

# The Genesis of an Oral Heroic Poem

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**I**N THE *Odyssey* Telemachus reminds his mother, "Men praise that song most which comes newest to their ears,"<sup>1</sup> and Homer has the bard Demodocus, in the presence of a veteran of the Trojan war, sing the quarrel of Odysseus and Achilles and the Trojan horse. Thus the oral poet is as much concerned with the *klea andrōn* of contemporary heroes as with battles long ago. Some light can be thrown on such poetry by modern instances in which we can observe at first hand the birth of a heroic poem, such as I recorded in Crete in 1953. By good fortune I arrived there when there was a ferment of oral heroic poems on World War II.

Here in the mountain villages of Sfakia there was still surviving a heroic oral society Homeric in its code of honor. There was deeply ingrained in these old *Kapetanios* as a result of generations of struggle with the Turks the heroic attitude necessary for their survival and for the creation of heroic songs. In the coffee houses and tavernas of these villages there came to greet me men whose families first appear in the catalogue of warriors in that Cretan *Iliad*, the *Song of Daskaloyiannes*, a long narrative poem composed by an illiterate bard in 1786.<sup>2</sup> Many were surprisingly tall warriors, dressed in picturesque baggy trousers, wearing long boots reaching close to the knee, their white locks zoned by a variously worn black kerchief fringed with tassels. Many of them were in their nineties, still blessed with copious memories manifested in the steady flow of traditional songs that they sang around the *tavla* with the raucous verve of rugged individualists.

<sup>1</sup>*Od.* 1. 351.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. J. A. Notopoulos, "Homer and Cretan Heroic Poetry: A Study in Comparative Oral Poetry," *AJA* 73 (1952) 225-250; for a selection of Cretan heroic oral poems, with a historical introduction, text, translation, commentary and musical scoring see my album, *Modern Greek Heroic Oral Poetry* (Folkways Records F.E. 4468, New York 1959).

These heroic poems are part of a long tradition of oral poetry that goes back to the ninth-century Byzantine hero, Digenes Akritas, who remains their ideal.<sup>3</sup> Their favorite ballad is "Digenes is a-dying,"<sup>4</sup> in which the hero becomes a superhuman titan who strides from cliff to cliff and hurls huge boulders, still referred to in various parts of Crete as "Digenes' boulders;" he surpasses deer and mountain goats in speed. Even Charos, the Lord's picturesque knight of Death who wrestles with warriors for their souls, dares not wrestle with Digenes (so also in versions of the other Greek islands) but wounds him in a stealthy ambush. They also sang long narrative tales about the island's many revolts, one of which is memorably described in Niko Kazantzakis' novel, *Freedom or Death*. They are veterans of the last of these revolts, that of Therison led by Venizelos. They love arms, treasuring those sacred relics which they pass from father to son in Homeric fashion. Their sons had found in the German airborne invasion of Crete in 1941<sup>5</sup> an opportunity to be greater than their fathers, or at least their equal. They are by nature proud, individualistic egoists, embroiled often in Achillean quarrels perpetuating long family feuds or arising from sheep-stealing, which is a favorite pastime and keeps them in fighting trim. Many of them abducted their brides, who take special pride in this Sabine marriage. War and brave deeds are still a main topic of conversation. The desire for fame reached such proportions that one of my bards told of an occasion when a guerrilla offered him a wagon full of wine-barrels if he would compose a heroic poem on his deeds.

The bard, called *rimadoros*, occupies a position of honor. Such was old Polychronakis, 83 years of age, a Homeric bard who under a shady tree in his village narrated poems about old revolts and old heroes, about his old fellow-warrior Venizelos, who rose to be Greece's great prime minister, and a long poem on World War II. Other bards sang about the German airborne invasion, the burning of villages, the cruel reprisal execution of villagers who faced the

<sup>3</sup>N. G. Polites, "O Thanatos tou Digenē." *Laographia* I (1910) 169-275; S. P. Kyriakides, *O Digenēs Akritas* (Athens 1926); H. Grégoire, *O Digenēs Akritas* (New York (1942)); P. P. Kalonaros, *Basileios Digenēs Akritas*, 2 vols. (Athens 1941-42); D. A. Petropoulos, *Ellēnikā Dēmōtikā Tragoudia* (Athens 1958) 3-65.

