

CHAPTER EIGHT

BECOMING A METHANITIS: FORGETTING IN ORDER TO REMEMBER

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THE PROBLEM

In this contribution I continue the theme of unity and diversity within the Peloponnese with a case study of the context of the identity shared by the inhabitants of a small sector of the Peloponnese: Methana. The unity of this shared identity means that diversity is also automatically implied, inasmuch as identity as a Methanitis means that other communities in the Peloponnese are thus identified as different and 'other': that is, 'not Methanites'. More important, that shared identity has itself been forged from apparently diverse identities. This contribution therefore explores aspects of the dynamics of how an initial diversity became a localised unity.

In my investigation I use a type of evidence concerning the past which is not regularly exploited by archaeologists or historians: oral histories. Most academics generally consider 'hard' (tangible and lasting) historical sources, such as written documents and artefacts, to be the only reliable guides to what happened in the past. Oral histories, being unwritten and transitory, inevitably risk being changed as they are transferred from person to person in the maintenance of local tradition. Nevertheless, with ethnographic studies being a widely accepted element in surface survey projects, such ethnographically derived viewpoints on regional histories have a legitimate place in academic study.¹ As will be demonstrated below, however, difficulties arise when oral histories disagree with 'hard' historical sources. The academic must either accept the evidence of academically 'safe' documents or prefer to believe the 'hearsay' evidence of native populations whose own identities and self-esteem are inextricably embedded in their oral histories.²

Memory, identity, place and movement are currently popular themes in archaeology, with memory a particular focus of recent archaeological discussion.³ This is not surprising, given archaeologists' long history of the study of places, especially monuments of all sorts, and more recently the materiality of landscapes, especially via surface survey projects. My contribution combines these elements of memory, identity, place and

¹ e.g. Cherry et al. 1991; McDonald and Rapp 1972; Sutton 2000; Wright et al. 1990.

² Forbes 2000, 204-5.

³ e.g. Knapp and Ashmore 1999; van Dyke and Alcock 2003.

movement in the context of how the people of Methana have defined themselves as Methanites. However, the existence of these elements and the way in which they interconnect are not straightforward, because being able to remember that they are Methanites has required that the population has first had to forget that they were not always Methanites.

An additional consideration is that when investigating memory, archaeologists tend to focus on material elements and remains as reminders of the past and of identities rooted in it. Such reminders, which become essentially monuments of all sorts, have a physical existence. On Methana there is one such physical monument. A stele commemorates a Methanitis who led a band of other Methanites during the Greek War of Independence: a defining moment in Greek history ([FIG. 1](#)). However, it was set up only in 1968 and not in the centre of the main town, but close to a church well away from any of the ten villages or the spa town on the peninsula. Its erection was evidently a very self-conscious act, but few Methanites seemed aware of its existence.

In contrast to archaeologists, most anthropologists would claim that kinship and genealogies are at the core of identity. By its very nature, however, kinship is insubstantial and therefore rarely considered by archaeologists. In this contribution I will demonstrate the impact of kinship on what is remembered and what is forgotten in the context of Methanites' pan-peninsular identity. Ultimately the most obvious tangible shared 'monument' is the place itself– Methana.

Methana is a small volcanic peninsula in the Saronic Gulf ([FIG. 2](#)), of no great historical importance but the focus of my research since the earlier 1970s, when I conducted 2 years of ethnographic fieldwork.⁴ Subsequently I returned for several summers in the 1980s, for the Methana Archaeological Survey,⁵ investigating the peninsula's settlement history from the earliest times up to the 20th century AD, and again in the summer of 1998, when I conducted archival and oral historical research.⁶ In addition, Mari Clarke also conducted ethnographic research on the peninsula which has contributed significantly to an understanding of 19th and 20th century developments.⁷

When I considered Methana's post-medieval landscape history for the Methana Archaeological Survey,⁸ I had to make sense of the present settlement pattern, especially when and how it developed. During my initial ethnographic research I accepted Methanites' own views: that their villages had existed for several hundred years, and that they had always been Methanites. However, evaluation of the emerging archaeological record and

⁴ e.g. Forbes 1976; Forbes 1982.

⁵ Mee and Forbes 1997.

⁶ Forbes 2007a, 111-13.

⁷ Clark 1988; Clark 1995; Clarke 1998; Clarke 2000a; Clarke 2000b.

