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Georgios A. Megas (1893–1976) and His Contribution to the Academic Organization and Development of Greek Folklore: a Review of Evaluations of His Work

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Abstract

This paper presents the contribution of George A. Megas (1893–1976), an academician and professor at the University of Athens, to the academic organization and development of Greek Folklore, through a review of evaluations of his work. It focuses on the ideological and methodological components of his work and the position it could hold in the academic study of Greek folk culture, and reveals that it established the guidelines adopted by folklore studies in Greece today. This paper also critically examines relevant aspects of the existing literature and perspectives on the academic character of Megas's work and his contribution to the study of historical folklore, folk literature, and traditional architecture in Greece.

Keywords

Modern Greek Folklore, folklore studies, Greek folk culture, folklore methodology

In this paper, the conclusions of my book titled *Georgios A. Megas (1893–1976) and the Scientific Organization of Modern Greek Folklore* (Thessaloniki 2016, in press) are presented. For detailed evaluation of Megas' publications see the forthcoming work.

As generally acknowledged, the effective founder of Greek folklore studies is N. G. Politis, the first scholar to bring scientific folklore to Greece and the founder of the *Hellenic Folklore Society* and the *Folkloric Archives*, as well as the periodical *Laografia (Folklore)*, whose scientific director he remained until his death. Also, without ever being named “professor of folklore”, Politis taught classes on folklore at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Athens and introduced many young academics of the time to scientific folklore, some of which continued his work.

After Politis’ death, the young but dynamic discipline was confronted by a void that was truly difficult to fill. On the one hand, the *Society* and the *Archives*, the two scientific bodies he had founded, needed to be continued and organized in a contemporary manner in order to meet the scientific requirements of the period, and, on the other, it was necessary to ensure the presence of folklore in the curriculum of the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Athens, where Politis had taught it, even if in the form of tutorials or outside the narrow content of the faculty chair.¹

Many and good friends of folklore, such as professors Phaedon Koukoules, Antonios Keramopoulos, and Philippos Dragoumis, despite the prestige they enjoyed not only in the academic world, but also in Greek society in general, filled the void only occasionally, as they had other principal fields of academic specialization and different academic identities. For his part, the renowned disciple of N. G. Politis, Stilpon Kyriakidis left Athens, the effective centre of intellectual and scientific developments of the period,² and moved to the then newly-founded Faculty of Philosophy at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Indeed, for a time, he transferred the essential activities of the *Hellenic Folklore Society* and the editorship of *Laografia* to Thessaloniki, resulting, however, in the weakening of the *Society*, so that, in the end, these activities returned once again to the capital of the Hellenic State and were placed under the direction of good friends of folklore, but not of specialized folklorists.³

Additionally, the continued prestige of Greek folklore and its intervention in the Greek intellectual and academic world meant that the new discipline had to pursue its contacts (both on the level of keeping abreast of events, and in the field of personal relationships and the associated updating of information) with the European and international folkloric community. This was not only difficult to accomplish from the Greek provinces, but also practically impossible

1 Avdikos (2009: 160-162).

2 Spyridakis (1967: 277). Varvunis (2012: 48).

3 Petropoulos (1952: 18-19).

to achieve by people who, despite their love for folklore, could not assimilate it entirely and incorporate it into the European and international academic framework.⁴

This void would be filled methodically and patiently by G. A. Megas,⁵ small in stature but a giant in terms of spirit and will, a young Macedonian academic whom Politis himself had picked out and employed as his assistant, indeed entrusting him with the compilation of the catalogue of Greek folktales in accordance with the international classification systems that had appeared at the time in the international scientific network.⁶ As will become obvious below, Megas patiently and methodically built up his academic profile and set upon a truly brilliant course, culminating in a university chair and the position of academician. With his solid philological knowledge, a deeply and genuine religious sentiment, and a traditional mentality, Megas, the scion of a teacher and child of a family from the so-called Eastern Rumelia (now southern Bulgaria), took upon himself the task of promoting folklore in Greece's intellectual milieu, not letting it slide towards the nationalist tendencies or oversimplifying interpretations that marked the pre-scientific phase of its existence, before Politis' determining appearance.⁷

