

MICHAŁ BZINKOWSKI
 Jagiellonian University
 Kraków

UDC:811.14'06'373.231

NAMES OF THE ABODE OF THE DEAD IN MODERN GREEK FOLK SONGS

Abstract: In the present paper I deal with the modern continuation of the concept of “neutral death” preserved in Greek demotic songs (τα δημοτικά τραγούδια) that have been transmitted in oral tradition from antiquity and are of vital importance to Modern Greek folk culture. Taking into account the dirges called in Greek *moirologia* (μοιρολόγια), I focus on the representations of the abode of the dead paying special attention to the language in which it is described, namely trying to show how the names of the other world are culturally determined and to what extent they revoke and reflect the most archaic Greek ideas concerning after-life beliefs. Using the methodology close to the linguistic view of the world, that is to say – attempting to describe through the language the fragment of the folk worldview regarding the after-life imagery, I will concentrate on the phraseology of Modern Greek dirges containing the names of the underworld.

In the eleventh book of the “Odyssey” surprised Achilles’ *psyche* asks Odysseus: “How didst thou dare to come down to Hades, where dwell the unheeding dead, the phantoms of men outworn” (πῶς ἔτλης Ἄιδόσδε κατελθέμεν, ἔνθα τε νεκροὶ/ ἀφραδέες ναίουσι, βροτῶν εἶδωλα καμόντων; *Od.* 11, 474-476)¹. Achilles’ speech expresses more about the condition of human afterlife existence in Homeric poems than any other fragment in both epic stories. The hero unconquered in Trojan war and now deprived – as any other ghost in Hades – of conscience and memories before drinking a drop of blood, disillusioned his interlocutor as to the merits of death. He would prefer to be “the hireling of another” and live the modest and poor life rather than “to be lord over all the dead that have perished” (βουλοίμην κ’ ἐπάρουρος ἐὼν θητεύμεν ἄλλω,/ ἀνδρὶ παρ’ ἀκλήρῳ, ᾧ μὴ βίωτος πολὺς εἶη,/ ἢ πᾶσιν νεκύεσσι καταφθιμένοισιν ἀνάσσειν. *Od.* 489-491). In fact, in Homeric poems the vision of the afterlife of an individual is completely hopeless because, according to archaic Greek representations, the world of the dead is not a place of punishment nei-

¹ Homer, *The Odyssey* with an English Translation by A.T. Murray, Text accessible on: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/> [access: 13.01.2011].

ther reward as it is in later Greek eschatology. At this early stage of Greek thought human souls are just shades of the living wandering aimlessly on the asphodel meadows through the darkness of the lower world². However, an attempt to see in a poetic vision a coherent eschatological system is an arduous task as the elements constituting the afterlife of an individual are not only veiled and incoherent but in most cases even exclude each other. Still, we are not able to discern if the epic vision reflects the popular eschatological beliefs of the people living in the archaic period and earlier or if it is just a poetic concept devoid of convincing parallels in reality³.

Nevertheless such a sullen and gloomy lot of every man is not a Hellenic nor Homer's idea but contains the traces of archaic thinking. If we compare closely similar ancient epic texts coming from the Middle East, we will find the same obscurity of the eschatological vision as well as the same beliefs regarding the afterlife of an individual. For instance, in the epic of Gilgamesh, the story known among the Sumerians and later adopted by Akkadians, the netherworld (known as Irkalla, Aralu or Kigal) is depicted as a "house of dust and darkness" whose inhabitants eat clay and are clothed in bird feathers⁴. In another myth, one of the most famous ever, about the descent of Inanna (Assyrian Ishtar) into the underworld, appears the formula significantly underlining the conditions of those who dwell in the darkness of the netherworld: "Don't let your precious metal be alloyed there with the dirt of the underworld"⁵. The element of "dust", "dirt" and "clay" is also a characteristic of the conception of Sheol, the earliest notion of the afterlife in Jewish Scriptures, in Greek translations of the Bible rendered always as "Hades"⁶ – the term that has long established

² I use alternatively the following English synonyms for "the abode of the dead", namely for the place where the "soul" is believed to go after death: the underworld, the world below, the netherworld, the lower world, the other world. They correspond in a way with Modern Greek equivalents that I research in this article.

³ Ch. Sourvinou – Inwood, "Reading" *Greek Death. To the End of Classical Period*, Oxford 1995, p. 107.

⁴ *Zaświaty...* 1999, p. 65–66; A. E. Bernstein, *Jak powstało piekło. Śmierć i zadośćuczynienie w świecie starożytnym oraz początkach chrześcijaństwa*, Kraków 2006, p. 20.

