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**WOMEN OF EPIRUS  
AND THEIR SOCIAL STATUS FROM ANCIENT TO  
MODERN TIMES**

Eleni Mpalaska, Andriani Oikonomou, Chrysostomos Stylios

Translated in English by:  
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The social status of the woman in Epirus has changed through times but never affected the characteristics of her special cast of features that gives her a prominent position compared to other Greek women. Her figure, “hewed” by the tragic nature of the place and its history, experienced nostos (i.e. homecoming), love, pain and death, survived and nurtured her own world, the world of Epirus women. We can always discern the same passion, the same ardor, the same belief and fighting spirit to all the women of Epirus, starting from the deities that make women’s position in ancient Epirus known, passing to the mother of Alexander the Great’s who came from Epirus and, later on, to the noblewomen (ladies) of Souli and Zalogo, to the women of Pindus and finally to today’s women.

## **THE WOMAN IN ANCIENT EPIRUS**

### **Amvrakia, Dodoni, the Molossi Kingdom**

Some information regarding the social status of the woman in ancient Epirus can be derived through the worship of female deities. Indeed, there have been several important findings that give evidence not only for its existence but also its expansion all over Epirus. Statuettes of female deities, depictions on pots and coins as well as inscriptions, are some of these findings, which attribute glory to pre-Christian women and are of significant archaeological and historic value.<sup>1</sup> Athena Chalinitis, Artemis Argotera, Artemis Igemoni, Artemis Pergaia, Artemis Passikrata, Artemis, Artemis, Ekati, Estia, Aphrodite, Aineiada Aphrodite, Dioni, Nymphs, Thetis (Achilles' mother and member of the family of the first ancestor of the Mollosi family, who were the first inhabitants of Epirus) are some of the major female deities of ancient Epirus. [1]

#### **The worship of Nymph**

Their worship was prominent in the area of ancient Amvrakia, a proof of which is the cave of Nymphs and other gods, today known as Koudounotripa on the "Holy Mountain" (Iero Oros), south of Arta.<sup>2</sup> Statuettes of women depicting Nymphs, bas-reliefs of Nymphs dancing, ceramic statuettes of women holding symbols of fertility, such as a pomegranate and an apple, as well as statuettes of women with doves on their chest sitting in thrones were found in the area. [2]

Apart from Koudounotripa, we find evidence of their worship in Gouriana in the prefecture of Arta, specifically in the cave of the church of the Nativity of Theotokos (Chrisopilotissa). According to archaeologist S. Dakaris, the area is directly related to the pre-Christian worship of Nymphs. [3] In Dodoni, in the prefecture of Ioannina, Nymph worship is also of interest, as Dodoni herself and Dioni (Zeus's mate) are among the Nymphs of Dodoni.

#### **Dioni, the Nymph of Dodoni**

Dioni is the oldest Pelasgian deity representing fertility. It is the Epirus concept of a "female" Zeus. According to Theogonia (The Birth of Gods) by Hesiod, she was the daughter of Oceanus and Tithys [4], while according to Apollodoros, she was one of the Titanides (Greek Titan Goddesses), daughter of Uranus (Heaven) and Gaia (Earth) [5].

An important worship place of Dioni was Dodoni, the oldest Greek oracle. There, she was worshiped as Zeus's (the greatest of the gods) wife, but also as water and springs goddess, from which she could receive prophecies. Another special invocation of her was "Naia", in accordance with "Zeus Naios" [39]. Themis is also called by the same name in Dodoni, which proves that both deities were so important for ancient Epirus, that they had also gained glory throughout Greece. Dioni and Zeus

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<sup>1</sup> Exhibits in the Archaeological Museums of Arta and Ioannina.

<sup>2</sup> "Dionisios Kallifontos places the mountain near modern Arta, while Lyvios (38.41) calls it by its common name, Peranthi."

constituted “the Sacred Couple”. Later on, Aphrodite was added as their daughter. All these associated with the sacred tree, the oak, where the sacred couple allegedly lived. Dioni and Zeus are mentioned together in almost all the inscriptions, as well as in written questions addressed to the oracle, in prophecies and on ceramic pots and coins. In addition, coins with the inscription “ATHAMANON”<sup>3</sup> on them were found, depicting Athena on one side and Dioni on the other. Finally, another depiction of Dioni can be found on the right corner of the Parthenon pediment together with her daughter, Aphrodite.

**Archaeological findings that confirm women’s special status in ancient Epirus society.**



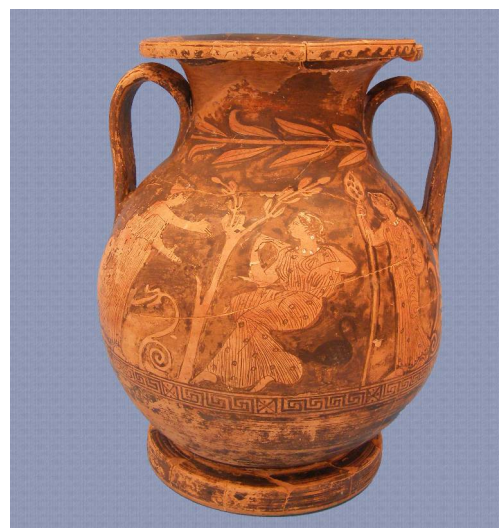
**pic.1: urn depicting women’s forms.**  
Archaeological museum of Arta. Numb.  
5494-2.

Among objects used on a daily basis by women there were jewellery and generally toilet articles made of copper, silver and gold that were found (and are still being found) in archaeological excavations of graves and settlements. Their study reveals the different social statuses of the people in the area. Valuable gold and silver jewels were discovered in rich women’s graves, while similar jewels made of material of inferior quality are attributed to women of lower social status<sup>4</sup>.

Moreover, extant pots of Classical and Hellenistic times with magnificent depictions are indisputable evidence of women’s position in ancient Epirus. A young sitting woman holding a mirror in her hand, with well-groomed hair and neat clothes is depicted on

an urn, which can be found in the Archaeological Museum of Arta (**pic.1**). On another urn, someone can see a woman’s figure with plenty of jewellery (**pic.2**).

The inscriptions of the theater in Vouthrotos<sup>5</sup> are also significant archaeological findings, as they provide considerable information regarding women’s status in the area. They describe social relations in Epirus during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. and present us with the basic characteristics of the society of free people (not slaves): they lived in family units, family assets were common for both



**pic.2: urn depicting women’s forms.**  
Archaeological museum of Arta. Numb.  
5493-1

the man and the woman, and, generally, the status of women in Epirus was more

<sup>3</sup> A tribe from Epirus, some of whom lived in the Athamanian mountains.

