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THE LAND THAT GAVE BIRTH TO SAINTS: 2,700 YEARS OF GREEK CULTURE IN SOUTHERN ITALY

by George Alexandrou

A friend of Calabrian Orthodoxy and godfather to Antonio Mauro, Greek journalist George Alexandrou is best known to readers for his absorbing 2004 *Road to Emmaus* interview, “The Astonishing Missionary Journeys of the Apostle Andrew.” Here, George outlines the Greek and Orthodox experience of southern Italy and his warm impressions of living amongst these little-known people.



When I visited Calabria, my love for the land and its people was first born out of a strangely beautiful and otherworldly feeling that I was hearing a forgotten form of ancient Greek. I had somehow returned to the days of Achilles and Agamemnon. This impression deepened in the days and weeks I spent with these simple people – farmers, herders and housewives, who live and speak like characters out of Homer and Aeschylus.

As we became better acquainted and my perceptions of their life and thinking matured, my spirit soared for another reason. I found myself heart-to-heart with people who seemed to have walked straight out of the Byzantine hesychastic tradition, for each person they meet is viewed as a living icon of Christ Himself. The ascetic tradition of the Greek Fathers of the Church is deeply rooted in the hearts of these people, and every stranger is a saint in the making.

As I learned their language, I began to realize that theirs was a strange and wonderful blend of each stage in the progression of my own Greek tongue. I heard words that I could easily define as Mycenaean, archaic Doric, classical Greek, Biblical Koine, Byzantine (ecclesiastic and secular) and older Ottoman and Venetian variants of our own modern Greek. Learning their dialect was like excavating a linguistic valley full of fossils, remnants of perfectly preserved discourses of ages past.

It was this enduring Orthodox hesychastic tradition in the Calabrian approach to personhood that gave rise to a *Grecanico* word that is used in place of the Latin *homo*, (*homo sapiens* = human being, a person), and that is *Christianó* (a Christian). While it is understood that not everyone is a believing Christian, each still carries the image of Christ in his heart, whether he is native or a stranger, a believer, heterodox or atheist.

Opposite: Monastery of St. Giovanni Theristis, Calabria. After Fr. Cosmas' restoration.

Photos courtesy of Georgios Alexandrou and Mimmo Fiorenza.

Ancient Greek and Mycenaean Calabria

Calabrian history goes back to the dawn of recorded time. Founded as a part of *Megali Ellada* (Greater Greece), the original name of southern Italy, Calabria's early Greek colonies are documented to 700 B.C. by archaeological remains and the great Greek historians: Herodotus, Thucydides, and Arrianus. Southern Italy was one of the three cradles of Greek civilization, the others being Greece as we know it now, and western Asia Minor with Pontos.

The first Greek colonists (700 B.C.) settled in southern Italy from the city-states of Greece and from Asia Minor, but even earlier were the "Mycenaean Greeks," the prehistoric "pre-Hellenes," who entered southern Italy from the Greek Balkans and Aegean Islands, around or before 1700 B.C.



Mosaics of Sts. Leo and Lucia in Calabrian Catholic Church.

After the Trojan War, remote histories reported a Mycenaean colony in 1200 B.C. in southern Italy. For centuries this was thought to be only a legend, but archeologists have now uncovered evidence that there was indeed a Mycenaean presence, and possibly permanent outposts of the empire. If this is true, then the Greeks immigrating to southern Italy in 700 B.C. weren't going to an unknown place, but to established Greek colonies where Greeks were already living. Centuries of thriving trade between the Mycenaeans and southern Italy is now clearly established, and evidence for more settled colonies is found in traces of pre-Homeric

Mycenaean-era words still in use in modern Calabrian Greek, such as the word for "cow," *vuthulia* [from *vus* (cow) and *thelia* (feminine)].

Almost all of the cities of southern Italy were originally Greek colonies and Greek-speaking: Syracuse, Reggio, Messina, Cefalu, Naples, Bari. The early exceptions to this were the region's indigenous Sicilians, Sikanians, and Elymians, who were themselves eventually Hellenized. Throughout the ancient Roman period, the region was entirely Greek-speaking, and the Italians still call this area *Magna Graecia*.

