

The Museum “The Acritans of Europe”

The exhibition “The Acritans of Europe” is the final product of a series of conferences and scientific consortia realized as part of the European program “European Acritic Heritage” and is intended to demonstrate that the acritic tradition is a pan-European, maybe even a universal, cultural and historic phenomenon, while at the same time focusing on the dual symbolic character of the acritans. Defenders of the borders, ‘akra’, the legendary guards – heroes of Europe share many common characteristics. With a rather strong presence in the fiction of the European peoples, they appear tough and self-assured; formidable yet down-to-earth, fantastic yet real, gifted with super-human abilities but also burdened by human weaknesses. They never bulge, nor can they be defeated, they are only vulnerable when it comes to love and death, but often even death himself can’t seem to seize them. They are mythical beings that terrify and haunt the collective imagination, but also highly worshipped heroes of many legends. The aim of the exhibition is to highlight the bridges of communication that existed beyond -or maybe alongside- the hostility and clashes that were taking place in the frontier regions, that is, the intercultural exchange that took place across the two sides of the border, along with the military encounters and the conflicting political, economic and social interests. Songs, dances, festivals, art, love and marriage, commerce, and other forms of cultural exchange, all contributed to the establishment of such communication bridges. The weight of the scenario developed for the exhibition falls on the mutual impact and fertile interchange of attitudes, behaviors and social standards that took place between the European people, as it is reflected in the legendary figure of the acritan hero.

Aside from their different nationalities, languages, religions and other distinctions related to their country of origin, the acritans all share similar qualities: honorable men, loyal to the national ideals, they have a strong sense of solidarity; they are deeply religious and brave, they despise every form of injustice, and when faced with similar problems, they come up with similar solutions; they perform identical feats and undeniably find themselves in an endless battle with their adversaries on the borders. Their exploits have travelled through the ages and spread throughout Europe from East to West, initially as part of each country’s oral tradition that was later integrated into its formal literature and poetry and are still sung in every town and country.

The exhibition knits together a historical introduction on the acritans, references to modern expressions of acritic culture (in folk songs,

the theatre, visual arts, etc.) and the acritic legends' origins from the antiquity. It revolves around the figure of Digenis Akritas, hero of the Byzantine national epic poem and a living legend that survives in our days; in our case he is seen as an actual person with a specific social, symbolic and gender identity, who goes through the various stages of life riding on his high horse and participates in various tasks, quests and enterprises living his life on the edge, both geographically and psychologically. He becomes thus a role model, setting an example with his life as a fighter, warrior, military officer, border guard – acritan, within a specific geographical, historical and cultural framework.

The reference material used in this exhibition is quite elaborate and diverse and includes oral descriptions, audio and multimedia records, written texts, images, etc., from various chronological periods and places. Our starting point was the oral tradition, i.e. music and narrations (acritic songs, traditions, myths, legends and other testimonies, biographies and recordings); we then continued with the written, scholarly tradition (the epic poem of Digenis Akritas as it appears in publications and other texts), and we also included a collected bibliography. In addition we examined visual representations of the subject in both the decorative and the applied arts (sculpture, painting, both secular and religious, gold and silver creations, pottery, embroidery, woodcarvings, prints and photographs), as well as related enactments in religious and folk rituals and feasts, carnivals and performances, (like the shadow puppet theater), theatrical plays and films. Last but not least, we gathered actual items from direct sources, in other words historical objects such as weapons, maps, original horse gear, ritual objects, musical instruments, jewelry, etc.

The general concept of the exhibition is summarized on the introductory panel that shows a map of medieval Europe with several heroic figures riding between the East and the West, accompanied by abstracts from literary texts recounting their feats. These are: King Arthur in England, Charles the Great, Tristan and Roland in Central Europe, Krali Marko, a famous hero both in Serbia and Bulgaria, El Cid in Spain, and, in the entire area between Euphrates and the Danube, as well as in all the Greek territories, the acritan hero Vasileios Digenis Akritas, who appears also under the names of Konstantis, Andronikos, Yiannakis or Yiannos, Tsamados or Alexandros e.a.

The exhibition is divided in six major units, each of which has several smaller sections. We will provide a brief description of each unit here, since the exhibition catalog includes elaborate texts and images for all of them. The first unit recounts the conflicts and interactions between the peoples of Medieval Europe (5th-15th cent. A.D.). Special reference is

made to the formation of the Byzantine Empire and its relationship with its assorted neighbors, also to the entire Christian world of that time in Europe, and of course to the dissemination of the Byzantine culture.