<sup>4</sup> Exhibits in the Archaeological Museums of Arta and Ioannina.

<sup>5</sup> It is an ancient town in Epirus, 20 km south of Agioi Saranta (in Albania)

prominent than in central and southern Greece [7]. In addition, women could make decisions on their own and become the head of the family, without having any man as their guard. This status is revealed in the Molossi voting (370-368 B.C.) engraved in Dodoni, with which a woman named Filista, wife of Antimahos from Arronos, and her children are granted “politeia” (i.e. full citizenship) [8].

### **Olympiada, Alexander the Great’s mother**

A typical example of an Epirus woman is Olympiada, a prominent historic figure, a particularly dynamic personality, who also took her share in many events in the history of her time.

Myrtiali, which was her real name, was daughter of the king of the Molossi of Epirus, Neoptolemos I, a descendant of Achilles. She was born in 373 B.C. in Passarona, the capital of the Molossi kingdom [40]. She is mentioned as a woman of extreme beauty with great culture, almighty, impulsive, with unquenched spirit and keen interest in the pursuit of mysticism, ambitious but also inflexible. Her metaphysical concerns lead her to the Dodoni oracle, which she served for years. Being initiated in the bacchic mysteries from an early age [9] and being a priestess of Kaveiria mysteries in Samothraki, she met Philip II, also initiate in the mysteries, and married him in 357 B.C. They had two children, Alexander and Cleopatra [10].

She was Philip’s only legal wife and sole queen of the Macedonians and thus, according to court custom, was named Olympiada. Her beauty, education and solemnity captured even the worst enemies of the Macedonians. Being a powerful woman, she could not stand her husband’s polygamy, a typical behaviour of Macedonian kings. The couple lived together for 20 years, from 357 to 337 B.C. During this period, her leading qualities and dynamic character gave the impression that power was everything she loved in her life. Many people also hold that Olympiada planned Philip’s assassination, so as to pave the way to Alexander’s succession. Generally speaking, she intervened dynamically both in her husband’s and her son’s administration. [11]

There are several accounts of the way she gave birth to Alexander. According to Plutarch, Olympiada heard a clap of thunder with which Zeus “put” Alexander in her womb, thus explaining Alexander’s divine origin. According to another version, Phillip saw in his dream that he stamped his wife’s belly with the sign of a lion. Reading the signs, prophet Aristandros foretold that Olympiada would give birth to an impetuous and lion-hearted son. [12]

Olympiada did not only play an important role in Macedonian policy. After the death of Alexander’s brother, she settled down in Epirus, assumed regency and became her nephew’s, Neoptolemos II, guardian. During the 13 years of her administration, till 317 BC, she managed to make the “Molossi Public” more popular. New Epirus tribes arrived and the Molossi were renamed as “The Alliance of Apeirotan”, rendering greater prestige to Aiakides dynasty<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Around 385 BC, “The Molossi Public” was established with the participation of 15 smaller tribes, which were represented by rulers whose tenure lasted for 1 year. Head of this public was the king of Molossi, which was the most powerful among the tribes. The whole organization was democratic and decision were taken by majority. The Alliance of Apeirotan succeeded the Molossi public 50 years later. It was obviously a military joint action with both defensive and offensive activities, having Dodoni as its seat and the king of the Molossi as its leader. King Pyrrus was the most prominent among them. In 233 BC the Alliance evolved into The Epeirotan Public, which lasted until 168 BC. [41]

After her son's death, she tried to ascend the Macedonian throne. However, she was chased away by Kassandros, her worst enemy and also pretender of the Macedonian throne, so she found shelter in Pydna of Pieria, where she was executed, possibly stoned to death. The image of her head is the emblem of the Technological Education Institution (TEI) of Epirus.

## THE BYZANTINE ERA

### The Despotate of Epirus

Admittedly, women's status in the Byzantine era was clearly better than that of ancient Greece. This social upgrade was also the result of the spread of Christianity, which liberated them from the ancient idolatrous phallocracy [42]. Byzantine women devoted themselves to spreading both Byzantine culture and Christianity.

Conditions in Byzantine Epirus were not much different from those in the rest of the Byzantine world. Ioannis Apokafkos<sup>7</sup> and Dimitrios Homatianos<sup>8</sup>, two important sources for the life and social status of women in the area, shed light on the early period of the Despotate [13]. In Apokafkos' texts in particular, the role of women is pointed out; women who "*are capable of care or do things that men can do, have a hard time from their in-laws, but also dynamic that dominate their husbands – husbands who appear to be weaker in old age and seek their care*" [14].

In general terms, the duties of Byzantine women are directly related to the patriarchal and nuclear nature of the family of the time. Women ought to be faithful to their husbands and in the event of their husband's death, they had to live alone and never marry again, while children ought to show unlimited respect to their parents and their upbringing was a particularly significant issue.

With regard to marriage as an institution, dowry was an integral part of the whole process and included property such as houses, land, cash, jewellery and it was mostly useful "*as a protection against poverty and not as liquid assets*" [15]. During the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century, legislation related to dowry seemed to be strictly followed, as property often changed hands violently, which turned dowry into a flexible asset.

Being promised or else marriage promise was recognised by laws of that time, defining the age of 12 as the youngest age to perform the act. This fact though did not stop parents from informally engaging their daughters at a very young age – from 5 to 9 years old – by providing false personal details so as to bring forward their wedding with men who quite often were much older. Under age girls did not react and the case of a 12-year old girl who, threatening to commit suicide, forced her relatives to go to court so as to break the promise is considered extremely rare [16].

Under these circumstances, a sometimes violent reaction on the part of women who were not satisfied with their marriage could be expected. They would abandon their homes, try to commit suicide or even kill their husbands. Their most typical reaction was divorce and the commonest reasons were early marriage, men's sexual incompetence due to old age, sexual perversion, adultery and quite often the woman's aversion for her husband. Women were accompanied to court by close relatives and would assume their own defence most of the times. In Byzantium, the free divorce policy was abolished in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. On the contrary, in Rome during the 9<sup>th</sup> century, issuing a divorce could be the result of only one of the mates wishes [17].

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<sup>7</sup> Ioannis Apokafkos, the scholarly metropolitan bishop of Nafpaktos and Arta, was probably born in Constantinople around 1155. His law texts constitute significant sources of the social and trial history of his era, while they are distinguished for their objectivity and their humorous depiction of daily life and folk culture of the time.

