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AKRITIC FOLKSONG AND *DIGENIS* AKRITIS: CENTRAL KING AND PERIPHERAL HERO?*

In this paper I will attempt to apply the geometrical schema of centre and periphery to the essential relationship between king and hero in Akritic folksong and the Byzantine epic *Digenis Akritis*. For this purpose, from the cycle of Akritic songs I will refer mainly to the *Song of the Son of Andronikos*, the three versions of the *Song of Porphyris*, the *Song of Theophylaktos* and the *Song of Digenis and the Crab* all found in the collection of Petropoulos (Petropoulos, 1958: 36–40, 43–8, 51–3, 16–19). As far as the Byzantine epic is concerned, I will consider mainly the version contained in the Grottaferrata manuscript (Mavrogordato, 1956), though I also refer to the Escorial version (Ricks, 1990). I will, however, extend my comparison to the first heroic epic, the *Iliad*, which originally provoked and channelled my inquiry, and I will use this as a gnomon for my discussion.

After close analysis, we find that in this epic authority is not identified with heroism; in fact there is a clear distinction between the two. Authority appears to stand at the centre while heroism lies on the periphery and takes many different forms. Agamemnon represents that centre surrounded by a number of heroic peripheral figures. He is the leader of the army but he is not the bravest of heroes. And because there exists this dimension of heroism that he does not encompass, there is a definite shift of attention from the centre to one very important point of the periphery. As a result he does not become renowned as the protagonist of the *Iliad*. It is in fact this one significant point of the periphery that acquires all the fame, and is represented by the outstanding heroic figure of Achilles.

This happens when the peripheral hero is given the pretext to challenge the central king. At this stage the behaviour of the king becomes crucial to the course of events. For the king's conduct determines whether the geometrical schema of centre and periphery will remain as it is or will change.

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As becomes apparent from the main theme — the wrath of Achilles — the highest heroic figure challenges authority and this challenge is, in turn, an element of disturbance for the hero, a vexing compromise, and a hindrance, but also a challenge to his heroic potential. It is indeed Agamemnon's behaviour that determines the course and outcome of the *Iliad*, because it is he who provokes Achilles' wrath and finally his furious and unrelenting victory; this conflict forms the overall situation that results in an outstanding heroic epic.

It is thus clear that in the *Iliad* the conflict between king and hero is an essential and core feature of this prototype of European epic. Given this, we may reasonably expect to find that a similar confrontation lies at the core of later epic, including the Akritic cycle of folksong and the epic of *Digenis Akritis*. In fact, Jackson (1982: 138) has suggested that “no epic could be composed unless, in some way, it embodied the confrontation between the hero and the king”.

Let us see what happens when we come to the cycle of Akritic folksongs and the epic of *Digenis Akritis*, whether we find any form or variation of this epic theme of conflict between ruler and hero.

It is noteworthy that the hero-king relationship has a similar treatment in the *Iliad* and the Akritic songs. The same distinction between heroism and authoritarian kingship is again expressed here by the existing competition between hero and king. The maturing hero, in his vigour, finds it necessary to discard authority, which is usually represented by aristocracy and ultimately by the king. He feels strongly compelled to establish his heroic claims which are not determined by titles of royalty.

After a miraculous growth, the upcoming sons of Andronikos, Porphyrus and Kostantis make it in fact their priority to dispel any doubt that they are not afraid of anyone and especially of the king himself. In all of these Akritic versions of songs, the hero's statement has indeed become a repeated formula which runs as follows:

Και βγήκε κ' εκαυκίστηκε πως άντρα δε φοβάται,
μήτε τον άντρα το Φουκά, μήτε το Νικηφόρο,
μήτε τον Παρατράχηλο, που τρέμ' η γης κι ο κόσμος.
(Petropoulos, 1958: 44; “Του Πορφύρη Α'”, lines 9–11)

The king immediately reads a threat in this statement and he does not remain idle. He sends a considerable force to eliminate the hero:

Ο Βασιλιάς ως τόκουσε, πολύ του βαροφάνη,
και πέμπει χίλιους στο σπαθί, τρακόσους στο πολέμι,
και παν και τότε βρίσκουνε στη μέση των προβάτω.
(Petropoulos, 1958: 44; “Του Πορφύρη Α'”, lines 12–14)

In one of his versions of the *Song of Porphyrus* the hero is asked to follow the men back to the king's court because the king needs his help but the hero states that he has already seen the king the day before:

Εχτές ήμουν στου βασιλιά, σήμερα τι με θέλει;
Αν είναι για ξαφάντωση, να πιάσω το βιολλί μου,
για και είναι για τον πόλεμο, να πιάσω το σπαθί μου.
(Petropoulos, 1958: 46; “Του Πορφύρη Β'”, lines 30–2)