⁵ English translation is available on:

<http://www.piney.com/InanasDescNether.html> [access 15.01.2011].

⁶ I mean here the Koine Greek version of the Bible translated between 3rd and 2nd century BC in Alexandria known as the Septuagint. The New Testament authors continued this method, thus joining the Jewish and Greek tradition. See Bernstein 2006, p. 171.

tradition in the Christian religious texts including both Testaments in which it occurs in the sense of “abyss”, “a bottomless pit” and thus of “Hell” itself.⁷ Like the Homeric underworld, Sheol is a place for everyone, regardless of life’s deeds, it is morally neutral, exactly like the Babylonian lower world⁸. The difference between the two traditions is visible in the characteristics of the world below. In Jewish tradition Sheol is described as an abyss in which all the dead, now being merely weak shadows exactly like in Homeric poems, will end up. Often it is compared to a cistern, a water basin or a well⁹ and thus the concept seems to underline rather the cavity of the underworld depicted as an indeterminate hole. Anyhow, the concept of “neutral death” according to which all the dead remain in half-life without reward or punishment, had developed long before the Homeric poems had been composed and handed down in oral tradition. From Mesopotamia of the 3rd Millennium before Christ the concept permeated into classical antiquity through the Persian culture¹⁰. The later idea of “moral death” had developed in Greek colonies in Sicily under the influence of Pythagoras and was passed on to Greece.

However, in the present paper I am not going to trace the history of the idea of the Underworld that, in my opinion, has already been thoroughly researched. Instead, I will try to pay attention to the modern continuation of the concept of “neutral death” preserved in Greek demotic songs (τα δημοτικά τραγούδια) that have been transmitted in oral tradition from antiquity through medieval Byzantium and are vital now in Modern Greek folk culture. As it turns out, the vision of the world below is astonishingly similar to the above-outlined Homeric picture of the land of the dead¹¹. Taking into account the dirges called in Greek *moirologia* (μοιρολόγια), that – as Alexiou convincingly shows in her well-

⁷ I. Sp. Anagnostopoulos, *Ο θάνατος και ο κάτω κόσμος στη δημοτική ποίηση. Εσαχτολογία της δημοτικής ποίησης*, Αθήνα 1984, p. 269–274, where he gives in references a detailed list of occurrences of the word “Hades” in the Old and the New Testament.

⁸ There is no detailed and coherent representation of Sheol in Testamental literature and an attempt to reconstruct it is difficult because of the language by which it is described. See Bernstein 2006, p. 171; *Zaświaty* 1999, p. 213–214.

⁹ Bernstein (2006, p. 174) cites the idiom *jórdê bôr*, which means “those who descend to the grave” – a metaphorical expression for “to die”. The word *bôr* has associations with a pit, a hole, a cistern or even a dungeon. In many Psalms the dead are regarded “to have descended to the cistern” (Ps. 28, 1; 88, 5; 143, 7). See *Zaświaty*... 1999, p. 213.

¹⁰ Bernstein 2006, p. 15–16.

¹¹ J. Mavrogordato, “Modern Greek Folksongs of the Dead”, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 75, 1955, p. 43.

known study¹² – have uninterrupted tradition from antiquity, I shall concentrate on the images of the world of the dead in those songs paying attention to the language in which it is described¹³. Specifically, I will attempt to show how the names of the underworld in Modern Greek dirges are culturally determined and to what extent they revoke and reflect the most archaic Greek thinking concerning the afterlife beliefs¹⁴. Using the methodology close to the linguistic image of the world¹⁵, namely trying to show the afterlife imagery inherent in the folk view of the world through the language, I will focus on the phraseology of Modern Greek dirges containing the names of the underworld¹⁶. Thus I hope to shed some light on the mythology latent in the language of the lament songs still sung over a dead body in Greece and to show the folk conceptualization of the netherworld.

One of the main features of the folk culture is “double-faith”, in other words a harmonic coexistence of pagan beliefs with Christianity¹⁷. In case of Greece, as attested by ethnographic

¹² M. Alexiou, *Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*, Cambridge University Press 1974 (Here I use the second, revised edition published in 2002).