In order to achieve this complex goal, Megas, as already mentioned, worked methodically and patiently, with continuity and consistency, given that he himself was an indefatigable person, so that he was called *chalkenteros* (χαλκέντερος, i.e. 'with innards made of bronze', which means 'working continually') by those who had the opportunity to meet him. On the one hand, he wanted to sustain the discipline's research foundation as defined by Politis, by gathering and classifying folklore material, and, on the other hand, through a series of actions, he attempted – and finally managed – to reinstate the academic status of folklore, incorporating its teaching into the curriculum of the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Athens, although he was not from the beginning full professor.⁸

Thenceforth, he gave a European and international status to Greek folklore, setting up a network of personal relationships and contacts with eminent foreign peers, which he put at the service of his discipline. The organization of the 4th *International Congress for Folk-Narrative Research* in Athens, and all that followed

4 Petropoulos (1952: 16–17). Varvounis (2012: 52).

5 Kuzas (2009: 162–163).

6 Meraklis (1992: 223–225). Puchner (2009: 603–620).

7 Alexakis (2001: 5–6). Lukatos (1976: 440–441).

8 Toundassaki (2005: 163–200).

both during and after the proceedings, revealed the prestige that Megas enjoyed on an international level, a prestige he used in order to promote his discipline.⁹

His personal archives, in the keeping of his descendants, contain a voluminous correspondence that proves this point. He made use of some of these letters himself, at least in the form of quoted excerpts, in the analytical memorandum he drew up in 1966, on the occasion of his candidacy to the newly established chair of Folklore at the Academy of Athens. Similarly, the reviews of his most important books in foreign academic journals show that his authority in the international folkloric community was not only incontestable, but also grew steadily.¹⁰

Furthermore, as early as 1930, Megas had begun to be regarded favourably in Greek intellectual life, in which he subsequently gained a dominant position. Indeed, as he too oversaw the popularization of his discipline (his famous collection of folktales with its consecutive editions constitutes the best example), he gradually became a recognizable and recognized scholar, whose name eventually became synonymous with the discipline of folklore. He thus constituted the undisputed dean of folklore studies immediately after what was for Greece the watershed, the crucial and transitional warring decade from 1940–1950 – a title he held until his sudden and unexpected death in a traffic accident in the mid-1970s, at a time when, despite his advanced age, he was at his prime intellectually and in full productive swing.¹¹

In this trajectory, the undisputed milestones of his career were those of becoming director of the *Folkloric Archives* of the Academy of Athens in 1936, his election as professor of the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Athens in 1947, his becoming the chair of the *Hellenic Folklore Society* in 1960,¹² and his election as an ordinary member of the Academy of Athens in 1970.¹³ In approximately every decade he marked yet another success in his ever ascending career, whose steps were carefully considered and planned. It is a trajectory which may have acquired him the personal – and certainly human – satisfaction of success, but which was in essence to him the means to promote his discipline, which he considered of crucial importance for the study of Greek folk culture.

In the aftermath of the Second World War and Greece's occupation by foreign forces, the main development of his work was directly linked to the global intellectual climate that these momentous historical events shaped. During this

9 Meraklis (1976–1978: 10–11).

10 Papataxiarchis (2013: 54–60).

11 Nitsiakos (2013: 89–92).

12 Kuzas (2009: 98–117).

13 Lukatos (1985: 39–40).

period many writers and intellectual creators turned to the source of Greek folk tradition in an attempt to find support as well as redefine themselves in the context of the constantly changing and extremely dynamic postwar world. Immediately after the Second World War, folklore evolved into a clearly historical discipline, with many of the elderly people customs being transformed and renewed, and a number of imported alien elements gradually adopted into Greek traditional everyday life.¹⁴

All this made the importance of folklore immediately prominent, and G. Megas seized the opportunity in the best possible way so as to promote his discipline as a means of understanding Greece's complex cultural composition. It is absolutely typical that Megas did not content himself with the study of the older forms of Greek customary life,¹⁵ but instead discussed the "Vlach wedding" (*Βλάχικος γάμος*) of Thebes, which he had recorded through fieldwork, and talked essentially about folklorism, before Greek folklorists approached the phenomenon theoretically and described it. And this certainly reflects the broad scope of his thought and his direct contact with the habitual daily life of the Greek people.