<sup>4</sup>For text see N. G. Polites, *Eκlogai apo ta Tragoudia tou Ellēnikou Laou* (Athens 1932) 104-105.

<sup>5</sup>D. M. Gavin, *Crete: Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War* (London 1953).

firing squad with traditional Cretan gallantry. Then as a vengeful sequel there was the "Song of Hans, the Gestapo Man," whom the Cretan guerrillas (*andartes*), avenging friends or relatives, tracked to a ravine and sent to Hades with automatics blazing like the nimble Cretan pidikto dance.

I shall select one of these bards, Andreas Kafkalas, age 39, from Sfakia. Though not my best bard, he is noteworthy for his facility in spontaneous improvisation, a subject about which scholars need to know more. He sang, for recording, older tales of the island and a long poem on his war experiences, from which he emerged badly wounded. He sang his version in the morning; when he sang it again in the afternoon, as anticipated it was not identically the same — a phenomenon common in oral literature. When he had finished the second version I commented that in the part which dealt with the German invasion and occupation of Crete he had said nothing about General Kreipe. A moment's hesitation on his part revealed that this famous episode was not originally a part of his poem. Asked if he could improvise a poem on this episode, he replied that he could, and proceeded to "glue" to his previous poem an episode which he had not previously sung. He was not so sure of himself in this new song, as the faulty versification of some lines shows.

Before we proceed to analyze this freshly improvised heroic poem, let us turn to history and General Kreipe. The abduction on April 27, 1944, of General Karl Kreipe, commander of the German forces in the island, by Cretan guerrillas led by two British officers ranks as one of the prize stories of World War II. The plan was conceived by Major Leigh Fermor and Captain Stanley Moss, British officers from Cairo, dropped on Crete by parachute. The abduction was carried out mainly for its psychological effect on the enemy, to show the Germans that their most exalted commander could not rest secure even amid his own forces. The deed was done with the aid of Cretan guerrillas who were to the epic manner born. There were many such bands composed of Cretans, Britons, New Zealanders and Australians, some of whom had been left behind when the British forces withdrew from the beach of Sfakia in May, 1941. These bands lived in the caves of Psilorites (Mt. Ida) or the mountain villages of western Crete. Their life

was characterized by epic brotherhood; hit and run ambushes, relaying information to Cairo via wireless, keeping the Germans on edge were their normal assignments. They relaxed from their life of danger in the traditional Cretan pastimes — drinking the potent *tsikoudia*, singing *rizitika* ballads, and dancing to the Cretan *lyra*. Many of the heroic songs recorded deal with the adventures of these bands.

Immediately upon alighting the British officers began to organize the abduction. The story, as it unfolds in Captain Moss' account in *Ill-Met by Moonlight*,<sup>6</sup> begins with Capetan Bourdzalis, whom Moss dubbed "Wallace Beery," that unforgettable character of the films. A great patriot, he gave valuable assistance to British agents who were operating in the island. "He stands a good six feet high, has massive shoulders, a comfortable paunch, and walks with a fine piratical swagger," wrote Moss. "Since the German invasion he has taken to the mountains and set himself up as the leader of a band of guerrillas . . . There is something of Falstaff about Bourdzalis. Before embarking on his luncheon he crossed himself and gave an enormous belch at the same moment; and then, disdainful to use a fork he stuck his formidable dagger into a piece of meat and started to eat from it."<sup>7</sup> This picturesque character was to organize and lead a reserve force to deal with any emergency that might beset the smaller guerrilla band of ten led by Manoli Pateraki, a herdsman from Koustoyerako.