<sup>8</sup> The second important legislator of the Epirus Despotate, Dimitrios Homatianos was born in the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and died around 1236.



Reinforcement of the role of women and their involvement in more aspects of social life lead to a decay of the concept of the nuclear family, which reveals both how easy committing adultery had become and also the higher frequency of divorces.

All the above mentioned evidence allow us to conclude that in general terms the patriarchal society of the Epirus Despotate and the legal regime in force did not deter women from settling their own affairs, facing difficult situations and, generally, enjoying social acceptance and freedom to some extent.

### **Women in Byzantine Epirus**

During Byzantine years, Epirus turned out to be one of the biggest centres of the Byzantine Empire [18]. Brilliant monuments that provide undeniable evidence for its glory and grandeur could be seen all around the Despotate of Epirus, which was founded in 1204 by Michael Angelos Komninos Doukas. Its glory can be attributed in great part to the presence of women that held key positions and played a decisive role in the history of the area. The noble women of the 12<sup>th</sup> century assumed very high offices and played a leading role, while as wives of the “kings” of the Despotate, they are mentioned by the honorary title of “the queen”. However, there is little information with regard to the social status of women who were not aristocrats.

The most important woman of the Despotate was Queen Theodora, later pronounced agia (saint) and patroness of the city of Arta. She was daughter of Ioannis Petralifas<sup>9</sup>, commander of Thessaly and Macedonia during Alexios Komninos’ reign, and Helen, and was born in Servia of West Macedonia in 1210. In 1230, she married Michael II, Despot of Epirus, man of ambition and a great personality, and settled in Arta, the capital of Epirus, where Michael was appointed Despot. He wanted to consolidate and expand the Despotate. Theodora though was totally devoted to God and was never carried away by the power and authority she gained as the Queen of the Despotate.

Their relations reached a terminal point after Michael’s adultery with a woman in Arta, Gagrini, who convinced Michael to drive Theodora away from the palace [19]. For 5 years, together with her son, Nikiforos, she was hiding trying to avoid her husband’s fury, having as her sole support her great faith in God and the help of a priest in Prenista<sup>10</sup>.

It was not long before the noble aristocrats of Arta, indignant with Michael’s loose life, decided in her favour and reacted in a dynamic way, throwing Gagrini out of the palace. Michael regretfully realized his revolting behaviour and welcomed Theodora back in palace and his life as his sole Lady and Queen [19].

Even today, it is a common belief that Gagrini deceived Michael and that was the reason why his subjects found it hard to understand his improper behaviour. “*Michael was carried away by Gagrini... He was an ambitious man, yet god-fearing above all... That is why he soon realized what he had done and truly regretted...*”<sup>11</sup>, mentions the prioress of Kato Panaghia monastery, one of the two monasteries that

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<sup>9</sup> The Petralifas was a family from Normandy, who first settled in Didimoticho, where Ioannis Petralifas offered great service to the Byzantine empire and was honoured with high offices.

<sup>10</sup> It is the village with the name Korfovouni, just outside the city of Arta.

<sup>11</sup> Oral account of Haritini, prioress of the monastery of Kato Panaghia, on 13-01-08.



**pic. 3: Pantanassa Church, in Fillipiada of Preveza**

Michael built as a sign of repentance towards Theodora. On the outer part of the north arch, one can still see the inscription of his repentance. In memory of the same incident, he built the monastery of Pantanassa, in Filippiada in Preveza (**pic.3**). He also exempted churches and monasteries from tax, while the city and the state were ornamented with works of faith and charity during his reign.

Theodora left her mark on the political affairs of the Despotat. She supported her husband both in peace and wartime as well as his failures. In 1234, after her incitement, education in the Despotate was reinforced by founding a higher school. She fought for the territorial and spiritual protection of the state's existence and one of her primary goals was peace among Greek states of the time, having re-establishment of the Byzantine Empire as her ultimate purpose. She never ceased to struggle for that cause and this is why she was named "peace-maker saint". Nevertheless, she cared mostly about the preservation of the orthodox religion, which was threatened by papacy and Roman propaganda, and sought to "(re)unite" the two churches [19].

At the beginning of 1265, Theodora and Michael's son, Nikiforos I, got married to emperor Michael VIII Paleologos' niece, Anna, and a new effort for peace and reconciliation with the revived Byzantine Empire finally succeeded. Anna Paleologina Kantakouzini played an equally important role in the political affairs of the Despotate and was particularly distinguished for her diplomatic flexibility [20].

Theodora's holiness is also evident in her daughter, Helen, who died in a tragic way, due to her attachment to orthodox religion, Michael Dendias, a scholar who studied her life, commented: "*It is a pity that Orthodox Church consecrated only her mother, Theodora, and not Helen herself. The reason for this is that Church was away from her sufferings, was not a witness of Helen's perseverance in virtue, was not aware of her resignation in sorrow, pain, disaster, and hardship. Church was never informed of her attitude towards the representatives of the political and religious power in Italy. Aristocrat Michalitsis' daughter was indeed a martyr in support of her faith, and the virtue and nobility of her nation*" [21].

After the death of Michael II in 1269 AD, Theodora decided to leave the world and become a nun, away from the glory of the palace and settled down in Agios Georgios monastery, which is now the church of Agia Theodora. Her biographer Job mentions that during this period she protected and supported the underprivileged and the widows and orphans, she helped the poor and expanded the monastery. She committed herself to the construction of new churches and monasteries and took great

interest in monks' and nun's life [22]. The miracles attributed to her till our days are also countless.



**pic 4: Church of Saint Theodora in Arta**

Theodora passed away around the age of 70. Unfortunately, we do not know the exact time of her death; however, it is estimated that it was some time between 1281 and 1285 AD. Her body was buried in the narthex of the monastery, where her venerable grave is located. She was pronounced Saint by the Orthodox Church and patroness of the city of Arta. She is honoured with magnificence by the faithful of the district on

11<sup>th</sup> March, when the litany of her miracle-working icon and relics in the streets of Arta takes place and constitutes the peak of the celebration (**pic.4**).



