personal composition. It originates in the cities of the Ottoman Empire and the community in which it arose can better be defined as a social stratum than on the basis of race or creed. Doubly disreputable in Greek eyes for its low social origins and its easy assimilation of vocabulary, musical styles, and general attitudes assumed to be the distinct prerogative of Turks, the *rebétiko* escaped the attention of scholars until quite recently, and its history can only be retraced through commercial phonograph recording, which at the same time distorted whatever purely oral tradition had been in existence before. The themes of the *rebétiko* are the gangster-heroism of *mánges*, whose individualistic code of honor owed much to that extolled in “demotic” songs of the klefts and other heroes out of a remoter past like Diyenis and Mikrokostantinos; and the evocation of a variety of depressed states, their antidote in hashish, and the prison regimen which forms the final link in this vicious circle (and is presented in terms that little differentiate it from life in the outside world).

Partisan songs of the Second World War and Civil War (*andártika*) do not really represent a distinct category of oral

tradition. Those songs, among a substantial corpus, that reflect the themes and styles of older kleftic ballads effectively belong with them in the “demotic” tradition, while the bulk of partisan songs undoubtedly belongs with popular song, and many were composed on the initiative of political groups as propaganda, to be sung to well-known military and popular tunes.

Finally, mention must be made of attempts that have recently been made to identify the processes of oral tradition at work in late medieval Greek texts written in the vernacular. The actual oral component in the composition and/or transmission of these texts is still very uncertain, but it is highly probable that during the twelfth to sixteenth centuries, when the modern language was first tentatively being exploited for literary purposes, the oral traditions of that time exercised a formative influence on writers who had no other models of poetic composition in the vernacular on which to draw. Oral tradition may in this way have played a part in creating the epic/romance *Digenes Akrites* (twelfth century?), the comic begging poems attributed to the prolific Byzantine man of letters Theodore Prodromos (twelfth century), and the Greek version of the *Chronicle of the Morea*, the long verse narrative of the Frankish conquest of southern Greece, written by an ardent opponent of the Byzantines in a language and style relatively free from their learned influence. More directly linked to the oral tradition of its time is the heroic “Song of Armouris,” little more than a ballad in length and style, and recorded in two manuscripts of the fifteenth century, although the world it depicts had vanished some four centuries earlier.

### **Collections**

1. *Oral song*. The collecting of *Volkslieder* or *chansons populaires* in Greek goes back to the very beginning of the nineteenth century, with the abortive collection of Von Haxthausen abandoned in 1820 (=1935), and that of Claude Fauriel (1824, 1825). Neither of these collectors ever visited Greece and their informants were educated Greeks who had left the Ottoman Empire, often permanently, to live abroad. The same seems to be true of Niccolo Tommaseo’s collection (1842) and the floridly entitled contribution of a Greek expatriate living in St. Petersburg (Evlampios 1843). The first collector to engage in any kind of direct field work, and also the first to publish a collection within

the geographical area of Greece, was Andonios Manousos (1850), a friend and disciple of Greece's "national poet" Dionysios Solomos. Landmarks in the sizeable bibliography of folksong collections in the second half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth are Passow 1860, in which the findings of several predecessors are collated (and surreptitiously conflated), and several regional ones, notably by Sakellarios from Cyprus (1868, 1891), Ioannidis from Pontos (1870), Jeannarakis from Crete (1876), and Aravantinos from Epiros (1880). In 1883 the Historical and Ethnological Society was founded in Athens by, among others, the leading folklorist of his day, Nikolaos Politis, and folksongs as well as other ethnographical material were published from then onwards in its journal (*Deltion tis Istorikís kai Ethnologikís Etaireías*, 1883-), and later in the periodical *Laografía* (1909-), which was founded by Politis alone. The initial phase of collecting and publishing oral poetry comes to an end with the publication of Politis' *Selections from the Songs of the Greek People* (1914), a meticulous collation and misguided conflation of the entire recorded corpus up to that date. This edition is still regarded as authoritative in Greek schools, although its fundamental shortcomings were pointed out more than fifty years ago (Apostolakis 1929).