Around 300 B.C., portions of southern Italy were Latinized by the Romans, however, many cities in eastern Sicily, including Catania and Messina remained Greek-speaking, Messina itself until the sixteenth century. Western



Palm Sunday in Chora tu Vua.

Sicily, which first belonged to the Phoenicians and the Carthaginians (Punics), later came under the Byzantine Greeks and Arabs. Calabria was a part of this larger pre-Christian Greek civilization.

Centuries later, a third wave of Greek immigrants moved to southern Italy after the Turkish occupation of Asia Minor, including a sizable number of Greek Albanians from the Peloponnese, who settled in Calabria and Sicily. Although they followed the Greek *typicon*, they used the Latin rite, their priests could marry, and they were part of the eastern Roman Catholic Church.

During the classical period, all of the major Greek city-states participated in colonizing southern Italy, except Sparta, which had only one colony further north in Taranto. Greek colonies, such as Cumae, sprang up in the north of Italy, and others in Marseilles, Monaco, Cote d'Azur, and even eastern Spain. These mother city-states were often at odds with one another and did not have the unified national feeling we know in modern Greece, but they did share a common ethnic identity by participating in the Olympic Games and the religious beliefs and practices of Greek antiquity. Threads of this can be seen even today. Although the population is now deeply Christian, in some



Calabria.

remote areas of Calabria isolated rituals and customs remain that are loosely connected, not to Byzantium, but to ancient pagan Greece and the mystery-religions of the Greek goddesses Demetra and Persephone.

Early Christian and Byzantine Calabria

The partial Roman colonization of southern Italy ended in 300 A.D. when Emperor Justinian conquered the region and made it a part of the Byzantine Empire. Evangelized at the time of the Apostles Peter and Paul by St. Marcianus (San Marziano), the first bishop of Syracuse, Sicily, there were both Hellenized and Latinized Christians in south Italy during the first decades of Christianity. In these early centuries, there wasn't yet a schism, even in language, as the popes of Rome were still speaking Greek! Many Christians don't know that Greek was the first official language of the Roman Church – the change to Latin came only after the Gothic invasion in the early fifth century. Even after the change, until the eighth century many popes were of Greek or Anatolian origin and Greek-speaking.

Two of our earliest southern Italian saints are St. Agatha of Palermo (+251) and St. Lucia (Lucy) of Syracuse, Sicily (+304). Both were virgin-martyrs who were honored throughout the early Church. According to her *Life*, St. Lucia prayed at the relics of St. Agatha, who had been martyred fifty years before, and obtained healing for her mother. Both were venerated throughout Christendom, and over the centuries, mid-winter *Santa Lucia* celebrations spread from Italy throughout Europe. Her feast continues as a much-loved December festival in both Italy and Sweden.

With the fifth-century invasion of the Arian Goths, many Greek-speaking Orthodox monks and nuns also came to strengthen the faith of the people. For 800 years, southern Italy was Byzantine, and Calabria was fully a part of this tradition. The oil of the Calabrian *uliva leucolea*, a white olive unique to the area, was used for centuries to make the Holy Chrism in Constantinople, another close link between Calabria and the imperial capital.

Most pre-ninth century Church records and histories were lost in succeeding invasions, but we do know about later saints, including Sicilians such as St. Athanasius, Bishop of Methone (+880) who went to a monastery in the Peloponnese after the Moslem occupation of his native Sicily in the 9th century; St. Leo-Luke of Corleone (+900); St. Vitalius of Castronovo (+944); and St. Luke of Demena (+984). Native Calabrian saints include St. Phillip the Demon Raider (ca. 6th century); St. Elias the Younger (+903); St. Elias the Cave-Dweller (+960); St. Fantinus the Younger (+ca.1000); St. Gregory of Cassano (+1002); St. Nilus the Younger of Rossano (+1004); St. Bartholomew the Younger (+1054); St. Philaret of Seminara; and St. Giovanni (John) Theristis (+11th century).



San Giovanni Theristes.