As a faithful disciple of N. G. Politis, Megas always focused on national traditions, with a particular interest in the contribution and survival of the Ancient tradition in Greek folk culture.¹⁶ However, he did not perceive folklore from an archaeological perspective but, rather, focused on the people of his time, an approach proposed as early as 1858 by Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl. Thus, he concerned himself with systematically founding a *Folklore Museum*, going as far as to propose an open-air museum, a then ground-breaking idea, echoing the developments and opinions of his time about the issue at an international level.¹⁷

Through his participation in a series of European and international conferences, Megas managed to broadcast the contemporary situation and progress of Greek folklore studies to a global audience. At the same time, he supported the European perspective on Greek folklore by embracing and applying the psychological method, according to which the objective of folklore studies was a knowledge of people's mental idiosyncrasies. In addition, he linked it to the intellectual and scientific demands of the Greek nation to reply to the well-known theory of Jakob Philipp Fallmerayer¹⁸ regarding the origin of Greeks in the 1830s.¹⁹ And this is because, when Megas made comparisons between

14 Meraklis (1976–1978: 4–6).

15 Lukatos (1976: 441).

16 Lukatos (1978: 174–175).

17 Lukatos (1957: 59–62).

18 For the Fallmerayer's theory in Greek Folklore see Alexiadis (2010–2012: 84).

19 Lukatos (1972: 551–552). Meraklis (1976–1978: 5–6).

Ancient and Modern Greek folk life, in the fields of both myth and folktale motifs and of popular worship and vernacular architecture, he did so following an international, well-trodden scientific path – yet only when this was certain and verified through the relevant testimonies of the available sources, not arbitrarily, nor in an unsubstantiated and obsessional manner.²⁰

Furthermore, his studies' pronounced "sociological perspective",²¹ in the terms of M. G. Meraklis,²² shows that Megas detached himself from the ahistorical overview and lemma-based approach to his subjects,²³ which our earlier folklore studies have often – and not always without cause – been accused of, and, as Evangelos Avdikos observes,²⁴ introduced synchrony to the study of folkloric phenomena, a fact of particular importance for the academic folkloric tradition of his times.

Both in the study of vernacular architecture, and issues relating to folktales and popular worship, i.e. in the main fields of his scientific activity, Megas delved into a comparative study of both corresponding Balkan and European material. He was the founder of organized folktale studies in Greece, but also the person who, together with D. V. Economides, introduced comparative Helleno-Balkan folkloric studies.²⁵

It is absolutely typical in terms of interpretation, that Megas treated many questions of folk culture through an examination of their affinity to existing environmental conditions. In this manner, he was led to synchronic and sociological interpretative proposals, which he attempted to combine with the psychological dimension of the interpretation of folkloric phenomena.²⁶ Although he did not organize his views into a specific theoretical or methodological model, he did nonetheless offer a new perspective on the folkloric interpretation of folk culture, which inspired many of his students, and most markedly M. G. Meraklis, in establishing the new Greek discipline of folklore, which took shape through the so-called "School of Ioannina" (*Σχολή των Ιωαννίνων*) in Greek Folklore, a few years after Megas' death.

Consequently, together with his dedication to the tradition of folklore studies, his work also contains the seeds of our discipline's evolution and the transformation of its terms and facts. Meraklis vividly describes its progressive evolution

20 Lukatos (1957: 60–62).

21 See Alexiadis (2003: 37–38).

22 Meraklis (1977: 134). Meraklis (1976–1978: 8).

23 For this see Kyriakidu-Nestoros (1978: 44, 153).

24 Avdikos (2009: 162–169).

25 Varvunis (2012: 50–51).

26 Dundes (1998–2003: 58–65).

from ascertaining continuities in the study of contemporary Man to the attempt to ascertain Greek continuity in the rural habitations through the needs and the self-powered cultural life and the creation of his contemporary villager, that of the interwar period, when he carried out his primary research in the villages of the Evros valley.²⁷ And he discovered the basic principle of folk art and life: the subordination of aesthetic pleasure to the expediency of practical functioning.