**pic.5: Students in the 1950s, just before the procession of St. Theodoras' holy relics in the city of Arta.**

## **THE WOMAN OF EPIRUS DURING THE OTTOMAN DOMINATION** **Women of Souli (Souliotisses)**

The tough years of the Ottoman Domination succeeded the fruitful years of the Byzantine era; those made women gain reputation as tragic and at the same time heroic figures of the Greek history. Women of Epirus demonstrated astonishing courage and spirit throughout this difficult period and the Greek Revolution. Their whole life was a continuous struggle for survival, as, apart from the conqueror, they had to face the difficult conditions created by the mountainous terrain, their families of many children, the consequences of misfortunes, disease, separations, emigration, etc. In addition, Epirus women always lived under the oppression and inequality of the male-dominated Epirus society. The women of Souli are a special case and that is why we shall examine them more closely.

Men and women of Souli lived in an organised way in clans and cliques, according to a primitive way of social organisation. The relations between the two sexes were developed in a different way from the one we see everywhere else in Greece in accordance with the conditions prevalent in the area due to constant military conflicts. In many aspects, the figure of the woman of Souli brings to mind the woman of ancient Sparta.

In general terms, women were not disregarded at all, but this does not mean that they enjoyed extended rights and full participation in public affairs. She was under great pressure to prove her fertility by bearing her husband's children. The biological survival of her nation, as well as the military and material power and possessions of her family were fully depended on her, provided that she gave birth to boys [23]. Men and women of Souli, however, were not angered if they happened to have a baby girl, as was the case with other places of Greece that time. They considered women capable of coping with even the most difficult situations and were fully trusted even in relation to military issues. Indeed, women would decide on critical issues instead of men. For example, in the case of a dispute, the rivals would ask for a woman to state her opinion, which was accepted by everybody. On the other hand, in the case of a dispute between women, no man would intervene in order to avoid the death of a woman during the fight, as this constituted a terrible crime and the killer was strictly punished. The account of Christoforos Perrevos<sup>12</sup>, a historian of the time, is characteristic: "*Whoever kills a woman should also be (considered) as killer of the number of children she managed to give birth to*" [24].

The woman in Souli is mentioned as the mistress of the house, had a definitely significant role to play in the family and undertook the care and defence of her rights. Her main characteristics were - and still are - common for every wife and mother in Epirus, who constantly caters for the needs of her husband and children.

With regard to local wedding customs, most of which are encountered throughout the mountainous regions of Epirus with some sort of variation, it is mentioned that the groom's father was exclusively responsible for choosing the bride. He would make an arrangement with the bride's father and would just announce his

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<sup>12</sup> The historian and teacher Christoforos Perrevos (1773-1863) fought for the spread of the revolutionary ideas of the people of Souli, who were fighting to regain their land at that time. His book, "*History of Souli and Parga*", which includes significant information about the social organisation of the people of Souli, was published before the Greek Revolution.

decision to his son [23]. The custom of dowry in Souli is not exactly the same as in the rest of the country. Brides would take only the clothing, which was made long before the wedding, for the decoration of their new home as dowry. Nowadays it is still a popular custom throughout Epirus, yet slightly changed, since the preparation of some kind of dowry is considered a responsibility of a girl's mother. Actually, in most regions, the custom of the exhibition of dowry before the wedding is still alive. Friends and relatives gather in the couple's house to admire the dowry and "na asimosoun"<sup>13</sup> it (pay money for it).

Another typical behaviour (mainly of older women) that still exists in our days is the loss of their first name after their wedding and the adoption of a new one drawn from their husband's name. This is how the widows of fighters from Souli were recorded in a document of 1827: the wife of Markos Botsaris was known as Markaina; Giorgios Tzavelas' wife is mentioned as Giorgakaina Tzavela, etc.

It is worth mentioning that women of Epirus living in the mountains were quite different from women of the plains, "rayiadisses" as they are commonly referred in history. The steep mountains, combined with continuous snowfall and lack of land fit for cultivation resulted in men's emigration in search of a job. Women dealt with everything that had to do with the family, the house and the upbringing of their children without any help, and in many cases, under the strict supervision of relatives, who made things even worse. This picture is not typical only of the society of Ottoman dominated Epirus, but also of modern society since, in some regions, women are under the control of their husband's relatives, mainly as far as the upbringing of children and the handling of family property are concerned.

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<sup>13</sup> They offered coins or even huge sums of money for luck.

## THE WOMAN OF EPIRUS IN MODERN TIMES

From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century till today



The structure of the family remained strictly patriarchal in modern times too and all decisions were made by the husband. Under these circumstances the woman managed not only to survive but also to play a crucial role within the family, a role that is occasionally acknowledged as equal or even more important than that of man.

The house and the family were the whole world of women and all their occupations had to do with these two sectors. She was the first to wake up in the morning and the last to sleep at night, a habit typical of her in our days too. The duties of a good housewife included a wide range of activities, such as cooking, sewing and knitting, since her family should always look neat and clean even if the financial situation did not entail something like that. All these qualities of a good wife, mother, and housewife are typical even of modern women of Epirus, who are still renowned for their skillful cooking and their housekeeping. As mentioned above, housekeeping was one of her main responsibilities. So, even though she always had a full day, she would find time to deal with needlework, which would improve the image of her house. She would weave beautiful handmade carpets and rugs using patterns taken from nature and everyday life, ‘...transforming dull reality into a work of art...’ [25].

Her daily routine and her responsibilities, however, quite often exceeded the limits of the house, as she would help her husband in all farming tasks: the grazing of animals, milking, shearing, the making of dairy products etc were some of her main tasks. Also, carrying water from the well, cutting and carrying fire wood, taking the flour to the mill, etc. Her mental and physical strength was inexhaustible: she would carry heavy loads, as if she were a mule, and she would occasionally walk extremely long distances (pic.5).



**Pic.5 : Her mental and physical strength was inexhaustible, equal to a man's. (Konstantinos & Vasiliki Giannaki)**

If the financial situation of the family was bad, she would leave the house loaded with the meager production of their livestock or fields, in order to sell it and make a living for her family. If her husband had emigrated in order to find a job, things were even tougher, since she had to take on the responsibility of all male tasks as well. In particular, the constant supervision of her in-laws or other relatives made things even worse for her. The same would happen if she became a widow too [26].

She often played the role of the doctor, exercising practical medicine and using incantations, in order to help those in need. As a midwife, she also played an important role in the society of that time since she participated actively in the miracle of birth. Equally important was her role in the preparation of a funeral since even the shrouding of the dead was her responsibility [26]. Funeral songs, which were sung in mournful atmosphere by older women, were and still are an integral cultural feature of the area. Generally, she was present in life and death, in good and bad moments of life. As far as weddings are concerned, all women of the community took part in the preparations actively: they helped in cleaning and decorating the house, they cooked, washed, prepared the bride's dowry, made the wedding dress and her clothes etc. It is worth pointing out here that weddings and fêtes were the only opportunity for entertainment for women, since their public appearances were quite restricted.



