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**MODERN GREEK STUDIES  
(AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND)**

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for his heroic efforts to make this journal readable.  
This issue is dedicated to Véronica and Andras.*

MICHAEL LOOSLI

THE KALLIKANTZARI<sup>1</sup>

AN IMAGE IN NIKOS GATSOS' 'AMORGOS'

*They say that the mountains tremble and that the fir trees rage  
When night gnaws the pins of the roof-tiles for the kallikantzari to enter*

According to traditional Greek folklore, the kallikantzari (sing. *kallikantzaros*) emerge on earth at night during the twelve days of Christmas. Whilst descriptions of them vary, in common are the characteristics of extreme ugliness and thinness. Each, moreover, is in some way deformed: 'Some are lame, some are one-eyed, one-legged, bow-legged, with twisted mouths, faces, hands, some are hunchbacked, wrinkled; and briefly, all of the defects and infirmities you will find upon them.' Usually they are reported as having the stature of dwarfs, with long unkempt bushy hair, savage red eyes, boar-teeth, the hands of an ape ending in long hooked fingernails, and the feet of an ass; or alternatively, with one of an ass and one of a human. Their clothing is tattered and in wretched condition. Peculiar to this dress is the large thick cloak, the pointed cowl which they knit themselves from pig's bristles, and shoes made of iron. They are very agile, climbing walls, walking on the roofs, entering by way of the chimney, etc. Their diet consists chiefly of worms, frogs, snakes, lizards, but even more so if fried. They are keen cognoscenti of the dance, a special dance being named after them: 'the dance of the kallikantzari.'

Their customary habits during their sojourn are mills situated in deserted places: 'They lie in wait in the ravines, wherever there is water, and near windmills,' and where three roads cross. For the rest of the year they dwell in 'the nether world,' 'in Hades,' where they saw with their teeth the supporting pillars of the earth. By Christmas their labours are nearing completion and they ascend to the surface so as not to be overwhelmed, but when they return the pillars have been mysteriously restored and they must begin afresh.

Some believe that the kallikantzari are humans of a blighted destiny metabolised into demons for a fixed period. Susceptible are babies born at the time of the Epiphany who are not immediately baptised, others for whom the priest incorrectly recites the baptismal blessing, aborted infants, anyone who dies at Christmas, suicides, and those with guardian angels who do not possess sufficient character to protect their charges against evil demonic influence.

The kallikantzari, despite being very stupid and easily deceived, are capable of wreaking extensive damage. They sit upon the shoulder of anyone rash enough to stray into their vicinity,

compelling them, if an appropriate answer is not given to whatever is asked, to eat their disgusting food and afterwards carrying them away in dance and mischief-making; although it is also said that they reward the good dancer. Likewise they enter houses, flogging the inhabitants and snatching their clothes, 'they torture lazy women... for this reason young girls hurry to spin as much yarn as they can at this time,' pouring out the water, urinating in the pots of wine and olives, scattering the flour, soiling the meals and whatever else happens to be before them, particularly ashes in which they hide; hence the ashes of fires lit during the Epiphany ('the paganness' or 'ash that didn't hear 'In the Jordan'<sup>22</sup>) are deemed dirty and unsuitable for any use.

Various means are employed to deter the kallikantzari: 1) Practices of Christian worship: the sign of the cross towards the openings and windows of the house, and on the foreheads of unbaptised children, the sanctification of the house by a priest, and incense. 2) Refrains and indecent phrases: the formula 'log of wood, burning torch' is widely recommended because fire is a fear of the kallikantzari. The reading aloud of the Lord's Prayer is a proven exorcism. 3) Magical practices: the use of smoke derived from the burning of foul-smelling substances, such as pieces of hide or old shoes thrown in the fire. Especially repellent to the kallikantzari is the smell of ground-thistle, from which they flee, chanting 'Ground-thistle smells here! Such a village should vanish!' Talismans hung behind the door are preventative, as are black-handled knives. The most efficacious however is fire, and in many houses fires are kindled upright, a blazing torch being maintained in the middle, for the length of the Epiphany. Torches are similarly held aloft if there is a need to venture outdoors. Some go so far as to capture kallikantzari by luring them with fries, and then setting them to count the holes of a sieve – a feat quite beyond them – or binding them with red thread or ropes made of rushes which they are powerless to break.