⁸ Forbes 1997.

the descriptions of the peninsula provided by early western sources—especially a Venetian census of 1700,⁹ and Edward Dodwell’s description of a brief visit in the first decade of the 19th century¹⁰—indicated that a single settlement, called Methana, existed from the end of the medieval period until the early 19th century. Other sources corroborated their evidence.¹¹

The Venetian census of the village of Methana recorded 76 families, with a total population of 392— a situation which was largely unchanged when the French Scientific Expedition to the Morea recorded 78 families in the village in about 1830.¹² The sparseness of the population in the later 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century is corroborated by the accounts of the few travellers who visited, which comment on the desolation of the landscape, apart from terracing around the village.¹³

Matters were very different by about 1830, however. Instead of a single settlement, there were at least 6 villages on the peninsula, according to the French Scientific Expedition. Although the original settlement’s name is still given as Methana in this document, it seems to have been changed to Megalo Khorì very shortly afterwards.¹⁴ It is very possible that two or three more villages were founded at about this time or very shortly afterwards.¹⁵ The village of Kypseli may have been the last traditional village to have been founded. Its original main church bears the date 1848 in two places,¹⁶ and the village’s name first appears in the register of male births (*μητρῶο ἀρρένων*) in 1849.¹⁷

My explanation for the change between the situation in the first decade of the 19th century and that at around 1830 was that the additional villages were founded by refugees during the Greek War of Independence.¹⁸ The war started in 1821, but although the Battle of Navarino in 1827 put an end to the worst of the fighting and pillaging, a formal peace treaty was not signed until 1832. In the Peloponnese in particular, up until the Battle of Navarino the Egyptian force under the Ottoman commander Ibrahim Pasha conducted a ruthless campaign against the civilian population.¹⁹

The best interpretation was that some of the refugees from these upheavals had found their way to Methana. In many ways this was only natural: Methana’s rugged landscape has afforded a refuge in troubled times for

⁹ Panayiotopoulos 1985, 144-5, 247.

¹⁰ Dodwell 1819, 267-84.

¹¹ e.g. Davies 1994.

¹² Khouliarakis 1973, 33-4.

¹³ Forbes 1997, 107; Forbes 2007a, 61.

¹⁴ Forbes 1997, 107.

¹⁵ Forbes 2007a, 66-8.

¹⁶ Koukoulis 1997, 246-7.

¹⁷ Forbes 2007a, 69.

¹⁸ Forbes 1997, 107-9.

¹⁹ Clogg 1979, 62; Woodhouse 1977, 142-6.

millennia.²⁰ Additional security was provided in this instance by the French Philhellene Fabvier's military force and his fortifications (FIG. 3) on the narrow isthmus connecting Methana to the mainland.²¹ Finally, partly because of the presence of the powerful fleets of the nearby Argosaronic islands of Poros, Spetsai and Ydhra, Methana was in one of the safest parts of Greece.²²

As noted above, however, Methanites had no clear oral tradition relating to the founding of new villages at this time and little concern for their pre-Methana origins. They simply considered that their families had been Methanites for many centuries—far longer than the period of Greek independence. Many of their stories about the peninsula were placed chronologically at some (unspecified) time during, or even possibly before, the period of Turkish occupation. Some Methanites stated that their families had arrived before the time of Christ, although the phrase was simply a way of indicating that an event happened a very long time ago.²³

The belief that Methanites' histories on Methana stretched many centuries into the deep past was so important that when I attended a conference on the nearby island of Poros shortly after the publication of the Methana Survey, the president of one Methana community harangued me over my interpretation of the evidence. Having read the final publication of the Methana survey, he could not accept that his and other villages had existed for so short a time. It was a clear example of the ethical difficulties of balancing 'hard' historical documents with the sometimes conflicting histories handed down via oral tradition.

In this situation the question became in part, which kind of historical 'document' does one prefer to trust? The academic sources, archaeological and documentary, were certainly not unassailable: they were anything but copious, and the idea that a whole settlement pattern could arise in under a decade in the relatively recent past is certainly unusual. Furthermore, although the combination of these sources seemed convincing, the majority of them were produced by outsiders, most of whom were not even Greeks. Oral histories, on the other hand, are important ethnographic 'documents' and valid data in their own right. In the context of the modern anthropological sensitivities, I was concerned that the views of western European outsiders were being unquestioningly prioritised over those of the local population who were 'owners' of their histories. Was there some way of reconciling what seemed to be two irreconcilable positions?²⁴ These questions strike at the heart of current interests in memory and remembering, and their contribution to a sense of identity.

²⁰ e.g. Gill and Foxhall 1997; Gill *et al.* 1997, esp. 73-5.