The success of the abduction depended upon a careful study of General Kreipe's schedule, which he carried out with Prussian precision. At 9:00 A.M. he left his house, Sir Arthur Evans' famed "Villa Ariadne" at Knossos, and went to his working headquarters in the nearby village of Ano Arkhanais. He returned to the villa at 1:00 P.M. for luncheon; at 4:00 P.M. he drove to his headquarters and returned for dinner at the villa at 8:00 or 8:30. These movements were carefully observed by a partisan who lived next door to Kreipe's villa. A Cretan high school youth concentrated on acquiring an intimate knowledge of the general's staff car so that he could recognize its shadow in the dark and the sound of its engine. The abduction was planned to take place at night at the crossroads where the sloping road from Ano Arkhanais meets the

<sup>6</sup>W. Stanley Moss, *Ill Met by Moonlight* (New York 1950).

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.* 42.

Houdetsi-Heraklion road, a junction which compels a car to slow down almost to a standstill. There is a ditch on either side of this road sufficiently deep to conceal the guerrilla band. The partisan and the high school youth strung a wire along the ditch leading to the crossroads. By means of this wire they were to buzz an electric bell and flicker a flashlight at the approach of the general's car. At the crossroads the two British officers, dressed as German traffic police, were ready to signal the general's car to stop. At the fateful moment the bell rang, the flashlight flicked, the guerrillas tensed for action. The general's chauffeur on approaching the intersection slowed down. Major Fermor shouted "Halt!" and approaching the side of the car asked, "Ist dies das Generals Wagen?" There came a muffled "Ja, ja," from inside. Then hell broke loose. There was a rush from all sides; the doors of the car were thrown open and the flashlight illuminated the bewildered face of the general, the terrified eyes of the chauffeur, who reached for his automatic but was rendered unconscious by the butt of a pistol. Moss jumped behind the steering wheel while Fermor and Manoli dragged the general out of the opposite door cursing at the top of his voice. The general was put in the back seat with three guerrillas, one of whom held his knife to the general's throat while the other two aimed their guns out of either window. Fermor took the general's cap and posed as the general in the front seat beside Moss. The rest of the guerrillas took the chauffeur on their long trek to the rendezvous on Psilorites. The car, a new Opel, its gasoline tank fortunately full, started for Heraklion. The general, assured that he would be treated as a prisoner of war, calmed down with a "Danke, danke."

Then began the spine-tingling business of passing through the many traffic control posts. Coolly Moss slowed down each time so as to give the sentry an opportunity to see the general's pennants on the fenders. Each time at the sight of the general's pennants the sentry would either give a smart salute or present arms as the crossbar was lifted and the car passed through. Thus they passed through a crowded Heraklion and the last of the control posts on the shore road leading to Rethymno. At a quarter past eleven they arrived at a post on the road where the car was abandoned along the beach with a note to the German authorities that the affair was carried out by the British, so that there would be no civilian reprisals. The

abduction party then headed on foot toward the high villages of Mt. Ida, sleeping in caves by day, travelling by night to elude the ever-present planes overhead. They eventually eluded all the cordons of the frantic Germans and made their way to Rodakino on the south coast of the island where a waiting British submarine carried the general to cordial captivity in Cairo. The event electrified the island; it made good war-copy; it appealed to the Cretan taste for humor and dash. Thereafter, until the war's end the Germans, after a reprisal of burning villages and executing civilians, behaved like a besieged army. Thus was accomplished the *Doloneia* of World War II.

The following is a summary of the version of this episode as it appears in the singer's recorded version. After a prologue in the traditional manner of Cretan epics, the bard launches into the tale. An order comes from British and American headquarters in Cairo to capture General Kreipe, dead or alive. The motive is revenge for his cruelty to the Cretans. A Cretan partisan, Lefteris Tambakis (not one of the actual guerrilla band) appears before the English general (Fermor and Moss are combined into one and elevated in rank) and volunteers for the dangerous mission. The general reads the order and the hero accepts the mission for the honor of Cretan arms. The hero goes to Heraklion, where he hears that a beautiful Cretan girl is the secretary of General Kreipe. In disguise the partisan proceeds to her house and in her absence reads the general's order to her mother. When the girl returns he again reads the general's order. Telling her the honor of Crete depends on her, he catalogues the German cruelties. If she would help in the mission, her name would become immortal in Cretan history. The girl consents and asks for three days time in which to perform her role. To achieve Cretan honor she sacrifices her woman's honor with General Kreipe in the role of a spy. She gives to the hero General Kreipe's plans for the next day. Our hero then goes to Knossos to meet the guerrillas and the English general. "*Yiassou*, General," he says. "I will perform the mission." The guerrillas go to Arkhanais to get a long car with which to blockade the road. Our hero, mounted on a horse by the side of the blockading car awaits the car of Kaiserli (that is what he calls Kreipe). The English general orders the pistols to be ready. When Kreipe's car slows