**Pic.6: A traditional wedding in Epirus, in the 1920s.**

Thus, marriage and family have been an important part in the life of the woman of Epirus (pic.6). The situation in Epirus,

where match-making marriages constituted the overwhelming majority, was quite typical: “...Back then, all girl had a match-making marriage. This is how I married my husband too. It was arranged by my uncle. Even if I didn’t want to marry, I could not refuse. After the wedding, I lived at my husband’s house together with his parents and his brother...”, says Aikaterini Nasi from Gavria in Arta<sup>14</sup>. Thus, it was typical for society in Epirus that right after her wedding, the woman would live in her husband’s house, sometimes together with his family. She was responsible for taking care her parents-in-law and, occasionally, her husband’s siblings and their families. Within this expanded family, she had to maintain balance and peace in the family affairs. Quite often, however, living with her husband’s parents was not as easy as it seemed: “...I got married, and the only thing that changed in my life was the house and my masters. ...I was the slave of the family. I wasn’t allowed to say “No” to anything. I wasn’t allowed to look either my father-in-law or my master in the eyes...” [27].

The account<sup>15</sup> of 70-year old Maria Zikou from Kalovatos in Arta is typical of the situation that prevailed at that time.

- How did men generally treat women at that time? How did they live ...?
- How did they live? They lived like slaves. If their brother-in-law entered the room, they had to serve him first, before the husband...
- Before the husband? !!!
- The brother-in-law, the father-in-law, they had to treat them well... because if they had sisters, they wouldn’t speak at all, so that they could get married too.
- How did you meet with your husband? Was it in a fête, in the village...?
- No. His uncle saw me as I was going to the well to get some water and spoke to my father’s brother. So, they arranged it and just told me “this is the man you are going to marry”, and that was it. (laughs). You went wherever your parents told you to go...

When the husband got back home, his wife had to leave whatever she was doing and prepare food for him. Quite often, she wouldn’t sit at the same table with the other members of the family [26], she had to serve and go back to her kitchen and eat alone, not only as a token of respect but also in order to be close to anything that they might ask for. And whenever she sat at the same table with the rest of the family, it was as if she was half-seated in order to be alert and carry out the orders of her husband or her in-laws [25]. In some places, such as the village Syrrako in Ioannina, the situation was even worse: while her husband was eating, she had to be standing right next to him! The relationship between husband and wife was quite restricted, and the father-in-law, the mother-in-law or the sister-in-law had the last word on anything that had to do with the couple. [27] Even today, in some plain and mountain villages of Epirus, it is customary for daughters-in-law to live with their husband’s parents or at least take care of them daily.

Within this framework of marriage and family, a phenomenon that was widely observed in Epirus, especially in the 50s, 60s and 70s, was the emigration of young girls in search of a better luck away from the poverty of their villages. The situation was particularly difficult for women of mountainous regions, due to the financial

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<sup>14</sup> Oral account of Aikaterini Nasi on 5/2/08.

<sup>15</sup> Interview of Maria Zikou from Kalovatos in Arta, Thursday 9 July 2007.



difficulties that families with many children faced. Many of these girls had to emigrate to foreign countries in order to get married and work. In most cases, they did not even know the man they were going to marry and have a family with. A typical case is that of Maria Tzova (**pic. 7**), who has lived in Ottawa of Canada for the last 40 years. When she became “of a marrying age” (21 years old), her godmother suggested a match-making wedding with someone from a village in Nafpaktos, who had already immigrated to Canada. She reassured her that he was a good, hard-working man who was interested in having a family.

Maria, having the difficult financial situation of her family in mind, decided to leave Greece and marry that man, whom she had known only from his photograph. Her younger sister, Zoitsa Samartzi, still remembers the day that Maria left their house in the village: “*What are you going to do if you don’t like him?*”, she asked her. “*I’m going to walk all the distance back here*”, Maria answered<sup>16</sup>.

At this point, it is worth referring to the importance of education for the woman of Epirus, since we can observe a significant differentiation: most girls from the plain dropped school right after they had completed elementary education, not because they wanted to but because they



**Pic.7: Maria Tzova, at her village, with her mother and her son.**



**pic.8: Excursion of the Junior high school of Agnanta.(1965).**

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<sup>16</sup> Oral account of Zoitsa Samartzi on 20/1/08.

were under pressure by their parents, who wanted them to work in the fields or learn some kind of craft. *“My father didn’t let me continue with school, even though I wanted to. Few girls went on to study in secondary education. I had to learn some kind of craft, and earn some money to help my family...”*, says Aikaterini Nasi, from Gavria in Arta. In villages of the mountainous regions of Epirus, on the contrary, despite difficulties, most girls completed their secondary education, and some of them would go even further to study at university or some other school. **(pic. 8)**

The woman of Epirus, more than any other Greek woman, has identified herself with the role of the mother, in particular the distressed mother who is completely devoted to her children and family. She sometimes looks as if she was born for this purpose: to make a family and protect it under any circumstances. Indeed, the mother from Epirus has always ruled her family wisely and has brought up her children with all these eternal ideals which form remarkable personalities. The brave chieftains of Epirus (Tzavelas, Botsaris, Karaiskakis, Zervas etc), who lead our country to its freedom, the martyrs and saints (Saint Maximos the Greek, the martyrs Zacharias and Georgios etc), the great benefactors of our nation (Skoufas, Averof, Zappas, Tositsas, etc), as well as all those unknown people from Epirus who excelled and still excel in every domain of life, are indisputable examples of such remarkable personalities. This mother is devoted both to the role of man and woman by her fate. During the difficult years of war, she had to bring up her children and also protect them from the enemy. During the years of poverty between wars, she had to work under adverse conditions, in order to provide as much as she could for her family. During modern times, she has to face emigration due to lack of jobs. In all these cases, she has to face social exclusion and the oppression of male-dominated society at the same time.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, she appears independent and dynamic, making progress and excelling in every domain, proving once again that women from this distant and poor district of Greece have great reserves of spiritual power, courage, and intelligence. Women of Epirus have made our area known through their social and political action, art and science, and they have achieved both national and international recognition and prominence. However, none of these distinctions, none of these high offices she has acquired, altered her unique identity and her unique character.