The founding of the journal *Laografía* a few years before, however, sets the stage for twentieth-century collecting of oral material. Its volumes from that time up until the present contain an enormous treasury of regional material, scrupulously recorded, and for the first time with the features of the regional dialect intact. Regional collections in this century have followed this lead, with variable but generally increasing fidelity to the oral "text" as performed (Kriaris 1920; Michailidis-Nouaros 1928; Baud-Bovy 1935, 1938). Little new material has been added since the Second World War to that already known, although substantial archives of unpublished material are housed by the Academy of Athens (*Laografikón Archeión*, *Leofóros Syngrouí*, Athens) and by departments of Folklore (*Laografía*) at Greek universities.

Several excellent editions have appeared in recent years, presenting a sampling either of the whole corpus or of a specific part of it, but without perpetuating the editorial shortcomings of Politis. The best in quality is Academy of Athens (1963), but unfortunately the promised second volume, which is to contain the lyrical songs, has still not appeared (although the third volume containing a rich body of musical texts, was published as long ago

as 1968). Other such “sampling” editions are D. Petropoulos (1958, 1959), Ioannou (1966), and Mastrodimitris (1984). Excellent editions of particular types of song are by Ioannou (1970) for the narrative ballads (*paraloyés*); by A. Politis (1973) for the songs of the klefts; and by Guy Saunier (1983) for the songs of exile. Of all these modern editions only those of the Academy of Athens (1963) and Saunier (1983) collate older published versions with unpublished archival material.

2. *Folktales*. Serious interest in folktales seems to have begun later than in folk poetry, and even today the bibliography of Greek oral prose is much less substantial. The German expatriate J. G. von Hahn, from Ermoupolis on the island of Syros, seems to have been the first to make a systematic collection, which, however, he published only in translation (1864), as did Schmidt after him (1877). Jean Pio, working from von Hahn’s posthumous papers, published the first Greek collection in Denmark in 1879, soon to be followed by Marianna Kambouroglou in the first volume of the journal of the Historical and Ethnological Society in 1883 (=1924), but the great majority of collected folktales were recorded in periodicals and regional publications around and after the turn of the century. In many respects the most remarkable is that of Dawkins (1916), in which Greek dialect texts from the interior of Asia Minor were recorded and discussed only a few years before the catastrophic Greek military defeat of 1922 that uprooted the entire Christian population permanently and effectively annihilated many of the smaller Greek dialect communities. Good modern collected editions are by Megas (1962) and Ioannou (1973). Folktales have fared better than their verse counterparts in English translation (Dawkins 1953). The standard collection of legends (*paradóseis*) remains that of Politis (1904).

3. *Karagiozis*. It would only be a slight exaggeration to say that the oral “texts” of the Karagiozis shadow-puppet theater have hardly been collected at all. No records survive of shadow-puppet plays before 1921. In that year the French scholar Louis Roussel published two volumes of texts that he had taken down from the then-veteran player Andonis Mollas, which he published in Athens with a French introduction and glossary. Three years later Mollas’ contemporary, the Cretan Karagiozis player Markos Xanthos, rushed into print with a “broadsheet” version of one of his plays, and in the next eight years, up to his death in 1932, Xanthos



seems to have published versions of no less than forty-six of his performances. In this practice he was followed by other players between the wars, so that a modest archive of these poorly produced texts, clearly conceived by illiterate or semi-literate players in the hope of selling them at performances, now exists. But there is no evidence that any of the Karagiozis players have been fully literate, and with the exception of the texts dictated by Mollas to Roussel, we have only the work of doubtfully qualified amanuenses, produced under the cheapest possible conditions. A modern edition of several of these has been compiled by Ioannou in three volumes (1971), and some of the same material had earlier been published in German translation by Jensen (1954). There is a sizeable bibliography on the Turkish Karagöz: a recent volume of texts (in Turkish) is edited by Kudret (1968-70); and two Turkish texts in Greek translation are published with a substantial introduction by Mystakidou (1982). An important archive of Karagiozis performances on tape is housed in the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature at Widener Library, Harvard University, and the first scholarly edition of Karagiozis material, from this collection, is currently being undertaken.

4. *The “historical” tradition.* In the collections this material is not strictly segregated from the oral poetry of the “demotic” tradition, and we find personal compositions on topical and historical themes co-existing with the shorter ballad and lyrical pieces from the second volume of Fauriel’s collection (1825) onwards. The oldest, and the longest, Cretan text has been published in a separate critical edition (Laourdas 1947). The Cretan material is principally to be found in Jeannaraki (1876) and Fafoutakis (1889), the Cypriot in Sakellarios (1891) and Farmakidis (1926). More recent developments of these local “historical” traditions are mainly to be found in Detorakis (1976) and Kapsomenos (1979), for Crete; and for Cyprus in Yangoullis (1976). Unpublished material, much of it belonging to this tradition, was collected on tape by James Notopoulos and D. Petropoulos in 1953, and is housed, along with the Karagiozis archive, in the Milman Parry Collection at Harvard.