down at the turn, he is at once attacked by the guerrillas. Kreipe is stripped of his uniform (only his cap in the actual event) and begs mercy for the sake of his children (a stock motif in Cretan poetry). After the capture the frantic Germans begin the hunt with dogs (airplanes in the actual event). The guerrillas start on the trek to Mt. Ida and by stages the party reaches the district of Sfakia (the home of the singer and his audience; actually the general left the island southwest of Mt. Ida). The guards have to protect the general from the mob of enraged Sfakians. Soon the British submarine arrives and takes the general to Egypt. Cretan *lyras* ring out with joy while people dance; Hitler is now sure to lose the war, for his favorite general is ignominiously captured — pride goes before a fall. Our bard concludes the poem with a traditional epilogue — that never before in the history of the world has such a deed been done. He then gives his name, his village, his service to his country.

At the conclusion of the recording I took off my ear-phones, congratulated him on his good story, the irony of which escaped him, and asked him about his sources for the story. He had told me, in an earlier account of his life for my notebook, that he had been in a wounded veterans' hospital in Athens during the occupation of Crete. He replied that a fellow-Cretan had told him the plot of the story while he was in the hospital and that he improvised the tale for me to fulfill his obligation of Cretan hospitality.

There is no oral heroic poem collected by folklorists which approximates the quality of the Homeric epics. This tale, like many others in the heroic traditions of modern nations, is a far cry from the genius of Homer. Yet it offers us what protozoa offer the biologist, valuable insights with which to face the more complex problems of Homer. We see in it, for example, the metamorphosis of the facts of history into myth only nine years after the event. Nor is my bard alone responsible for myth-making. My Cretan guide in the villages of Mt. Ida, who played a significant role in the resistance movement, in telling me the tale of the capture of General Kreipe added dramatic details from other hearsay accounts which render the story folklore. When this instance of myth is added to the many others studied by Lord Raglan in *The Hero*,<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Lord Raglan, *The Hero; a Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama* (New York 1937).

we can readily imagine the transformations in the Achaean heroes by the time they reached Homer in the eighth century.

Our bard illustrates the basic fact of folklore: the tale is adjusted to the audience and not to history. History as transmuted to epic and folklore is like the wine drunk by those who consulted the Oracle of Bac-buq in Rabelais — it tasted different in accordance with the imagination of those who drank it. Our tale makes a hodge-podge of history, even as Homer does in conflating Mycenaean and Geometric periods of culture. As bronze and iron weapons exist side by side in Homer, so do the blockading car and the mounted horse at the crossroads. Helen of Troy has long been suspected by historians as an example of the poet's prerogative of interpolating in terms of human interest the *how* to the *what* of history. Our Cretan heroine is obviously the creation of a male mentality in storytelling which, ever since Homer and Hesiod, interprets history in terms of *cherchez la femme*. Helen emerges as a spy adjusted to the needs of the tale. Furthermore, our singer ever adjusts the facts to the requirements of local Sfakian pride. The hero is a Sfakian, though not one of the members of the actual abduction party. Sfakians play no second fiddle to any Cretan, much less to the British, whose role is played down in the poem. General Kreipe is led to Sfakia in order that the singer's fellow villagers may be afforded a chance to leap at the tyrant. The episode is motivated by the basic Cretan code of revenge, which is momentarily frustrated by the arrival of the submarine. The only nucleus of history remaining in the poem are the facts that the general was abducted and taken away in a submarine; the rest is fiction.