²¹ St. Clair 1972, 291.

²² Forbes 1997, 107.

²³ Forbes 2007a, 207-8.

²⁴ Forbes 2000, 204-5, 221.

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ORAL HISTORIES AND MEMORIES OF THE PAST

The pioneering work of the anthropologist Jan Vansina,²⁵ and others, has demonstrated the value of oral traditions as historical documents, particularly among non-literate peoples around the world. This work has enabled anthropologists to investigate the histories of societies which have no formal documents relating to their pasts. Many peoples worldwide maintain quite detailed oral records of major events—some from several centuries previously. Studies indicate that oral histories are readily embedded in the memory of lines of ancestors: quite commonly these memories stretch back 5 or 6 generations into the past. Although exact chronologies are rarely achievable, it is evident that many peoples can record events at least as far back as the approximately 150 years that had elapsed between 1830 and the initial period of fieldwork in the 1970s, and often much further.²⁶ The range of topics is also limited, but tales of key events, especially large-scale public events such as wars and migrations, are consistently represented.²⁷ So, if it had occurred, why should a major migration during a period of war barely 150 years before my initial fieldwork be completely unremembered?

My concern was that my interpretation of the rather limited lines of evidence had been incorrect. However, there were just a few oral historical pointers to support my original view. One was a story, repeated by Athanasiou,²⁸ that one Methana village was founded by refugees from the destruction of the island of Psara— a major disaster that occurred during the Greek War of Independence. One surname unique to that village is found belonging to several different people in the published Psariote archives:²⁹ coincidentally, a document from the late 1820s reports a substantial number of Psariote refugees on the island of Aegina, opposite Methana in the Saronic Gulf.³⁰ 19th century census documents from Methana suggested that 5 or 6 men with this surname, all probably related, settled in the village at about this time.³¹

Another indicator that my interpretation of the archaeological and historical documents had been at least broadly correct was a statement made to me in the 1970s by an elderly man. He told me that Methana was settled only after the Turks had left. Initially I had not been inclined to believe him: he was forever inflicting his large store of often garbled stories on me, and this one did not fit in with what I seemed to be hearing from other Methanites.

²⁵ Vansina 1965; Vansina 1985.

²⁶ Vansina 1985, 187–90.

²⁷ Vansina 1965, 116; 1985, 24.

²⁸ Athanasiou, 1998, 43.

²⁹ Forbes 2007a, 66-7; Sphyroeras 1974.

³⁰ Khouliarakis 1973, 32.

³¹ Forbes 2007a, 66-7.

However, when re-examining my field notes I discovered that incidental detail in his story tended to confirm the association of new settlements with the War of Independence.³² He further stated that his grandfather had made terraces on good land on the edge of his village— something which is most likely to have happened when the location was newly settled. His grandfather appeared in the register of male births registering a son in 1851.

Finally, several people commented that the whole landscape surrounding their village had originally been divided up and allocated to ancestors who had then constructed terraces in their apportioned parts. This original act of division and apportionment was de-coupled from any particular time in their description. Nevertheless it also corroborated the idea of a group of newcomers founding a new community.

These limited lines of oral historical support for my original view, however, merely raised a further question. If a wave of refugees had arrived during the War of Independence, why did their descendents not maintain an oral record? Methanites have had a strong group identity *as* Methanites. The sudden arrival of so many of their ancestors would have been a major event, both of itself and in terms of explaining how they ‘belonged’ in their landscape. Yet there was no widely-accepted oral historical account of a wave of refugees coming to Methana. Why?

ORAL HISTORIES AND KINSHIP

Part of the answer to this question seems to lie in the traditional Greek kinship system. Methanites’ concept of kinship did not extend back beyond grandparents: the kindred of relatives extending to second cousins, known as the *soi*, was effectively limited to the offspring of the grandparental generation.³³ In addition, the emphasis in Methanites’ approach to kinship does not conform to standard anthropological notions of kinship, which emphasise *intergenerational* connections within a kinship group— a viewpoint derived especially from African kinship systems. Instead, the emphasis in Methanites’ kinship is on *intragenerational* links— that is horizontally within generations, rather than vertically, across generations and back in time. Hence there was no mechanism for remembering back 5 or 6 generations via long lines of ancestors.³⁴ This meant that most people could not directly link identifiable ancestors to the period in question.

This did not seem to be the whole answer, however, since studies of oral histories in various parts of the world indicate that great events can frequently be remembered over long time spans, even if de-coupled from

³² Forbes 2007a, 71-2, 215-16.