## **THE WOMAN OF EPIRUS DURING THE WAR**

War is a direct threat for individual freedom and that is why it is considered to be very bad and a counselor of disaster. According to the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, war is defined as the social situation in which parents bury their children, while peace is exactly the opposite [28]. During the national struggles of Greeks, however, death, pain and injustice were not the only protagonists. Hope and the fact that individuals identified with freedom played their role too. And this is exactly where the leading role of women, as protectors and defenders of those ideals that make up freedom, the greatest possession of human life, can be seen. *“The warlike qualities, however, that are attributed to the woman-warrior do not distort her image. She is still an everyday woman of a specific era, oppressed by society, who, nevertheless, stands up and shows, if need be, her bravery and dash. She is praised and sung, breaking the social prejudice that courage is a virtue and privilege of men”* [29].

Greek history refers to names of women from Epirus who fought at the front. We distinguish three periods of woman contribution to the fight for freedom: The period of the Ottoman Domination and the Greek Revolution in 1821, the war of 1912-1913 between Greece and Turkey, and the war of 1940.

### **The Ottoman Domination and the Greek Revolution of 1821**

Since the beginning of the Ottoman Domination, the women of Epirus had experienced loss, lament, and the brutality of war. The mass kidnapping of children or “blood toll”<sup>17</sup>, which was an impudent common practice of the Turks for the reinforcement of their army of janissaries (Muslim Greeks) [30], was worse than the most difficult battle for them as they had to renounce their most important role, that of the mother. They would do anything in order to save their children: they would have them married at an early age, they would offer whatever they possessed to the Turkish soldiers as an exchange, they would beg on their knees in front of the enemy, without feeling any shame or guilt: *“be three times cursed king / for the evil that you do / you send, drag the old men, the first, the priests / to kidnap our children, to make them janissaries. / Mothers cry for their sons and sisters for their brothers / I’m crying too and I’ll be crying for as long as I live. / Last year they took my son, this year they took my brother”*<sup>18</sup>.

The contribution of the women from Souli to war has been really characteristic. The names of Moscho Tzavela, Chaido Sechou, Lena Botsari etc. are written in golden ink in the pages of Greek history.

The woman from Souli fights side by side with men, taking part in raids or assisting by carrying food and the wounded [31]. Cl. Fauriel presents a typical picture of their courage and bravery: *“The women accompanied the men in war, either carrying food and ammunition to them or even fighting with them, if it was necessary. If they saw someone of their army retreating in front of the enemy or losing a battle,*

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<sup>17</sup> It was the violent recruitment of young children, which was implemented for the first time during the reign of Murat II. It was considered necessary not only for ensuring discipline but also to reinforce the Ottoman infantry.

<sup>18</sup> A folk song from Epirus.

they would insult him and mark him as “unworthy” of having a wife and in some extreme cases they would also deprive him of his weapons. For a woman from Souli, it would be preferable to see her husband fall bravely in battle, rather than be called a coward. Whenever a woman whose husband was considered to be a coward went to the well to get some water ...all other women had the right to drive her away...A woman who wanted to avoid this kind of insult or not face it for a second time could choose between two possible solutions: she could either leave her husband or persuade him to prove everybody wrong by doing a deed of valour”. [32]

The sacrifices in Zalogo, Riniasa and Seltsos, in the last war of Ali Pasha against the people of Souli, ended the contribution of the women of Souli in the fight for national freedom in the most heroic way. These were the places where three separate groups of people from Souli had fled after the agreement they had with Ali Pasha to withdraw from their village [24]. Ali, however, did not keep the agreement and from then on, one of the bloodiest and, at the same time, most glorious moments of Greek history starts [31].

Zalogo, the village found on the mountain with the same name, was the place that the first group with the women and children had fled. When the commander of the Turkish-Albanian soldiers asked them to surrender and be transferred as prisoners to Ioannina, 60 women, holding their children in their arms, unable to stand the thought of



pic. 9: Zalogo's Monument, by G. Zogolopoulos (1961).

slavery, jumped over the high cliff of Zalogo, thus

writing one of the most glorious pages of Greek history. According to Fauriel, the women first dropped their children and then, holding hands and dancing in a circle, jumped one after the other over the cliff [33]. Each one leading the circle jumped as soon as she reached the edge of the cliff. The second, the third, the fourth followed her, singing and dancing. Their song echoed over the mountain: “*The fish does not live on land, neither the flower on sand / and the women of Souli do not live without their freedom*”. In 1961, at the place where this tragic incident took place, G. Zogolopoulos built a monument where a celebration takes place on the second Sunday of August (pic.9).

Despo Botsari, the wife of Giorgos Botsaris, has her own golden page in Greek history. On 23 December 1803, during the raid of the Turks against the tower of Dimoulas in the village Riniasa, where the second group of people from Souli found shelter, Despo blew the tower up and chose, together with her family, to die rather than be enslaved by the enemy: “*...Even if Souli has submitted to Ali and Kiafa has fallen into Turkish hands / Despo has never had masters, she will never have. / She grabbed a torch with her hand, she calls her daughters and daughter-in-law. / Let us*

*not live as slaves of the Turks, my children hug each other. /The cartridges were fired and all of them turned into fire” [29].*

The struggle and the sacrifice of the people of Souli continued at the monastery of Seltos, where the third group found shelter on 22 December 1803, under the commands of Kitsos Botsaris. Almost immediately the Turks attacked them but the defense of the people of Souli was really unyielding. The women dashed forth using rocks, pieces of wood, even their teeth and their nails, but when they realized their desperate condition they thought it was preferable to throw themselves and their children in the river Acheloos, rather than be captured by the enemy. One of the women who died in Seltos, Lena Botsari, the youngest female captain of Souli, was especially honoured by Greek people. Her heroic attitude is mentioned in many folk songs: “...*hey you, Turks! Don’t bother, don’t come close to me, / I’ve got guns in my apron and bullets on my cartridge-belts, / I’m Lena, the wife of Botsaris, the sister of Yiannis, / and I’m not going to fall alive in the hands of Turks”.*

### **Lady Frosyni, The Fairy of the Lake of Ioannina**

Lady Frosyni of Ioannina, an extremely beautiful woman and especially desirable in the closed society of Ioannina, became part of history for her heroic attitude towards Ali Pasha and her unjust death. According to popular tradition, the son of Ali Pasha, Muchtar, fell in love with Frosyni and had an illegal affair with her, since she was married to the notable merchant Dimitrios Vasileiou from Ioannina. When Ali Pasha found out about this affair, since he wanted Frosyni for himself, he ordered her arrest on 10 January 1801. Frosyni did not concede to any of his suggestions and so furious Ali ordered that Frosyni together with seventeen other women be drowned in the lake of Ioannina. “...*Until one night, in January of 1801, the lake embraced eighteen beautiful women from Ioannina. The first and best of all was Lady Frosyni, the lady who became the spirit of the lake, the Fairy that the muse sings for...*” [34]:

*“Did you hear what happened in Ioannina, in the lake  
Where they drowned the seventeen women and Lady Frosyni?  
Oh! Praised Frosyni, poor child what happened to you?  
If only stones were sugar, to be thrown in the lake,  
To make the water sweet for Lady Frosyni...”*

Here, it is worth referring to folk songs, which preserved the fame and the deeds of the women of Epirus during the Greek Revolution, and have been indisputable witnesses of a whole era. Written under emotional pain by people who had acquired the wisdom of life, folk songs managed to preserve by word of mouth the substantial contribution of women of 1821, their achievements and their sacrifices for freedom and independence, and to give them the place that they deserve in Greek history.

### **The Period of 1912-1913**

During the period of 1912-13, the motive for military activity by the women of Epirus was given by the “Mixed Army of Epirus”. In a report of the first commander of the corps, there is a reference to the contribution of women in the fight against the Turks. Specifically, it is mentioned that “...*some of them helped spontaneously in the transportation of food and ammunition, while other participated actively in the fight, showing steadiness of courage during the battles...*” [33].

This report also refers to Maria Nastouli (Kosta Kitsaina) from Derviziana [27]. On 24 October 1912, she became a captain, a title not only honorary but also substantial, and she immediately found herself in full play in the battlefield. The Athenian press of that time wrote on 25/11/1912 that captain Maria Kostakitsaina “...showed courage and bravery fighting for a long time and contributed greatly in repelling the Turks who had attacked her village in order to burn it” [32].

The contribution of the women from Tseritsana<sup>19</sup> in the battles for the liberation of Ioannina was crucial. When in 1912-1913 the Greek troops tried to overcome the barrier of the Turkish fortifications around the town of Ioannina, it was necessary to protect themselves from a possible counter-attack of the Turkish troops that were stationed at Paramythia in Thesprotia. So, platoons of Greek soldiers were positioned in Tseritsana. From that moment, the contribution of the women of Tseritsana commenced. They were responsible for the care of the soldiers, the knitting of clothes and provision of food, and generally played various roles, such as cooks, nurses and stretcher-bearers. The ability to move easily in rough places proved to have been crucial: During the preparation of an attack against the enemy troops, the army transport vehicles were immobilized in the mud. Then, the women carried all the ammunition and the medicines to the front on their shoulders. So, finding support in women’s sacrifice, the Greek army was lead to victory.

### **1940-1944: World War II – German Occupation – Resistance**



**pic.10: (from the collection of Artas’ History Museum)**

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<sup>19</sup> Tseritsana is a village built on the southwest slope of Olytsikas, on an altitude of 1000m, and populated mostly by poor stock-breeders, who had a profound love for education and played a crucial role in the national struggle for freedom.

“Mothers went up the steep cliffs like Virgin Mary. Carrying their blessing on their shoulders, they were heading to their sons. The wind was rocking them up and down, and, loaded as they were, it untied their kerchiefs, it blew their hair, “beat” their dresses and whipped them. But they were walking like men, on high mountains, stepping from stone to stone, going up in a line, till you could see them no more, hidden in the clouds, still holding their head up high.” (pic.10).

The contribution of the women of Epirus throughout World War II, the German



pic. 12: Family of Lampros & Vasiliki Samartzi (1955)

occupation and the Resistance was really invaluable and commemorated by Greek people even today. The women of Epirus found themselves at the front, fighting the enemy with all their strength, under extremely adverse conditions. And later, during the German Occupation and Greek Resistance, they helped Greek fighters the most in their struggle against the occupation troops. Especially in the mountainous villages of Epirus, women proved to be worthy champions of those ideals that they felt to be in danger. Lacking help from men, since all of them were

fighting, they undertook the responsibility to protect themselves and their families (pic.11).

The assisting services that women of Epirus offered during World War II was so important that the victory of the Greek army would have been impossible if it had not been for their invaluable contribution. In the morning, they would trace the road for the troops to use, and at nights, they would make clothes for the soldiers. Women felt that it was not just their obligation but also their honour to offer their hospitality and make clothes for the Greek liberation army. For example, 300 soldiers found shelter (10-15 of them in each house) in the village Tsepelovo in Zagori. The women were so eager to cater for their food and clothes that they slaughtered all the animals in the village, which were the only productive source of the area. In Lepiana in Arta, a village on the mountains Tzoumerka, the villagers



Pic.12: Marigoula Houliara with her daughter, Vasiliki Mpouri (1969)

were woken up by the sound of canons. "... we woke up in fear. The canons sounded as if they were next to our houses.... But the worst thing was aeroplanes. They were too many of them... They were on their way to bomb Arta...", says Marigoula Houliara, one of the women who still remembers the horror of the war, during which many of the men of her family were killed (**pic. 12**). And she adds: "... One day, trucks of the army reached the village. They brought cotton and gave it to us. They told us to make socks and underwear for the army. Each one of us offered whatever piece of cloth we could find in our houses. Blankets, woollen rugs, whatever..."<sup>20</sup>

Women, old men and children took on the responsibility to open roads and built bridges in little time, such as the 6-km road that was repaired in the village Kapesovo in Zagori. *"Our victorious soldiers of Pindus were advancing. When they reached the river Vogiousas and the fearless women of Pindus realised that the rapid water wouldn't let the pioneers work, they did something spontaneous that would be repeated later on at the rivers Kalamas and Drinos: they threw themselves in the waters and, grabbing each other's shoulders tightly, created some kind of dam, thus reducing the rapid and helping those building the bridge!"* [36]

The transport and treatment of the wounded soldiers was also a women's responsibility. They would carry the wounded from the front to the rear, bandage their wounds, comfort and encourage them. Quite often, they would take them in their own houses, which had been turned into barracks and hospitals. Every wounded man and every soldier could see their own mother, wife, sister, or even a companion in the troubled face of the woman of Epirus. In his correspondence from the front, P. Palaiologos mentions: "... women carried the wounded in their arms. They placed the wounded war prisoners on the back of their mules and accompanied them to the rear..." [33]

The most important contribution of women was probably the transport of guns, food, clothes, etc. to the front, where army transport vehicles could not reach due to bad weather conditions and rough roads. On the snowy mountains, the women of Epirus wrote their own history, making their way in the snow and carrying ammunition for Greek troops: "... I met women carrying ammunition. One of them was 88 years old... The snow, the ice, the freezing cold did not seem to scare them. All of them wanted gladly to offer to the army whatever the army transport vehicles could not. Indeed, admirable women. Different from city women!" [37] Women carried canons and ammunition up the mountains with the help of soldiers who tied thick ropes around their waists and pulled them. And they kept on climbing, pulling themselves up from protruding stones or roots, kneeling under the heavy load.