¹³ I have used the following collections of demotic songs that I had access to: N.G. Politis, *Εκλογαί από τα τραγούδια του ελληνικού λαού*, Αθήναι 1925; *Νεοελληνικά Δημοτικά Τραγούδια*, t. I, Ακαδημία Αθηνών 1947; K. Pasayanis, *Μανιάτικα μοιρολόγια και τραγούδια*, Αθήναι 1928; Ch. Sotirios, *Folk Songs of Mantinea, Greece*, Berkley and Los Angeles 1965. Valuable and helpful source of fragments of demotic poetry was also J. Sp. Agagnostopoulos, *Ο θάνατος και ο κάτω κόσμος στη δημοτική ποίηση. Εσχάτολογία της δημοτικής ποίησης*, Αθήνα 1984.

¹⁴ Agagnostopoulos 1984, p. 269f.

¹⁵ I use the term “linguistic image of the world”, which is the English equivalent to “językowy obraz świata”, according to Bartmiński (1999, p. 103f) who understands it as the interpretation of reality that is contained in the language and could be expressed in the form of the set of opinions about the world. These opinions may be preserved in the language itself, in its grammatical structures, in vocabulary, in proverbs etc. It is noteworthy that the Polish term corresponds more closely to the German *das sprachliche Weltbild* than to English one cited by Bartmiński – view of the world – that presuppose rather the vision and thus the subject that is actually looking at something.

¹⁶ I drew attention to the problem in my paper “Εσχάτολογική ταυτότητα στα δημοτικά τραγούδια” presented at the Fourth Congress of the European Society of Modern Greek Studies „Identities in the Greek world (from 1204 to the present day)” that took place in Granada in Spain on 9 to 12 of September 2010. The paper is accessible on the website: [http://www.eens.org/EENS_congresses/2010/Bzinkowski_Michal.pdf]. I differentiated there between some categories of the images of Hades taking into account different attitudes of people towards it: a) Hades as a “negative” (αρνητικός) place, b) Hades as a dark place, c) Hades as a place of no return (αγύριστος), d) Hades as the garden of Charos.

¹⁷ The first time the term *dvoviria* (двовір'я) was used by Theodosius of Kiev (Феодосий Печерский) with reference to the process of peacefully coex-

material gathered in rural societies, especially in nineteenth century, we have to do with the world of Christian beliefs, namely the legacy of Byzantine church on one hand, and, on the other, Greek-Roman elements deeply rooted in the Hellenic ground since ancient times¹⁸. These two parallel worlds that mostly used to exclude each other – similarly to the two languages that were used throughout centuries: the learned and the spoken Greek – still coexist in the demotic songs what I shall show subsequently.

The underworld, according to the most archaic ideas concerning the cosmological picture, is situated at the lowest of the three levels of the world, below the earth and the highest level, the sky¹⁹. Such a tripartite image characteristic of Indo-European vision of the world is preserved in the Christian concept of the New Testament is, however, influenced by ethic valuation – the underworld becomes a place under the power of Satan and is described as a place of punishment and suffering of the souls of the dead²⁰. Anyhow, we have to do with the vision of the world of the dead within the pair of oppositions – down/up and the underworld /the sky²¹. The folk culture, regardless of the Christian vision of the world that inevitably dominated the pagan one, retained the pre-Christian concepts concerning the place where the soul heads for after death. If, for instance, we look at Russian lament songs, the destination of the soul is completely uncertain and obscure, which is reflected in the names of that place: in the Old Russian beliefs it is *bezvestnoje, nevedomaja strana* (unknown land) or *čužaja strana* (strange land)²² and similarly the road waiting for

isting elements of Christian and pagan beliefs in conscience of Russians. See Aries 1992, p. 151. The „double-faith” is by no means original for Greek folklore, it is common to all areas inhabited by Slavic peoples and is vital especially among the Eastern Slavs. See M. Strimska, *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives (Religion in Contemporary Cultures)*, ABC-CLIO 2005, p. 209–215.

¹⁸ As for the coexistence of the elements of Antiquity and Christianity in Byzantium see D. Constantelos, *Christian Hellenism: essays and studies in continuity and change*, New Rochelle N.Y. 1996. An interesting excerpt: *Byzantine and Ancient Greek Religiosity* is accessible on: http://www.myriobiblos.gr/texts/english/Constantelos_3.html [access 02.07.2011].

¹⁹ *Słownik stereotypów i symboli ludowych T. I*, 2 1999, p. 465.

²⁰ *Słownik stereotypów i symboli ludowych T. I*, 2 1999, p. 466.

²¹ S. Bylina, *Kultura ludowa Polski i Słowiańszczyzny średniowiecznej*, Warszawa 1999, p. 20.