³³ Forbes 2007a, 127-41.

³⁴ Forbes 2007a, 138-41.

genealogies.³⁵ The arrival of a large mass of immigrants during the most momentous episode in the history of modern Greece ought to have been remembered, yet there was no common oral tradition of such an event. Nevertheless, a substantial number of Methanites did have some sort of story concerning the origins of their ancestors before their arrival on Methana, although they did not specify when they arrived or under what circumstances. When I asked ‘when did the ancestors of Methanites, (or, of people in your village) arrive’, or ‘where did the ancestors of Methanites come from’, I would draw a blank. However, if I asked ‘when did people with your surname arrive on Methana’ or ‘where did people with your surname come from’, I received information which broadly made sense, even if I was not always inclined to believe it in the form it was presented to me.

A flavour of the sort of information I received can be gained from my transcription of an interview with a nonagenarian in 1998. I had already asked him when the village was first settled, to which he replied that it occurred before the time of Christ. I then asked him when people with his surname came to Methana:

*Barba Nikos:*³⁶ Because of the hill rising up between the village and the sea, the people in behind weren’t visible, so robbers would not go there. This is why people went there and put houses there. [He had previously explained that no light from the village could be seen at night from the sea. Because robbers slept during the day and came out at night to steal, they looked for lights.]

Who knows what date it was? 1500 it was, or a bit later. Now we have 1900?

HF: Yes.

Barba Nikos: It must have been 1500 or a bit later.

HF: How did the first Petronoti [his surname] come to the village?

Barba Nikos: Over there [i.e. at a distance from Barba Nikos’ own house in the village], the first was Velioti [a surname]. Then [another surname], then [yet another surname], then Petronoti. Four or five people: they filled up the village.

HF: Were the Petronotidhes the last to arrive?

Barba Nikos: Who knows? Second? Third?

HF: And when did this happen?

Barba Nikos: Didn’t I tell you? 1500, 1600. Now we have 1900? - 1500, 1600, 1700.

HF: Didn’t your grandfather tell you anything about this?

Barba Nikos: I was seven when my grandfather died.

³⁵ Vansina 1965, 116; Vansina 1985, 24.

³⁶ In keeping with anthropological practice I have changed his first name and surname.

When I asked Methanites about the places of origin of their families I received equally diverse answers, ranging from Asia Minor in the east to Tirana in Albania in the west.

Methanites' reactions therefore indicated that origins were embedded in family (i.e. surname) histories not village histories. When re-evaluating the evidence, I realised that there had almost certainly not been an organised mass migration of the kind described in tribal oral histories in other parts of the world like sub-Saharan Africa. Rather, it seemed more likely that a series of small groups, probably mostly of closely related kin, had arrived on the peninsula on a piecemeal basis.³⁷ The group of Psariotes mentioned previously, all sharing the same surname, were surely simply one of a number of such closely related groups.

FORGETTING IN ORDER TO BELONG

Despite their apparently disparate origins, later 20th and early 21st century Methanites have had a strong sense of identity *as* Methanites, for instance in contradistinction to people on the adjacent Plain of Troizinia, many of whom were settled shepherds from the central Peloponnese, and in comparison with the inhabitants of the island of Aegina, who unlike Methanites were not speakers of an Albanian dialect. This pan-peninsular identity was played out especially at celebrations of the feast days (*panigyria*) of Saint George and Saint Barbara, when for one day particular extra-mural churches, located away from any one village, became central places for all Methanites rather than mere empty spaces.³⁸

It is via the combination of a strong community identity but varied origins that it is easiest to explain the almost complete lack of an oral historical record of arrival on Methana. An anthropological study of a very comparable situation on a Malaysian island, settled like Methana by migration from disparate areas in the recent past, indicates the political importance of forgetting.³⁹ While many archaeologists have emphasised the importance of memory and memorialisation in the archaeological record, few have considered the importance of strategic forgetting. Similarly, much ink has been expended on archaeological and anthropological discussions of the importance of movement and travel in the context of identity and self-definition.⁴⁰ Few archaeological or anthropological discussions have investigated the erasure of the memory of movement and travel as a prerequisite for developing an identity in a new place.

³⁷ Forbes 2007b, 125-8.

³⁸ Forbes 2007a, 369-74.

³⁹ Carsten 1995.

⁴⁰ e.g. Balzani 2001, 211; Dubow 2001, 250-53; Osella and Osella 2003; Tilley 1994, 28.