In short, the hero implies that there already exists a relationship between the two men, which finds the hero in a subordinate position, in which he is seen as either entertaining the king, or joining in the king's celebrations, or fighting the king's battles. Moreover, underlining the tension and conflict between them, the hero is not fooled and fights the men. He also symbolically cuts the nose of the man in charge, του μικρού Γιαννάκι, and sends it to the king with a message:

Και κόβγει και τη μύτη του, του βασιλιά τη στέλλει,
να πάη να τον χαιρετά το διπλοπεξεβέγκη;
Τα πρόατα που του 'στειλε εκαλοκούρεψέν τα,
κι αν έχη κι άλλα πρόατα, να στείλ' να του κουρέψη.
(Petropoulos, 1958: 46; “Του Πορφύρη Β'”, lines 42–5)

In these songs, the confrontation of central ruler and intruder-hero assumes explosive dimensions, due to the overreaction of the king. It results in a sudden shift of attention and emphasis, but mainly of power, from the passive centre to the unpredictable periphery, though not, however, to the point that the hero takes over the position of the king. The established king acts here, too, irrationally, following the pattern of Agamemnon in the *Iliad*.

Let us see whether there is a way of retaining the stable centre and the dynamic periphery so as not to come to a clash that brings about a transfer of power and whether the Akritic folksong offers any other alternatives.

One can say that the *Song of Theophylaktos* and the *Song of Digenis and the Crab* imply a temporary solution which appears to be adopted by the king. In these two songs, the ruler asks, challenges or provokes the hero to take up a task for him or for the whole community, and the reaction of the hero — depending on the stage of their conflict — ranges from eagerness to anger. Nevertheless, this process involves and occupies the hero by diverting his heroic potential away from the established power. Thus, when Digenis is informed that the king needs him, he either rushes eagerly to his aid, as happens in the *Song of Digenis and the Crab*, or he first displays his anger that again drives him to his task, as in the *Song of Theophylaktos*:

Και κει χαμαί Θεοφύλακτος αρκώθη και θυμώθη,
κλωτσιάν της τάβλας έδωκεν, στα πόδια του ευρέθη.
“Ούλα για μένα τα λαλείς, ούλα για με τα λείεις, [...]”
(Petropoulos, 1958: 52; “Του Θεοφύλακτου”, lines 11–13)

There is, therefore, no doubt about the similarities in subject matter between the *Iliad* and the Akritic folksong, in respect of the antagonistic relationship between the first of the heroes and the first man of the state, which appears to follow similar fiery stages of development. Thus we see the young hero, once fully aware of his invincibility and bodily strength, resisting the humiliating orders of a lesser man. In fact, he then feels compelled to discard and disregard his authority publicly. Lack of authority infuriates the hero; he is looking for an excuse and a chance to express his anger fully. When such an opportunity arises, the clash of heroism and authority comes into full effect. Egotism and self-interest do not allow either of the protagonists to withdraw their case, until either a crisis arises that requires both men to put aside their personal ego, or the man in authority — who is obviously older, more mature and perhaps more reasonable — by offering a challenge directs the young hero's energy and strengths away from himself and the state and towards an “enemy”, in order to retain the existing centre-periphery dimension.

We can thus argue, that despite the very different nature of the material compared — on the one hand, the *Iliad*, a heroic epic poem with unsurpassed unity of theme, on the other hand the Akritic cycle of songs, existing in many different versions — both sets of texts share a basic thematic and structural similarity.

When we come to the epic of *Digenis Akritis*, the opposition between the king and Digenis follows a somewhat different pattern. The Escorial version does not refer to any kind of relationship between the hero and the king. The hero here does not confront any central royal authority figure, unless the tension expressed between Digenis and Phillopappous or Digenis and the general — both older and of a certain established reputation — compensates for the absence of the hero-king episode. Unfortunately it is impossible to know whether there is an attempt to show concentration of power in the person of Digenis, who after all, also bears the name of the king (Βασίλειος) which, in turn, implies royalty (βασιλεία).