When the poem of our bard is set against the many other tales recorded in Crete, we note a change and a difference. It differed from the other traditional heroic tales which were recorded even by the same singer. Here the singer was breaking away from his tradition and adjusting his tale to a newer world. His originality is seen primarily in the introduction of the Cretan heroine and the role she plays. In none of the many heroic tales from Cretan oral epics is there any room for women except to lament the hero's death. We see Helen and Briseis in such a role, weeping over the bodies of Hector and Patroclus respectively. The presence of the



Cretan heroine in our tale might be explained simply: that is how our singer heard the story of Kreipe from his informant in the hospital at Athens and that is how he sings it. This is the way singers of heroic tales work; our singer is no exception.

But an analysis of the spy role in the poem leads us to an interesting trail. The fame of Mata Hari (Gertrude Margarete Zelle), the dancer of the French stage who was executed as a spy by the French in 1917, spread widely after World War I and acquired romantic interest as the result of newspaper and magazine accounts and a popular American film on the subject. It reached even Greece and Crete and now enters as a new motif in Cretan poetry. Our Cretan heroine's spy role is modelled after Mata Hari. We see emerging the influence and contribution of the contemporary world to the oral tradition. Our oral bard is adjusting to a newer world, one in which woman outgrows her traditional role of merely lamenting the dead.

In dealing with his contemporary world our bard adheres in the main to the basic tradition of the Cretan hero in poetry — the traditional prologue and epilogue, the use of traditional formulae, type-scenes like the hero on a horse, a letter read over and over again like speeches reported in Homer. Yet he also modifies the tradition by introducing new formulae, arising from changes in warfare; airplanes become "birds of war," old formulae yield to automatic weapons, telephones and wireless. Thus the oral tradition adjusts itself to deal with the contemporary. Scholars have long suspected from an analysis of his poems that such was the case with Homer, too.

Our singer, finally, has one more contribution to make to our understanding of the epic. Poor as his poem may seem to us, he has much to tell about the technique of oral poetry. How was he able to improvise a tale almost the length of one of the shorter books of the *Odyssey*? Parry has given a full account of this method in the case of Homer.<sup>9</sup> Our bard corroborates his explanation. He stands at the tail-end of a long tradition of heroic poetry in Sfakia which goes back at least as far as *The Song of Daskaloyiannes*, the epic on the destruction of Sfakia in the revolt of 1770. He is

<sup>9</sup>For bibliography see *AJA* 52 (1948) 43-44.

not a professional bard, an oral virtuoso, as was Homer. Our bard as a worker of the fields indulging in heroic song from sheer love of the tradition. His remarkable facility in improvisation was cultivated from learning the songs of older men. My notebooks reveal that he heard many from a blind singer in Askephou. From these and others he acquired a vocabulary of oral formulae, phrases extending from part of a line to a line to an entire group of lines. Some of these formulae go back to the Byzantine oral ballads on Digenes Akritas, others to folksongs, to *rizitika* ballads which are sung at every social occasion in these villages. Furthermore, our singer was able to improvise facily by reason of a long ingrained practice of improvising on social occasions fresh distichs called *mantinades*.<sup>10</sup> One hears these distichs everywhere in Crete and in the other Greek islands. Children learn to improvise them and continue in this practice the rest of their lives. Such is the range of the oral tradition that made possible his song. He does not memorize; he can when need arises create new formulae by analogy with older formulae. Such is the practice of the oral technique met in the study of all surviving traditions of heroic poetry.

My notebooks reveal also some precious facts which never emerge from arm-chair scholarship. His answer to a question about the relation of the music of the verse to the formulae revealed that our singer, like others, was unaware of what we call metres. When asked how he knew that he had come to the end of the fifteen syllable line (the basic measure of his verse), he replied naively, "I didn't know the line has fifteen syllables. I don't count syllables, I feel them — it's the melody that shapes the lines." He relied on the basic melody of the line to aid him in organizing his phrases and formulae into verse. Such too may have been the role of Homer's "bloomin' lyre."

It is in ways like these that recent scholarship in Homer is seeking answers to questions often insoluble by traditional techniques of literary scholarship.

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<sup>10</sup>Cf. S. Baud-Bovy, *La Chanson populaire grecque du Dodécanèse* (Paris 1936) 313-394.