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In the Malaysian study, few people knew their fellow villagers' origins or could recall their own genealogies beyond two or three generations. This 'genealogical amnesia' can be explained partly because relationships such as those between second and third cousins were readily established by reckoning horizontally within a generation, in terms of sibling-ship (groups of brothers and sisters) just as on Methana,⁴¹ rather than vertically across the generations, to a shared common ancestor. It can also be linked to the fact that identity and place are closely associated. In the context of the demographic mobility characteristic of the political history of Southeast Asian maritime kingdoms, forgetting the diverse origins of the villagers became a way of developing a shared identity of belonging to a particular place.⁴² The close similarities with the Malaysian situation suggest that on Methana, too, a forgetting of diverse origins was instrumental in relatively rapidly engendering a shared identity as Methanites.

Although it might be considered far-fetched to argue that the origins of the settlement of Methana could have been forgotten in just a few generations, another example from oral history is relevant here. The horse, and its use for riding, introduced into North America by the Spanish, spread quite rapidly through Native American tribal groups. The Nez Percé tribe of the Great Plains had a tradition describing the introduction and adoption of horse riding, but a neighbouring tribe, the Assiniboine, had no such record. For the Assiniboine the horse had become so central to their way of life that they could not imagine a horseless past. Hence just three generations after its adoption they believed that the horse had existed since the time of creation.⁴³

It would seem, then, that the interpretation of the settlement of Methana which I reconstructed from historical and archaeological documents can broadly be accepted as correct. However, it is important to emphasise that Methanites' oral histories of the founding of their villages were not simply 'wrong' or misguided. It is a well-known feature of oral histories that they are 'rewritten' every generation, as the information is passed down. Each time this happens, the story is modified to fit the standpoint of the new generation.⁴⁴ The 'forgetting' of the origins of Methanites should therefore not be seen as a negative or passive response to the passage of time and poor memorialisation. Rather it should be considered an active and positive set of decisions by more recent generations resulting from the forging of a common Methanitis identity, set within the short generation-depths of the Greek kinship system. It would seem that once more than three generations lay between Methanites and the founding of their villages, their new identity progressively over-rode and replaced in the collective consciousness their

⁴¹ Carsten 1995, 319–23.

⁴² Carsten 1995, 326–29.

⁴³ Vansina 1985, 118–19.

⁴⁴ Forbes 2007a, 221–22; Vansina 1985, 176–78.

disparate origins in the period during or immediately following the epic dramatic upheavals associated with founding a yet more overarching identity: the Greek state.

CONCLUSIONS

This contribution has been an exercise in understanding the development of a shared identity. One element commonly associated with identity in archaeological thinking is memory and a shared past. When I attempted to uncover Methanites' shared past I discovered that what seemed to be reasonably clear evidence from archaeology and historical documents was in conflict with their own views, as received via oral traditions. Exploring these oral traditions led me to consider the role of family and kinship in maintaining identity and a knowledge of the past.

The simple end result has been at one level that I felt able to confirm the view derived from 'hard' historical 'facts' as derived from archaeology and written documents. However, at another level, the evidence of oral history, including the lack of certain types of oral histories, and of kinship, has contributed to a deeper understanding of the implication of memory in identity.

A central tenet of anthropology is that identity and kinship are inextricably linked. Anthropological studies of Greece in particular have noted that the family is at the core of a villager's social world, with bonds of kinship fanning out from it to link it to other family groups within the village and in the surrounding countryside.⁴⁵ Another element associated with identity is memory and a shared past, aspects of the past which have particularly exercised archaeologists recently. However, when pasts are disparate rather than shared, they have the potential to fragment a community's identity. In this situation, forgetting one set of pasts— a divergent one— allows members of a community to remember a shared one.

My point is that in the situation described here the kinship system, at the core of memory and identity, is also the driver of the ability to forget. Historically rooted memory is constrained by the generational depth of the kindred— the *soi*— which does not extend beyond the group of siblings in the grandparental generation, and the fact that the kinship system emphasises links within generations rather than connections across generations and back in time. Even at the time of my initial fieldwork the events which brought Methanites' ancestors to Methana in the third decade of the 19th century had slipped out of memory rooted in kinship. Nevertheless, this is not apparently the whole explanation, since one or two people maintained the memory of those events, and others would occasionally comment on the pre-Methana

⁴⁵ Aschenbrenner 1986, 46.

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origins of their ancestors. Rather, it was important that diverse origins be forgotten in order to remember a 'new' common identity.

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