5. *Urban folksong and partisan songs.* The principal source for the study of the *rebétiko* was until very recently 78 rpm gramophone records, and these have provided almost exclusively the

basis for the modern editions. In addition to these editions (I. Petropoulos 1968; Schorelis 1978-82; and Gauntlett 1983, Appendix), a further and often overlapping source of material has been the copious “autobiographies” of retired exponents of the tradition, which were in fact dictated, and contain the texts of many songs as recalled by their “authors” (for example, Vamvakaris 1973).

Several collections of partisan songs (*andártika*) have appeared since 1974, when the lifting of a thirty-year ban on Communist Party membership and activity in Greece for the first time made the publication of most of them a legal possibility. Adamou (1977) presents a substantial sampling, with introduction; and a scholarly thesis on the subject by Riki van Boeschoten (University of Amsterdam) is nearing completion.

6. *Medieval vernacular texts.* The medieval Greek texts in which the influence of oral tradition has been suspected scarcely belong in this section, as they are only known to us in literary form. Suffice it to say that extracts from all of them, with notes and further bibliography, may be found in L. Politis (1975), with the exception of the “Song of Armouris,” which is printed in Kalonaros (1941:vol. 2, pp. 213-17).

## **Discussions**

The history of scholarly interest in Greek oral traditions has been well covered, from widely differing standpoints, by three recent publications: Kyriakidou-Nestoros 1978; Herzfeld 1982; A. Politis 1984. Kyriakidou-Nestoros gives a straightforward and factually full account of the intellectual interests of the first collectors and students of Greek oral material in the nineteenth century, which she categorizes as “pre-scientific” and strongly colored by the then current equation of oral traditional lore with “popular antiquities”; this was followed by a “proto-scientific” period inaugurated by the meticulous, if sometimes misdirected, scholarship of Nikolaos Politis, whose career spans the period from 1870 to his death in 1921. It is to Politis that we owe the first really systematic collections of a wide range of ethnographic material, and the first attempt to apply the methods of comparative mythology to Greek material. He too, as was natural at this time, sought to define modern Greek culture in terms of continuity with its ancient past, but to this end he

was assiduous in comparing it with an impressively wide range of contemporary material from outside Greece. The second half of Kyriakidou-Nestoros' book is then devoted to the career of her father, Stilpon Kyriakidis, who succeeded Politis to the chair of Laografía in Athens. The cornerstone of Kyriakidis' achievement, she rightly argues, is to be found in the historical approach to ethnography. While still not seeking to detach modern Greek ethnography from its putative forebears in the ancient world, he set out systematically to discover the historical factors that had determined the course of such a long transmission. His conclusion was that the direct origin of modern oral material, particularly songs, was not to be sought in the classical or even pre-classical world (see, for example, Lawson 1910 as a classic of this approach), but in two well-defined historical epochs: the time of the late Roman Empire, and the highpoint of Byzantine-Arab confrontation in the Middle East, between the eighth and eleventh centuries. (The most important essays in which this position is developed have been republished as Kyriakidis 1979). Kyriakidou-Nestoros is broadly prepared to endorse these conclusions, although her own interest clearly lies more in the synchronic approach of structural anthropology. Kyriakidou-Nestoros perhaps wisely stops short of assessing the achievements and shortcomings of her immediate predecessors and contemporaries, but makes the point, which I believe to be justified, that her father's work between the wars represents the last time that Greek ethnologists have turned to the outside world and endeavored to relate their own findings to wider theoretical perspectives.

Alexis Politis (1984), dealing with the earliest interest in Greek folk song by Greeks and especially by foreigners in the period culminating with the appearance of Fauriel's Collection (1824, 1825), extends the perspective backwards in time and places the discovery of Greek folk song, at the turn of the nineteenth century, in the context of European ideological developments of the period.