Following the departure of the kallikantzari, the village is purified with a fire being lit in the open. The hearth too is cleansed, or all the house. Most often the ashes are thrown out, but a few keep them for magic.

Theories proposed by scholars concerning the origins of the kallikantzari range from Pan, the satyrs and centaurs of ancient mythology to the Egyptian scarab. Others discern a relationship with beliefs about the figures depicted on the western pediment of the Parthenon.

## NOTES

- 1 The text is a free adaptation of the entry in the *Great Greek Encyclopaedia* by Maria Ionnidou. Amongst her sources are Nikolaos Politis' *Traditions* (1904) and John Cuthbert Lawson's *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion* (1910).
- 2 The Apolotikion of the Epiphany. It is the principle hymn of the day and is sung at the end of Vespers. The stanza begins: 'As you were baptised in the Jordan, Lord, the worship of the Trinity was made manifest.'

**NIKOS GATSOS**OLD-FASHIONED SONG<sup>1</sup>*For George Seferis*

(Translated by Michael Loosli)

Times change the years pass  
the river of the world is turbid  
but I will step out onto dream's balcony  
to see you stooped over clay  
embroidering ships and swallows.

The sea bitter and meagre our earth  
and water costly in the clouds  
nakedness enfolds the cypress  
grass burns its ash in silence  
and ceaseless the hunt of the sun.

Then you came and sculpted a fountain  
for the old shipwrecked sailor  
who was lost though his memory remains  
a luminous sea shell on Amorgos  
and a salt pebble on Santorini.

And from the dew that stirred on the fern  
I also took a pomegranate's tear  
so that I might in this notebook  
spell out the heart's anguish  
with the first star of the fable.

But now that Holy Tuesday draws near  
and Resurrection will be late in coming  
I want you to go to the Mani<sup>2</sup> and Crete  
with your everlasting company there  
the wolf the eagle and the asp.

And as soon as you see on your forehead  
the fallen star of yore shining secretly  
with a gentle glittering – rise up  
and bring once more to life the spring  
which yet abides in your own rock.

Times change the years pass  
the river of the world is turbid  
but I will step out onto dream's balcony  
to see you stooped over clay  
embroidering ships and swallows.

#### NOTES

- 1 The poem is in rhyme, reflecting Gatsos' tenure as a songwriter, and observes the structure ABABA. It also contains echoes of Seferis' poetry.
- 2 The harsh and mountainous southern part of the middle peninsula of the Peloponnese, renowned because the Turks were never able to subdue its inhabitants.

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- d) 'The Snow' (Rythmos, 7, April 1933, p. 203).
- e) *Amorgos* (Aetos, Athens, 1943).
- f) 'Elegy' (Philologica Chronica, 41, May 1946, p. 119).
- g) 'Death and the Knight (1513)' (Tetradio, 1, Jan. 1947, pp. 31-33).
- h) 'Old-Fashioned Song' (Tachydromos, 2 Nov. 1963, p. 21; reprinted in 2d). In homage to George Seferis.
- i) *Amorgos* (3rd edition: Ikaros, Athens, 1969). Included 'Death and the Knight (1513)' and a revised version of 'Elegy'.
- j) 'Memory of Death' (Odos Panos, 66, March-April 1993, pp. 2-5). Also known as 'The Young Kormopoulos'.
- k) *Lend Silken Threads to the Wind* (Ikaros, Athens, 1994). Posthumously published drafts and unfinished poems. Edited with an introduction by Evgenios Aranitsis.

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