With the eleventh-century Norman invasions, the new rulers, even before the schism of 1065, had begun handing over local churches, previously answerable to Constantinople, to the jurisdiction of Rome. After the schism, many Orthodox emigrated to the East, but during this period, there were still hermit saints like Leo of Bova, high in the remote mountains of Calabria, who believed himself answerable to Constantinople and knew nothing of the schism. Bova Marina was the last city to submit to forced conversion, only becoming Roman Catholic in 1573.

Bova's conversion, however, had been attempted earlier. Around 1300, a Latin bishop, Stavrianos of Cyprus, took the relics of St. Andrew the Apostle from the church in Bova Marina and threw them into an open field. So closely was St. Andrew connected to Byzantium that by scattering the relics, the bishop hoped to break the people's ethnic and spiritual ties to Greek Byzantium.

The tragic destruction of the relics, however, was an exceptional act. Latinization generally came, not as a cataclysm, but as a creeping ground-fire that ate away at the roots of traditional Orthodoxy. Hieromonk Antonio

Scordino, a former Roman Catholic chaplain in the Italian army, graduate of both Orthodox and Roman theological studies, and now pastor of the small Orthodox Church of St. Elias the Cave-Dweller in Reggio, says that the Roman Church, understanding the danger of direct confrontation, did not generally force outward change on either the parish clergy or the common people, nor was the use of Greek forbidden. Both Norman and succeeding overlords simply obliged all Christians to come under the jurisdiction of the Latin bishops. Villages and parish churches were left outwardly untouched; instead, the spiritual heart of Orthodoxy was struck at by Latinizing or closing the Greek Orthodox monasteries, isolating the



Alexandrou family on the peak of Mt. Bova.

remaining hermits, and slowly rooting out the tradition of individual asceticism. After the schism, veneration of Orthodox saints was reduced to a local cult, and even pre-schism Greek-speaking saints native to the area were downplayed as being solely of local interest.

This methodical uprooting of Byzantine Orthodoxy reached its predictable end as the Greek language began to die out, surviving only in small enclaves in the isolated valleys and inaccessible peaks of Aspromonte.

Breaking Ancient Ties

Besides the pre-Homeric Mycenaean words mentioned earlier, there are still discernable classical Greek, Byzantine, and modern Greek elements in southern Italy's Greek dialects. One village may have marked Byzantine inflexions, and a few kilometers away, classical Greek idioms. These ancient



Traditional Calabrian Music.

ties with Greek culture and language were drastically severed only after the unification of Italy under King Victor Emmanuel II in 1861.

Predictably, the new nation attempted to establish its identity by casting off anything that wasn't purely "Italian." Under Mussolini, discrimination against Italy's southern Greeks was state-enforced, and the use of local Greek dialects was forbidden. Parents were told not to pass the language down to their children.

To this day, the Greek-speakers of Calabria are shy and troubled over their identity. After thousands of years, they no longer speak with the glorious complexity of the ancient Greeks; they live in the mountains, isolated, with a simple language made up of words for work, for farming, for the home and fields. After decades of repression, twentieth-century Calabrians were ashamed to speak their language and many didn't even know that it was Greek.

Then, during the Second World War, Anselmo Vacalebri, a Calabrian who is thought to have participated in the Salo Government (the puppet government set up by Hitler to support Mussolini in co-operation with the Nazis) discovered through his Nazi-inspired love of the ancient Greeks that his



Chora tu Vua.

native language was Greek, the language of the people whom the Nazis admired. After the war, he came to southern Italy and campaigned, “You must take pride in your heritage.”

Around the same time, Giovanni Andrea Crupi, an anarchist during a bitter period of terrorism, also fought for his Greek heritage – not because he was a nationalist, but because he wanted to destroy the Italian state. So from these two strange poles, one a Nazi and the other an anarchist, Calabrians began to think about their past as something to be proud of.