The other work which provides a partial overview of scholarship on Greek oral material (Herzfeld 1982) has been widely reviewed (e.g., Mackridge 1983; Lambropoulos 1983; Beaton 1984; Sanders 1984) and need not be discussed in detail here. In dealing with the period from about 1800 to 1922, it covers only the ethnographical pursuits of Greeks (who do not represent a majority of those active in the field for all of the period). However, the book is a stunning exercise in the "anthropology of

anthropologists,” and seeks to demonstrate not just that Greek ethnography in the nineteenth century was crucially dominated by the necessity of the newly formed Greek state to acquire and buttress a national identity, but further how any culture in the attempt to define itself must simultaneously distort the very evidence on which that definition is based.

The academic study of oral traditions in Greece has changed relatively little since the retirement of Kyriakidis in the early 1960s. None of the oral traditions described here is the object of a special branch of study in Greek academic institutions, but all are subsumed together under the heading of *Laografia* (roughly “folklore” or “ethnology”). The scope of this study is well indicated by Loukatos (1978), and is traditionally divided into “monuments of the word” (a term that rather prejudges the nature of the oral traditions to which it refers), rituals, customs and beliefs, and what we would call physical ethnography. The curriculum is very large; but as outlined by Loukatos it leaves little room for anthropological method or, with limited exceptions, for comparative study of similar material from outside Greece. This situation is now rapidly changing in some (but not all) Greek universities.

Until relatively recently the different oral traditions described here were either not consistently distinguished or, in some cases, even ignored by the ethnographers. In the last few years this picture has changed considerably, so that a sizeable bibliography now exists devoted to each tradition. A brief guide to that bibliography follows.

1. *Oral song (the “demotic” tradition)*. This has always proved the most attractive field for scholars and amateurs alike, and most of what has already been said applies primarily to this tradition. In Greece Kostas Romaios has published a seminal study of a specific formal property of this tradition (1963) and has also written, less convincingly, on the historical and mythological roots of particular types of song (1968), while Georgios Megas, champion of the Finnish School in Greece, has subjected a single ballad, “The Bridge of Arta,” to exhaustive examination of more than three hundred recorded Greek variants, which he then compares with a wide range of Balkan counterparts (1976). Although this study stands out in its meticulous attention to detail, the conclusion offered—that the Balkan ballad originated among Greeks

of Asia Minor in the sixth century A.D.—seems scarcely worthy of the laborious effort involved.

Outside Greece Michael Herzfeld was the first to apply computer techniques to analysis of Greek oral songs, and the first to advocate a specifically structuralist methodology in the field (1972). Beaton (1980) looks at the whole field of “folk poetry” (including the “historical” tradition and modern offshoots) in terms of the Parry/Lord oral-formulaic theory and of the ideas on myth and symbolism of, respectively, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Dan Sperber; and M. Alexiou (1983) makes a major contribution to the study of “domestic” ballads (*paraloyés*) in terms of myth and synchronic function, to which the description of these songs above is indebted. A “contextual” approach has been proposed by Herzfeld (1981) and Caraveli (1982), the latter persuasively arguing that meaning in songs is derived from performative context, implicit allusions to received tradition, and social and local determinants, as well as from internal factors. Most recently post-structuralist perspectives on this tradition have been launched by Herzfeld and Alexiou (both forthcoming).

2. *Folktales*. The appropriateness of the Aarne-Thompson classification was quickly recognized, the more so since all the oral prose narratives which by their specifically local character are likely to fall outside of it have been classified, ever since Politis (1904), as *paradóseis* (legends). I know of no specific studies of the latter, although they continue to be used as evidence for many sorts of inquiry. However, the style, performance, and status of these “factual” statements deserve some consideration in their own right. On the folktales proper, Dawkins’ commentaries (1916) and introduction (1953) are of considerable interest, but relatively little of substance has been published more recently. The principal exception is Meraklis (1973), which provides a good general introduction to folktale studies and discusses the style, content, and origins of specific Greek folktales with scholarly sensitivity. Alexiadis (1982) is not unrepresentative of the present state of the art, in its scholarly but unimaginative application of historical-geographical methodology to the Greek versions of a single tale-type.