As M. G. Meraklis observes, Megas himself probably did not prioritize this type of interpretative investigation, which things themselves had led him to, as he seemed rather ill at ease when hearing the term used, yet even he managed to function as the connective link between the older tradition and the more recent development and form of Greek folklore studies.²⁸ These observations, coming as they do from his disciple par excellence, are of particular importance, given that they show the magnitude of his contribution not only to Greek folklore, but also to Greek Academia in general.

All that precedes shows, we believe, the reasons behind the detailed appraisal of the folkloric work of the professor and academician Georgios Megas, as attempted in the paragraphs that follow. He is the man who continued and consolidated through research the work of his teacher, N. G. Politis. He is the academic who organised Greek folklore studies on the research level and gave them a comparative, Balkan and European – if not also international – dimension. He was the effective organizer of Greek research associations and institutions regarding folklore, and for decades the director of Greek academic folklore journals.²⁹ He is the professor and academician who, through his efforts, opened the way for folklore's entrenchment on the university and academy level in the Greek reality.

He is also the researcher who, without disavowing continuity, concretely avoided nationalistic Helleno-centrism, and introduced elements of a historical, sociological, environmental, and comparative investigation to Greek folklore studies, following – but simultaneously modifying and completing – the historic-comparative method³⁰ of his teacher. Hence, he is the person who effectively opened up the way for the Modern Greek folklore discipline, which, on the one hand, was inspired by his openings and, on the other, was based on his robust and internationally recognized work.

Despite his great work and significant role, presented above epigrammatically, no systematic monograph on G. A. Megas has been written to date, except for

27 Meraklis (1977: 133–134).

28 Meraklis (1977: 133). Meraklis (1976–1978: 12–14).

29 These are *Επετηρίς Λαογραφικού Αρχείου* (*Επετηρίς Λαογραφικού Αρχείου*) and *Λαογραφία* (*Λαογραφία*). Cf. Lukatos (1972: 570–582). Meraklis (1976–1978: 10).

30 This is a method proposed by professor M. G. Meraklis, see Alexiadis (2003: 37).

obituaries, short essays, such as those by G. Thanopoulos³¹ and N. Karpouzis,³² or isolated reviews and viewpoints. Because the breadth and significance of his research, organizational, and authorial work justify such a monographic survey, our forthcoming monograph (Thessaloniki 2016) will attempt to fill this gap in the existing bibliography as completely as possible, in full consciousness that the work and personality of G. Megas are such as to initiate publication of other similar studies in the future.³³

In the wake of G. A. Megas' unexpected death in a traffic accident, his disciple and professor of Folklore at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Ioannina, M. G. Meraklis, sent an article about him to the newspaper *I Kathimerini* (*Η Καθημερινή*), to which the two men were contributors and, what is more, gratis. The newspaper's editorship at the time not only ignored the submission, but also did not even deign to return the manuscript to its author, despite the fact that he asked for it insistently and in writing.

Everything that Meraklis wrote on this issue not only constitutes the just grievance of an intellectual, but is also absolutely indicative of the social trends and corresponding behaviour of the time.³⁴ It should be noted that, in the same period, when professor D. S. Loukatos was writing his own obituary about G. A. Megas, he reached similar conclusions. If the life of G. A. Megas coincided with a period of interest among Greeks in their traditions and historical past, his death marked the beginning of a deconstructive process, which managed to change Greek social values, at first in an underhand manner and then overwhelmingly, especially from the mid-1980s onwards.

Throughout his life and career, Megas insisted on promoting the discipline of folklore not in order to serve his own personal interests, but because it was his firm conviction that this discipline constitutes an intellectual vehicle towards achieving the correct study and assessment of Greece's contribution to the world. His work proves that he was not a nationalist,³⁵ especially because he engaged in the study of subjects that do not offer themselves to the development of such views, such as vernacular architecture and folktales.