The second unit is dedicated to the warriors of the 'akra', the borders, as they appear in the European acritic tradition, or rather in the traditions inspired by the adventures of their life as guards of the frontier line, which was constantly contested and regularly adjusted. Particular attention is given to the personality of the warrior himself, since he incorporates all the values and ideals which were considered fitting for a hero at the time. The Acritans and the 'Akra', Europe's eastern frontier, are the highlight of this unit, since the borders of the Byzantine Empire were not narrow strips of land but included entire regions that needed to be defended and safeguarded. In fact the eastern borders of the Mediterranean region bore great significance since the ancient times, because they helped separate Europe from Asia thus, by implication, the "civilized world" from the "barbarians", and, of course, later on the Christian world from the Islamic world. Then again, these same borders functioned as a meeting point and communication channel between the cultures of these two separate worlds, levelling out their differences and encouraging the fusion of their timeless values. The unit concludes with two chapters on the history of the frontiersmen of Byzantium and Western Europe. During the reign of Justinian (6th cent.) these frontiersmen or acritans, still distinguished by their Latin name 'limitanei' (limes=borders), were settled mainly in the eastern part of the Byzantine Empire in order to deter Persian and later Arab invaders. They were rewarded in payment for participating in battles and enjoyed special rights and privileges, such as tax exemptions. From the end of the 11th century and with the appearance of the Seljuk Turks (mid 11th c.) the acritans gradually lost their privileges, while facing serious difficulties with the Turkish advances in Asia Minor and the general instability prevailing in the border regions. In medieval Western Europe there were also able fighters defending the borders, mercenaries in the service of powerful local lords and kings. Their battles involved either different peoples carving out territories from the remnants of the western Roman Empire or fights by the christian populations, such as the Franks and the Spanish, against the Muslim advances in Europe.

The third section titled "the Acritans and the medieval acritan tradition" underlines the heroic character of these heroes and presents several aspects of their private life. There is an abundance of material on this topic, enriched greatly by the fertile folk imagination and expressed formally in the acritic literature, oral (9th – 10th c.) and written (12th-13th c.), in folk songs, epic poetry, legends and other stories. Folk songs help preserve

the collective identity as it evolves through history; hence the creators of the acritic poetry sung the feats of these great warriors and carried their stories over to the future generations.

In this part of the exhibition we are introduced to each one of the Acritan heroes separately, the ones from the Greek acritic tradition, the Balkans and those from the rest of Europe. In Byzantium there is of course Vasileios Digenis Akritas, main figure of the well-known byzantine epic poem and of many acritic songs, Konstantis, Porfyris, Andronikos, Tsamados, Yiannis or Yiannakos or Yiannos, Alexandros, the son of Armouris, and also Velissarios the famous general of the Emperor Justinian; in the Balkans, Vlad Cepes (aka Vlad Drakul or count Dracula) and Krali Marko; in central Europe, Zigfried, hero of the german epic song of the Nibelungen, Charles the Great of the French “Song of Roland”, El Cid (aka Rodrigo Diaz de Vivars) in Spain, King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table in England and finally the Celt hero Tristan and his Scandinavian counterpart Ogier the Dane. Extensive reference is made to the ancient archetypes that provided the inspiration for the acritic myths; many of the European heroes and their stories remind us of common mythological accounts and related mythical beings. Thus, this section illustrates the makeup of the medieval hero and its variations that cover all levels of the social scale.

The unit concludes with an analysis of the dissemination of the acritic legends, which, although they recount border fights, they themselves know no boundaries. They travel and, due to their intrinsic oral character, are passed on by popular bards, acritan warriors, pilgrims and traders, who find themselves often on the move. Through manuscripts and recounting, myths traveled from one region to another and were translated in many languages. Swaps are thus usually obvious in their morphology, thematic content or tone, yet a common link in the verses and patterns can often be detected from one acritic song to the other. Of course these features were always adapted according to the characteristics of each new environment. In this context, the acritic tradition is an irrefutable proof of a multidimensional communication, of a cultural interaction between peoples, focusing more on their mutual sympathies, rather than the disputes which, at one level or another, separate them. Moreover, at all times, art and culture, far from creating a “border”, a dividing line, provide the grounds for convergence, for communication, and for mutual respect.