Recovering a Heritage

To outward eyes, the Greek language and the Byzantine heritage may seem completely lost, but the place name of every field, hill, and village is the name of a Greek saint. Ruins of Orthodox churches, hermitages, and monasteries bear silent witness to their Byzantine roots, and far in the south, old spiritual habits hold on. In isolated *Chóra tú Vúa* (Bova Superiore), the old capital of the *Grecani*, villagers still celebrate the feast day of St. Leo, the local protector of Africo and Bova. In a three-day vigil at

the local Roman Catholic church named in honor of the saint, prayers and chants are not in Italian or modern Greek, but in the old Calabrian dialect. After reading the *Life* of St. Leo, everyone twice makes the sign of the Cross and the Orthodox “small *metania*,” a bow to the floor; a practice unique in the western Catholic world.

Now, even the Catholic Church is speaking about this heritage, and the Calabrians not only recognize their ancient Greek past, but are writing books in their own dialect about the Byzantine saints of southern Italy. Although southern Italians are definitely Roman Catholic, they are interested in what they have lost.

While Calabrian Greek-speaking *Grecani* can be found in all of the *Grecanici* towns of southern Italy, in only two places does it survive as a village-wide working language: Nuovo (New) Roghudi and Galliciano, with 1,000 and 300 people. The Italian government has also stepped in to help these people recover their language and heritage. Officially known as *Zona Graecanica*, the region now has a high degree of cultural autonomy. Although most of Calabria’s parents welcome the state-sponsored Greek-language and heritage classes in the public schools, many of the youth, desperate over the fate of the Italian south, are not so eager to learn the old dialect.

Through the attention focused on Calabria by the European Union and the Italian government, many Greeks are now visiting the region. A movement of native Calabrian intellectuals is exploring their Byzantine heritage, and the name *Magna Graecia* is coming alive again. Seventy percent of the people here feel that they are Greek by origin – their national identity is Italian, but their ethnic identity is Greek.

As well as supporting this effort to rediscover their Greek roots, the local Roman Catholic clergy and laity have been very kind to the Orthodox and are helping in substantial ways. They have returned five monasteries in southern Italy and ten churches that were originally Byzantine and Orthodox. These are local Calabrian churches, not missions begun by new immigrants.

In 1995, an Italian-speaking monk from the Great Lavra on Mt. Athos, Fr. Kosmas, came to restore the newly returned Orthodox monastery of



Calabrian schoolchildren, circa 1950.

St. Giovanni Theristis (St. John the Harvester). Living alone in the hills and at first rebuilding the monastery by his own labor, I asked him, “Father, aren’t you afraid here? There are wild animals all around, brushfires that burn everything in their path, and outlaw gangs of local mafia.” He looked at me peacefully and said, “I am not alone. Every night the holy souls of the local Orthodox saints are with me, helping me. This land is *Agiostokos* – the land that gave birth to saints.”

When Father Kosmas came from the spiritual stronghold of Mt. Athos to this place where Orthodoxy seemed dead and surely forgotten, it was like a miracle. The local Calabrians, literate or illiterate, suddenly felt that someone “of their own” had come again to bless their land. Their souls recog-



Fr. Antonio Scordino inside the Orthodox Church of St. Elias the Cave-Dweller.

nized him as one of themselves, and they began to rediscover the spiritual power in the Orthodox ruins scattered around the countryside. A few Calabrians have become Orthodox, but for most, the recent Catholic saints are also very dear and they don’t want to forsake the church in which they were nurtured. Nevertheless, after overcoming the entrenched belief that their heritage and language are shameful and unmentionable topics, most now confess that this Byzantine spirit is, indeed, their lost inner identity.

Fr. Kosmas’ restoration brought 20,000 pilgrims a year to the monastery from Greece, Italy and Europe, and under his influence, young local men, who had involved themselves in unsavory lifestyles, returned to school, learned professions and are now back helping the local communities, which are reviving with the influx of pilgrims and visitors.

But as they say, the enemy of men is jealous of these successes, and wrong decisions led to last year’s request that Fr. Kosmas return to Greece. His departure was neither his will nor his fault, but he went like an innocent sheep, out of obedience for the love of Christ. Now, the monastery has two God-fearing monks, Father Gennadios, a Greek hieromonk, and Father Igor, a Ukrainian hierodeacon, but Father Kosmas is sorely missed, and the people of Calabria hope and pray for his return.