He did not attempt to demonstrate an irrational, historical or unstable degree of "cultural continuity" from Antiquity to his times, in the manner of amateur folklore writers prior to Politis. On the contrary, he asserted the existence

31 Thanopoulos (2011-2012: 210-217).

32 Karpuzis (2012: 205-217).

33 Lukatos (1985: 39-46).

34 Meraklis (1977: 134). Meraklis (1976-1978: 5-6).

35 For more details see Meraklis (1976-1978: 12-13).

of the famous cultural *epiviomata* (i.e. ‘surviving elements’) in folk culture only where this could be adequately established in the sources and existing data – and avoided doing so when it could not be upheld indisputably.³⁶ Indeed, the manner in which he deals with the customs of Greek popular worship and their possible continuities from Greek or Roman Antiquity in his now classic book on Greek celebrations and the customs of popular worship³⁷ is absolutely indicative of this point.

On the other hand, an attentive study of G. Megas’ work shows that there was a definite evolution in his positions and opinions over the course of the decades throughout which his research and writing activity unfolded. For that matter, the movement not only to the past that ensured the documentation of cultural continuity, but also to the present of the man of the people, appears in his studies as early on as the late 1930s, especially those concerning vernacular architecture. At the time, as M. G. Meraklis characteristically notes, the concept of continuity is absent in his studies, but these feature “the continuity of a hard life in rural areas, the struggle and daily toil of the village for the most elemental existence”.³⁸

Megas appears to have been led to this sociological perspective, but also to the historical view of folklore phenomena (which made him affirm it also in the study of contemporary folklore phenomena), by a kind of powerful “folkloric instinct”, related to his work and the knowledge taken from his fieldwork. Given that he had ventured into his folklore-related trajectory from different starting points, what he encountered led him there, combined with a consideration of the theoretical trends and methodologies of international folklore. Therefore, he did not turn completely to the perspective opened up by these considerations, but dedicated the main body of his studies to questions of national unity and cultural continuity under the previously mentioned conditions.

Megas engaged in typology and the creation of taxonomic schemes, because he knew that in the absence of a corresponding scientific foundation, the development of folklore as an autonomous and distinct discipline was not possible. This was his main objective, and this is what he attempted to achieve through his work at the *Folkloric Archives*, the University of Athens, the *Hellenic Folklore Society*, the *Lyceum Club of Greek Women*, and the Academy of Athens, that is to say through the entirety of his research, writing and teaching contribution.³⁹

36 Abrahams (1993: 20–24). Danforth (1984: 53–85). Herzfeld (2003: 290–295).

37 Megas (1956). For English translation, see Megas (1958).

38 Meraklis (1976–1978: 13). Cf. Meraklis (1977: 133–134).

39 Chryssanthopoulou (2013: 97–99).

With a programme and a plan, and with – as fields of application – vernacular architecture, folk literature (in particular folktales⁴⁰ and folk songs) and popular worship, Megas tried to promote folklore studies not as a quaint and nationalistic object, but as a scientific branch with international affinities and contacts, with a national starting point and basis (as is always the case in all “folklores”), but also with European and international horizons. And naturally, within this framework, typology, classification, and the assembly of bibliography were an integral part of the effort to develop scientific tools for promoting scientific knowledge.⁴¹

Megas himself does not seem to have consciously placed his work among the discipline’s innovative areas, albeit without excluding these prolongations. We might add at this point that further proof of this is the fact that it is from his disciple, who wrote the above, that the renewal of folklore began, certainly under the influence – consciously or unconsciously – of his teacher, N. G. Politis, with the introduction of the socio-historical overview of its object. Megas obviously was the germ of this renewal, and this was beyond the grasp of those who criticized him, precisely because they approached his work through their predetermined ideological and theoretical models, without the inclination or capacity to understand him.

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40 Meraklis (1992: 223-235). Puchner (1998: 87-105). Puchner (2009: 603-620).

41 Puchner (1977: 155-163).

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