3. *Karagiozis*. Since Roussel’s pioneering publication and discussion of the Greek shadow-puppet theater (1921), quite a large

bibliography, mostly of journalistic articles and enthusiastic encomia, has built up, and the best guide, which links this bibliography to worldwide studies of shadow-theater, is to be found in Mystakidou (1982). The same volume offers the most restrained and informed account of the relation between the Greek Karagiozis and Turkish Karagöz. (In an expensively produced and enticingly illustrated publication, Fotiadis [1977] had attempted to claim that the true origin of the Greek shadow-theater lay in pre-Aristophanic performances in Greece, to which all its near and middle eastern manifestations are ultimately linked.) Much useful information is contained in the “Memoirs” of the consummate player Spatharis (1960), who died in 1974, and analytical accounts of the technique of the Karagiozis player and the content of the plays from an anthropological perspective are to be found in, respectively, Myrsiades (1976) and Danforth (1976). There is as yet no study devoted to the specifically oral techniques of composition and performance in the Greek shadow-theater (but see Kiourtsakis [1983], Sifakis [1984], and the exhaustive bibliographies of Puchner [1978, 1982] in which 435 items have so far been listed).

4. *The “historical” tradition.* This designation, like that of the “demotic” tradition, is proposed and explained in Beaton (1980). As such the term “historical tradition” can therefore only have provisional standing, but the recognition that the material described under that heading forms a distinct body is already present in folk terminology, which refers to *rímes* (rhymes/rhymed poems) in Crete and *piímata* (poems) in Cyprus, while the oral poems of the “demotic” tradition are always known simply as *tragoúdia* (songs). Nikolaos Politis devoted a lengthy article to this tradition (1915), in which he contrasted it with the anonymous products of what we should today call the oral tradition, and thereafter commentators are (not without justice) inclined to be scathing about the artistic merits of these poems. It was Farmakidis (1926) who first introduced the notion that these longer, semi-professional compositions constituted an *epic* tradition, and this possibility was embraced with enthusiasm by the American scholar and pupil of A. B. Lord, James Notopoulos. The Notopoulos archive at Harvard is said to contain about a thousand items collected on tape in the 1950s, and it was songs of this tradition that Notopoulos was particularly anxious to collect (1959).

Notopoulos' untimely death prevented his completing a book-length study of what he regarded as an oral epic tradition, on the lines of that studied by Parry and Lord in Yugoslavia, in modern Greek. Subsequent work has shown this position to be untenable, at least in the manner in which Notopoulos formulated it in his published articles (Yangoullis 1976, 1978; Beaton 1980; Papadopoullis 1976, 1977, 1980), but it remains true that Notopoulos's proposal first revived interest in an undervalued area of Greek oral tradition. And although it now seems impossible to see, in the Cretan and Cypriot itinerant minstrels, analogs of pre-Homeric epic versifiers, recent studies nonetheless suggest that they might have useful things to tell us about the vexed theoretical questions of the "transitional" text, in that oral and written features seem to coexist in this tradition (Eideneier 1984; Beaton forthcoming).

5. *Urban folksong (rebétiko)*. Until the end of the 1960s almost a taboo subject, on account of its association with anti-social behavior and its shared features with its counterpart in Turkish culture, the *rebétiko* became the object of a vigorous revival in the 1970s. At one level this may have been prompted by the initiative, and unparalleled success, a decade earlier of the popular composers Hadzidakis and Theodorakis, who transplanted something of its musical style into a distinctive form of popular art-music; but the serious craze for *rebétiko* really begins with Ilias Petropoulos (1968). Petropoulos seems to have conceived this publication as itself an anti-social act, in the spirit of many of the songs, and took care to include some obscenities in his introduction which the military censors of that time could not ignore. In this way the rebetic revival can be seen as a child of the Greek junta of 1967-74.

Petropoulos' book was followed, after 1974, by a spate of publications and gramophone records, and various claims were put forward about the nature and history of this tradition, with little scholarly basis. Against this background Damianakos (1976) stands out as a serious attempt to treat the song texts as sociological evidence, and Gauntlett (1983) provides the first exhaustive analysis of them, in relation to theories of oral tradition and in their historical development from the beginning of the twentieth century when they are first attested. Gauntlett (1982-83) makes a concise attempt to define *rebétiko* in terms of genre, and Conway Morris (1980) couples important historical background with a properly

compiled contribution to discography.