In the older, Grottaferrata, manuscript about one hundred lines of the fourth book deal with the hero-king encounter, in an episode which is somewhat unusual according to heroic standards. Catia Galatariotou (1987: 37) describes this meeting between emperor and Digenis as a dynamic opposition. That may be so, but in comparison with the *Iliad* and the Akritic folksong the opposition between king and hero here reflects a subtle and more temperate conflict, without fully epic and heroic attributes.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of this very episode and the depiction of certain elements of friction do indeed reflect a deliberate attempt on the poet's part to imply tension between the static centre and the active periphery. The relationship begins when the emperor, Βασίλειος ο ευτυχής και μέγας τροπαιούχος (Mavrogordato, 1956: 4.973 [1052]), hears of the fame and valour of Digenis and expresses a desire to meet him. To this effect, he sends a letter to the hero which is full of kind and complimentary remarks about his achievements, emphasising the sincerity of his intentions. Suspicions of tension, however, immediately arise when the emperor invites the hero to his court in order to reward him for his deeds, and stresses the fact that the hero should come to him “suspecting nothing grievous” (Mavrogordato, 1956: 4.986 [2065]).

The reaction of the hero is, however, not very yielding. He in turn replies. His opening words sound very unheroic, with very humble overtones. He attributes his achievements to God's help — something not totally unlike Achilles — and regards himself as the emperor's servant. He stresses that he has no share of imperial benefits and he bids

the emperor to come to his own territory, on his own terms to meet him. For this, he uses the excuse that he is afraid he may kill some of the king's inexperienced soldiers if they attempt to say something inappropriate to him. Also, there is a slight threat at this point, in regard to the way Digenis should be treated even by the king's soldiers, implying that he does not take any criticism from anyone. Here is also apparent a display of valour and prowess on the part of the hero as opposed to simply authority on the ruler's side; and the subtle shift from the centre to the periphery is already set in motion.

In the lines that follow the epic poet's comments assure us that the king "admired the modest diction of the boy, and having understood his lofty valour" (Mavrogordato, 1956: 4.1001–3 [2081–3]), he accepted Digenis' proposal and took only a hundred soldiers with him, ensuring that they would not utter any word of blame to him.

The meeting takes place and the previously assertive hero behaves unheroically again, bowing right down to the ground in front of the king, acknowledging his divinely given kingship and regarding himself as worthless. And as if this was not enough, there are the outbursts of joy and admiration on the king's part as he actually leaves his throne and kisses the hero and, after identifying beauty with valour, the king wishes that there were four such men in Ρωμανία. Whether this action indicates sincerity or pretence, it is clear that the ancient Greek cause would have benefited if Agamemnon had followed this ruler's example, although this would have ensured that we would have no *Iliad*.

Nevertheless, the dialogue continues with a mixture of praise on the one hand and encouragement for Christian righteousness in kingship on the other, until Digenis states that he does not need the emperor's gifts, thus lessening the central authority's prestige. He also makes the distinction between kingship and might, emphasising that rule is granted only by God. He thus appears not to consider his strong and mighty self worthy of the kingship; alternatively he is perhaps indirectly trying to reassure the king that his intention is not to challenge his position. Moreover, Digenis grants the king the tribute of Iconion, and the king, relieved by the hero's response, offers him rewards. He appoints him to the rank of *patrikios*, grants him all his grandfather's estates, assigns to him authority to rule the borders and gives him precious royal vestments.

The king's rewards appear, at first glance, to be considerable tokens of his appreciation of Digenis' contribution to the empire. When examined closely, however, they do not seem to be of great significance. The rank of *patrikios* does not seem to excite, let alone suit, the heroic character of Digenis. The return to Digenis of his grandfather's estate is ironic, since it was rightfully his, for, as Catia Galatariotou mentions:

This was Eirene's father, a general of whom in passing the poem tells us that he had been εξόριστος δια τινα μωρία by this same emperor, Basil, and had died in exile. Significantly, there is not a single word of disapproval for this general who fell foul of the emperor. (Galatariotou, 1987: 42–3)

The authority given to the hero to rule the borders, again comes too late, since Digenis already stands there in control and simply confirms his supremacy over the area. As far as the royal clothes are concerned they are totally unsuitable to the hero's way of life.

Overall, the king's offerings represent elements of the static and stable central authority which are totally inappropriate to the hero's active and unpredictable peripheral domain. We can interpret this as an attempt by the king to relate to this unusual or abnormal phenomenon on his periphery, but by using his language and within the context of his reality.

Furthermore, we can perhaps suggest that it is the unpredictability of the dynamic heroic periphery that the king is trying to stabilise, by imposing on it passive attributes of the centre. The day, however, that the hero adopts these attributes will be the end of his heroic career and Digenis is not ready for that. And as if disregarding the king's words, he embarks on a heroic display of his superhuman strength, first mounting an unbroken horse and then mightily snatching and killing a lion. On the other hand, the observing king is put to flight by the sight of the lion, as the poet again juxtaposes the courage of the hero with the faint heart of the king, while everyone is astounded and afraid of the hero's capability.