Many striking incidents speak eloquently for the strength of women's soul and their sacrifice. In Tsepelovo, the hungry and barefoot Greek soldiers asked for reinforcements from Ioannina, that wouldn't come. Immediately the women were called, who carried food, army boots, guns and canons to the war front.

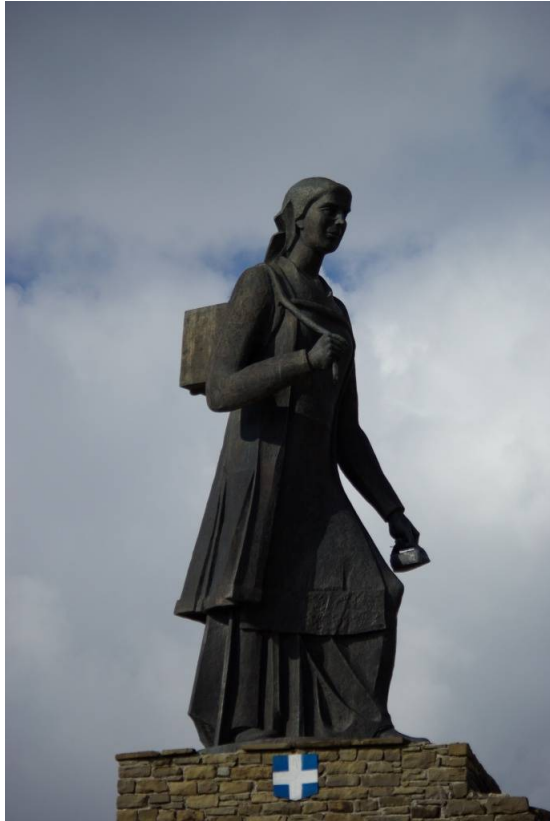
The women of Pindus became a legend, stood right next to the soldiers and once again revived the legend of Greek women, Spartan women, women of Souli, and all those heroines who fought for the honour and freedom of their country. They were honoured by prominent authors, poets, men of letters, Greek and foreign, contemporary and later, and are still honoured by the whole Greek nation.

On the top of a hill, close to the village Asprageli in Ioannina, the statue of "The Woman of Pindus" stands stately there where 68 years earlier women from Epirus fought for only one cause: to conquer their own, free mountain top (**pic.13**).

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<sup>20</sup> Oral account given by Marigoula Houliara, resident of Lepiana in Arta on 4-11-2007.





pic.13: The Woman of Pindos (Aspraggeloi of Ioannina)

*“Women from Epirus,  
walking in the snow  
and bearing bomb shells (twice),  
my God, how have you blessed  
them  
and they don’t gasp for breath?”*

*Women from Epirus,  
wonders of nature,  
enemy why didn’t you ask  
whom you are about to conquer?*

*Women from Ioannina, from Souli,  
wonders of nature,  
enemy why didn’t you ask  
whom you are about to conquer?*

*Women from the borders,  
daughters, old women, mothers,  
fire in the north wind,  
you must surely be  
mothers of freedom ... ”<sup>21</sup>*

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<sup>21</sup> WOMEN FROM EPIRUS: a war song by Pythagoras – Georgios Katsaros

## THE WOMAN OF EPIRUS: MYTH AND REALITY

The bridge of Arta and the sacrifice of the master builder's wife [38]



pic. 14: “45 builders and 60 apprentices were building the bridge all day through, but during the night it would collapse...”. It is the bridge of Arta, the landmark of the town of Arta in Epirus

“45 builders and 60 apprentices were building the bridge all day through, but during the night it would collapse...”. It is the bridge of Arta, the landmark of the town of Arta in Epirus (pic.14). For centuries, this bridge would trouble the residents of Arta and the area in general, as it would collapse a little time after its construction due to the rapid water of the river Arachthos. According to the legend and the relevant song referring to it, the only way for the bridge to stand was the sacrifice of the beautiful wife of the master builder on its foundations. Eventually, she was sacrificed and ever since the bridge stands haughty at the western entrance of the town. Since then the wife of the master builder has been a symbol of Arta. Everybody feels sorry and also respects her for the tragic end that fate had in store for her. Her main quality is the loyalty to her family and especially to her husband, whom she respects and loves above all, a quality typical of all women of Epirus, even in our days, as we mentioned earlier.

## IN CONCLUSION

The woman of Epirus holds a prominent position among all Greek women and mothers, not because she asked for it but because her living conditions impose a constant struggle for survival. Her strong character was not bent by the difficulties that she faced, on the contrary, they gave her the strength and will to help. Thus, the grandeur of the women of Epirus, the strength of their soul and their sacrifice have been insurmountable. Necessity, poverty and deprivation made them one with their land, which they honour daily and make it known in the best way. Despite the successive buffets of history and the difficulties, that to a certain degree they even face today, they never bent and stopped feeling proud of their unique identity. The most important thing, however, is that, even today, in towns and villages of Epirus, women, the modern heroines of Epirus, proudly carry on with the work of their ancestors. If they had to sacrifice themselves once again for their country or their religion, they would definitely do so. If they had to go away for their family's sake or give their life for their children, they would definitely find no reason to hesitate. Even though the women of Epirus have experienced the change of life, the ideals that constitute part of their unique personality haven't been influenced at all. Throughout time and even today their attitude honours and praises the female sex and everyday they prove that it is nice to be a woman...

“It's nice to be a woman  
It's nice to be a woman  
The first leap of life  
Belongs to you  
The skies open up for you  
The first smile of life  
Belongs to you  
First breath  
Your love reaches God  
It's nice to be a woman.

It's nice to be a woman  
With a schooled intellect  
Setting the whole world  
On fire  
A burning torch  
In the whole firmament  
That crumbles the dreams of murderers.  
It's nice to be a woman”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> A poem by Vicky Zagavierou – Vourvouli from Arta

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