The fourth section of the exhibition presents the background where all those heroic acritic stories take place, the natural and architectural environment, where each hero lived, his everyday life, his military tasks

and “noble” pastimes, such as music and hunting. The importance of his armor and his weapons is highlighted, as well as that of the gear of his horse, all of which are often personified and even enhanced with mythical attributes. Meals are also considered an important part of the acritans’ everyday life, since they promote collective behavior and bring to light their moments of leisure and relaxation.

The fifth part focuses on the special attributes of the acritan hero and portrays events from his life cycle: his birth and usually noble lineage, the illustrious years of his youth, his love conquests, his glorious feats, but also his great sensitivity. The lifestyle and mentality of the people on the borders is in fact reflected very accurately in the mixed racial origin (di-ghenia, in Greek), Christian and Arab, of the Byzantine hero Digenis (Di-ghenis). His dual breed is what defines Digenis’s existence as a man living a life literally on the edge, balancing between two worlds, between incredible strength and deep sensibility, as a kindhearted defender of the weak and unfortunate, but a fearsome warrior against real and mythical enemies, who in the end will be defeated only by Death himself.

The last unit of the exhibition presents the impact of the acritic myths and the way that they evolved through time. The 19th century marked the highpoint for the acritic literature, since the acritan heroes gained acclaim equal to that of national heroes, due to the philosophical and scientific ventures of the time. The influence of the acritic myths and legends can be seen in all forms of contemporary art, and in the multiple products of acritic literature that exist till today.

The exhibition has a narrative and educational structure with texts in two languages, Greek and English. It was comprised by 64 panels supplemented by museum objects and works of contemporary art. It also included 2 CDs with acritic songs from Greece, Spain, Bulgaria and France compiled specifically for its needs, as well as an introductory multimedia presentation with maps, historical and other background information. Material gathered from folk rituals and feasts, films and theatrical plays was used by Christina Katsari to create a film on the impact of the acritic legends in Europe today. The exhibition was enriched with the donation of objects from Finally to complete the visual documentation and an ad hoc collection of the “Acrinet” network was created, through purchases, donations and manufacturing of museum replicas, as are for instance the byzantine plates and the musical instruments that were crafted with the supervision and care of Museum of Greek Folk Musical Instruments.

The exhibition was supplemented with works of contemporary Greek art by artists who drew their inspiration from the acritic legends and other themes presented in the temporary show. These are, for exam-

ple, the etchings by Spyros Vasileiou titled “The Death of Digenis Akritas” in a handwritten text by Aggelos Sikelianos; Apostolos Chantzaras painted many figures of European heroes, and his series of small scale paintings picturing figures of heroes on horseback; the diptych “Digenis in the East and the West” by Kostis Moudatsos, which the artist created especially for the exhibition after studying thoroughly the acritan tradition. Other exhibits include the embroideries of Maria Eleni Galanou, that depict eastern and western legends with dragons, castles and heroes against imaginary backgrounds, as well as a collage composition by Eleni and Dimitris Kalokyris based on the illustrations of a children’s book on Digenis Akritas. Finally, the exhibition includes puppets from the shadowpuppet theater plays “Alexander the Great and the Serpent” and “Digenis and Charon”, 2004, by the puppeteer Dimitris Chantzis.

The exhibition “The Acritans of Europe” was presented at the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens, the Folk Museum “Konstantinos Frontzos” of the Society for Epirus Studies in Ioannina, the Cultural Center of the Municipality of Karpathos, the Museum of Byzantine Culture in Salonica, the Musée des Arts et Traditions in Paris, the Royal Academy of Sciences and Arts in Barcelona and at the University of Girona in Spain. The collection is housed permanently in Palaeochora, Crete, at the “Museum of the Acritans of Europe”.

On 28 May 2006 the permanent exhibition “The Acritans of Europe” was installed in The Acritans of Europe Museum. The Museum is located in the border village of Palaeochora in the Municipality of Kantanos-Selino in the department of Chania, Crete. The exhibition was officially opened on 9 July 2006. In 2018 the Museum moved into his new premises in the centre of Palaeochora. It functions under the responsibility of the Municipality of Kantanos - Selino and the support of the Association of the Friends of the Museum.

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