More lines of praise follow when the ruler thanks God for deeming him worthy of seeing such a valiant man and the two leading men of the empire depart after embracing each other. Towards the end of the

fourth book of the Grottaferrata, the poet tells us that after that meeting between the king and Digenis, the hero was called Βασίλειος Ακρίτης.

There is definitely ambiguity here over which of the two men holds the predominant position, since both now share the name of Βασίλειος with its implications of royalty (βασιλεία). A transfer of focus is indicated from the king to the hero Digenis, or the poet of the epic — perhaps for the sake of stability in the empire — appears to attribute equal power (of a different nature, of course) to the central ruler and the peripheral hero. This may be a way of balancing the two authorities — the rule of the centre with the rule of the border — in order to promote stability and tranquillity.

Finally, there is no doubt that the *Iliad*, the Akritic folksongs and the epic of *Digenis Akritis* share the same basic theme of competition between king and hero, though this is presented in a slightly different manner in all three. The *Iliad* makes this theme the underlying force that drives the hero to fulfil his heroic potential and it is thus identified as the core theme of epic poetry. The fragmentary nature of Akritic folksong includes it in the repertoire of songs although it is not fully exploited because of limited reference and elaboration.

It is interesting, however, that the *Iliad* and the Akritic song depict this theme with the same intensity of feeling, and without attempting to hide its conflicting and explosive character. In the epic of *Digenis Akritis*, however, the hero-king theme is absent from the Escorial manuscript, and in the Grottaferrata version there are obvious attempts by the poet to play down the conflict inherent in this fundamental relationship.

Is the superficially very polite encounter between the king and the hero in the epic proof that the poet is trying to avoid such tension between the two leading men of the empire or is there simply no such tension between them? Is the lack of a fiery relationship between king and hero an indication of the poem's less epic character, or does it reflect what Elizabeth Jeffreys (1993: 36) notes, namely that "one of the regular points made about *Digenes Akrites* is that the poem, in both G and E, seems to be looking back to a golden age of heroic tranquillity but that age is now past"? It is possible, too, that the poet is being careful not to represent the ruler in anything but an ultimately superior position of power.

Whatever the explanation for the more subdued treatment of the hero-king relationship in the Byzantine epic, one can reach the following conclusion. Authority and utmost heroism are not embodied in or represented by the same person. The former stands at the centre and has a more passive, static, older, more logical profile, while the latter is depicted as the periphery because it represents action, dynamism, movement, unpredictability and youth. Both hold power, but of a different nature. The king has power because of his royal position while the hero combines bodily strength and skill. Eventually these two forces clash, and although one is envious of the other's power and position, there cannot be a reversal of roles because of their different make-up and capabilities.

Their conflict is essential for the creation of epic poetry, but in the end the schema of centre and periphery stands as it is because although we seem to have a shift of attention from the centre to the periphery, we do not have a reversal of roles. This is only possible when the hero in the end becomes king (or vice versa), something which is accomplished in the Homeric epic of the *Odyssey*, where the peripheral wandering hero in the end becomes the settled ruler of Ithaca.

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GREEK CULTURE AND AMERICAN “CULTUROLOGY”: JAMES FAUBION’S *MODERN GREEK LESSONS*

This paper is built around an assessment of James D. Faubion’s *Modern Greek Lessons: a primer in historical constructivism* (Faubion, 1993). In reviewing Faubion’s book, it will attempt to provide an account of the problems and limitations of traditional anthropological focus and methods (against which Faubion has reacted) for the study of modern Greek society, and at the same time to point to some of the difficulties entailed by Faubion’s approach. Central to the paper’s discussion will be a consideration of what Faubion means by “culture”, of the vexed status of “culture” in contemporary anthropology, and of the possibilities of defining what could be meant by “modern Greek culture”.

Any discipline that makes its living out of the intellectual analysis of the forms of quotidian life — and Anthropology is a prime candidate — is bound to be in a state of continual crisis. To an extent the crisis is self-induced: who wants yesterday’s theories? (Unless, possibly, one is outside France and they happen to be French.) At the least academic advancement will not square with filial piety, and “killing the Da” has become an institutional practice. But in fairness the crisis is also externally induced, for what Anthropology studies is itself as subject to change as are the means by which it is studied. Thus it has always been; but there are periods when (and places where) the changes appear to be so rapid and so radical that theoretical disarray might present itself as a quite legitimate response. “Post-modernism” in general has fed off that apprehension, not least by ambiguously labelling both a condition of the world and its own intellectualisation of it. Being profoundly elitist, it naturally elides the distinction: academic disenchantment must be the register of a disenchanted world. Nonetheless, the world does change, and in Greece it appears to have changed very quickly; quickly enough to have caught anthropology on the hop; certainly quickly enough to allow some deft outflanking manoeuvres within the discipline.