Also tilling the spiritual soil is a native Calabrian hieromonk, Father Neilos, who, even before Fr. Kosmas’ arrival, worked single-handedly to



Calabrian Pascha Bread.

uncover his native Byzantine heritage. Converting to Orthodoxy, he rebuilt ruined Orthodox churches in Catagna, Seminara, and Gerace, a hermitage in Melicucá, and an entire monastery in Mandanizzi, an immense work that has unfolded through the contributions of Montenegrin nuns, and Calabrian, Romanian, Ukrainian and Russian monks and priests.

Other Calabrian clergy include Father Demetrios Makarov, a Russian-Australian hieromonk, who is living in the hermitage at Melicucá, Bova native Fr. Mimo Casile, and Fr. Daniele Castritsio, a well-known archaeologist who teaches in the Byzantine department of the University of Reggio. Together with Hieromonk Antonio Scordino, the author of *Shadows of History, Saints of Orthodox Italy*, Fr. Daniele has founded a small but very active community in Reggio Calabria, providing services to southern Italian Orthodox, Greek nationals and students, and new Orthodox immigrants.

Hieromonk Alessio, who serves in the Sicilian Skete of St. Phillip the Demon Raider, may be the last monk in the world to celebrate church services, not in the usual Byzantine Greek chant, but in the very ancient (possibly proto-Christian) Greco-Italiot tones of ancient Magna Graecia



Jalo tu Vua (Bova Marina).

(South Italy). There is speculation that early Latin Gregorian chant was influenced by these ancient tones of Sicily and South Italy, whose people were among the first western Christians.

Priests and monks are not alone in this great endeavour. Mrs. Ioanna Sakkavù, president of the Association of Greek Nationals in Reggio, was given a small piece of land from the municipality of Reggio, which she transformed into a humble but precious Orthodox church, served by Fr. Antonio Scordino. Mrs. Laoredana La Capria has built a beautiful private Orthodox chapel in Palmi, and even in the isolated village of Galiciano, the stronghold of Grecity, local architect Mimolino Nuccera returned home after a successful career in the north of Italy to become Orthodox and put his talents to work building a church. Dedicated to *Panaghia Padruna*, the All-Holy Mother of God of the Greek Motherland, this architectural gem, combining wood and stone in the local pastoral tradition, is a triumph of the modest as art.

The Pied Piper of Bova Marina

I will finish with an extraordinary story. This year, when I stayed in Bova Marina for some weeks, Fabio Cupari, a local Roman Catholic, told me that I should demand land to build an Orthodox church there. I told him that I was alone, and that I only live in Bova Marina off and on. How could I demand a piece of land? I was surprised that a Roman Catholic was so insistent on our building an Orthodox church, but I've always known and admired the strange ways that God works.

The local Orthodox here can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Antonio Mauro is one of them. He decided that he would take up Mr. Fabio's proposition, so with his participation we became two. Then, I thought of including my wife, a Ukrainian citizen of Russian origin. Now we were three. Next, we remembered the handful of Orthodox immigrants in Bova Marina, and went to speak to a young Romanian construction worker, Olivio Nicolau, who enthusiastically joined us. An Albanian Orthodox immigrant, Fitim Minelas Velo, stopped by to visit, and now we were five. We decided to go to the mayor, and set out, taking my two young daughters with us. On the way we ran into Photini Polatou, the Greek teacher for the local school. She joined our small ragtag crowd with her own tiny daughter. We went to the mayor just like that – all strangers and one native Calabrian.

Shyly, we asked for a piece of land to build an Orthodox church. To our surprise, Mayor Domenico Zavetieri didn't push us out of his office, but full of happiness and eager to help, said that our next step was to collect signatures for a petition from both local Grecani natives of Italian citizenship and foreign immigrants, legal or illegal. The Orthodox immigrants signed, as did a great number of local Grecani who feel connected to their Byzantine past – Roman Catholics, Greek Catholics, atheists, anarchists willing to defend the rights of immigrants, and shopkeepers hoping for Greek pilgrims. We now have the promise of the town counsellors and are awaiting our documents. It is a beginning. ✦