6. *Medieval vernacular texts*. It has generally been supposed since the late nineteenth century that the epic ballad, the “Song of Armouris,” which deals with conflict between Greeks and Saracens such as existed during the eighth to eleventh centuries, and which is preserved in two manuscripts of the fifteenth century, is a product of oral tradition. The same has often been claimed for the epic or romance *Digenes Akrites*, which undoubtedly draws on popular (and at this date one may assume therefore oral) tradition, although today it seems most probable that the texts we possess derive from a consciously literary type of composition, in the eleventh or twelfth century. The relation of both these texts to oral tradition is discussed in L. Politis (1970), Beck (1971), and Beaton (1980, 1981a, and 1981b), where relevant bibliography can also be found. A. B. Lord published some quantitative results of formula analysis of different versions of *Digenes* in the Appendix to *The Singer of Tales*, and has returned to the subject more recently (1977), but avoids the categorical conclusion that any of the versions represents a recording from oral tradition as he has defined it.

It was Constantine Trypanis, in a brief and rather sweeping article (1963), who first made the suggestion that the vernacular literature of the last centuries of Byzantium *as a whole* constituted the remnants of a once thriving oral tradition. Then Michael and Elizabeth Jeffreys (1971) proposed that the wide variations in the manuscript tradition of a vernacular romance text could be explained in terms of oral performance and the operation of memory. In a series of articles since then, they have elaborated a proposal, initiated by a quantitative formula analysis of a 12,000-line text using computer techniques, that the style of all this “popular” (or vernacular) literature derives from the conditions of oral composition and transmission, although they leave open the question of how the text as we possess it in each case came to be created, or re-created, in writing (M. Jeffreys 1973, E. Jeffreys 1979, E. and M. Jeffreys 1979).<sup>2</sup>

In a parallel endeavor, Hans Eideneier (1982, 1983, 1984) has proposed criteria for distinguishing between written and oral transmission in the manuscript tradition of these texts, and concludes that all of them circulated in a form of oral transmission much more restricted than the Parry/Lord model (followed by the



Jeffreys), and only came to be collected in written form when the oral tradition began to decline. He too leaves open the question of an “original” form behind these orally circulated poems, although he hints that they may have been popular paraphrases of texts conceived in the learned language.

### **Prospects**

It is not by any means assumed by all commentators that the emergence of Greece as a modern nation alongside its partners in the European Economic Community necessarily spells the end of its once thriving oral traditions. Profound changes have of course occurred. And it is probably a general truth, wherever oral traditions are recorded and studied and their productions published as texts, that the traditions themselves will be radically affected. In Greece the “demotic” tradition of oral poetry scarcely functions any longer as a process of re-composition in performance, and the length and coherence of recorded variants indicate a real deterioration. On the other hand, the function of preservation once performed by the techniques of formulaic composition and the acuter memory of the non-literate performer is now fulfilled by published anthologies, by tapes and records. The urge to sing the songs remains, although the special creative property of performance without reference to a fixed text has transferred itself to other media—to literature in one direction, and to the thriving art of extemporizing rhymed distichs in the other. The same can broadly be said of the other traditions mentioned; and one should not forget the continuing debt of modern Greek literature and music at all levels to these oral traditions.

The prospects for future scholarship are more open still. There is probably little “traditional” material that has not yet been transcribed in some form, but the probability of oral traditions developing their own futures implies a need for continued recording. Almost all the recorded material so far is deficient in indications of context and the non-verbal aspects of performance, and there is room for work in this direction. Judiciously selective use could undoubtedly also be made of the many texts in archives still unpublished, and a major contribution in the future should be the publication, in some form, of the sound archives of an earlier period, such as the Melpo Merlier Collection in the Centre for Asia Minor Studies in Athens (recorded in 1930) and the Notopoulos

Collection at Harvard (recorded in 1953), on which a start is only now being made.

Otherwise, it would be foolhardy to predict, and presumptuous to attempt to prescribe, the directions which future studies of Greek oral culture might take. Closer integration of ethnographic studies in Greece with the aims and methods of scholars in other countries is an obvious desideratum, and there are signs of increased momentum in this direction in Greece today. It is now perhaps for those of us whom Greek scholars have in the past mistrusted or found indifferent, to demonstrate how highly we value the oral material and the intellectual insights which they are in a position to contribute to the understanding of a phenomenon which is truly universal, namely oral tradition.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>“Modern Greek” is assumed to mean not just “belonging to the Greek state,” whose birth was heralded by the revolution against the Ottomans of 1821, but to include everything that pertains to speakers of the modern languages wherever they may live or have lived, and going back to the period from which that language is first continuously attested in written records, that is, to the twelfth century.

<sup>2</sup>For a thorough discussion of this work and its background, see the Jeffreys’ “The Oral Background of Byzantine Popular Poetry,” to appear in a future issue of *Oral Tradition*.

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