²² Bylina 1999, p. 14f. The reconstruction of the pre-Christian Slavic beliefs concerning the place where the souls of the dead were gathered is an arduous task. The conclusions resulting from the research do not allow us to think that there was one dominant Pan-Slavic belief regarding the afterlife.

the dead is unknown and distant. In one of the dirges the soul of a newly dead girl is described as soaring *za oblački, za chodiačcii, k krasnu solnyšku* (beyond the clouds, beyond the known paths, into the beautiful sky). In many languages there is a widespread occurrence of the name of the place where the souls goes after death connected with the folk belief that it constitutes a parallel world, situated somehow in opposition to *this world* and thus dividing the dead from the living. It is called usually *the other world, that world*, like for instance in Polish – *tamten świat, drugi świat*²³ or in Macedonian *onoj svet (оној свет)* as an opposition to *this world* – *ovoj svet (овој свет)*²⁴.

The Greek other world is more concrete, which is confirmed by the names that in a way preserve, as I have already remarked, the archaic ideas concerning the afterlife beliefs. One of the most common names of the world of the dead in Greek demotic songs is still Ancient Greek “Hades” (Ὅϊδης), now meaning only a place, not the god of the underworld, depicted as sunless (ἀνήλιγος) and absorbing all the dead regardless their deeds in life. This eschatological concept of “neutral-death”, as I mentioned above, has nothing in common with Christian beliefs as there is no hope for a man who is just a prisoner and shares the lot of all the dead²⁵. Such a vision, analogous to Ancient Greek representations and ideas concerning the afterlife, especially in Homeric epic, permeates all Modern Greek folk songs and is very rarely completed by the elements of Christian beliefs²⁶.

According to the folk belief, as we read in one of the folk-songs, the Lord has created the world and has ornamented it, how-

Among many theories we can suppose that the other world was situated probably beyond the waters dividing the two worlds and later was called *Nawie* (old slav. **nawь*) meaning “dead” or “the world of the dead”. There is also a well-known archaic Slavic belief that the souls were pastured on a meadow by the god of the underworld, among others, and fertility, *Veles (Velesь, Volosь bogь)*. See Szyjewski 2003, p. 76f., 206f.

²³ Przymuszała 1999, p. 107. The most common synonyms of the verb “to die” include in Polish the component of “the other world”: *pojechać na drugi świat, pójść na tamten świat* (go to the other world, go to that world).

²⁴ Zadrożyńska, Vražinovski 2002, p. 58, who describe the funeral rites in the village Jablanica in Macedonia. During the carrying out the dead from the house, the housekeeper puts for a while a piece of bread at the feet in the coffin and later treats all the members of the household to it. It is believed that this piece of bread is “for the soul of the dead so that he would not miss it in the other world” (*za duša na umreniot da mu se najt na onoj svet*).

²⁵ Mavrogordato 1955, p. 43.

²⁶ Anagnostopoulos 1984, p. 269–271. He also gives a solid analysis of Christian motives in demotic poetry, see p. 320f.

ever, he did not equip it with three significant things: a bridge over the sea, a possibility of return from Hades and a ladder to Heaven:

*Ο Κύριος έκαμε τη γη κ' εστόλισε τον κόσμο
μα μόνο τρία πράματα δεν έπεμψε στον κόσμο·
γιοφύριν εις τη θάλασσα και γαγερόμ' 'ς τον Νάδη
και σκάλαν εις τον ουρανό να παχίνου να γαγέρνου.*
(Politis, 176)

Although there is a sort of a ladder or stairs (η σκάλα) to the Underworld, it is obviously a road of no return – the idea that reiterates in many lament songs, like in this one, where a mother tries to dissuade her daughter – that is certainly about to die soon – from going down the stairs because she would never come back:

*Παρακαλώ σε, κόρη μου, τη σκάλα μη κατέβης,
γιατί σαν τήνε κατεβής, δεν θα την ξαναέβης*
(EDT 1947, 168)

Similarly, every attempt made by the netherworld dwellers to get away from the realm of death is doomed to failure, as attested by many versions of the story about three young braves (παλικάρια) who attempted to break through Hades (τον Άδη να τσακίσουν), but were obstructed by a young girl who, dressed too conspicuously, attracted the attention of Charos – the Modern Greek agent as well as the angel of death and death itself²⁷ – and thus prevented them from escaping (EDT 1947, p. 133, 134; Politis, p. 222; FSM, p. 67).

According to the dualistic and we could even say – vertical, folk worldview, the place of the dead is a somehow reflected picture of the world above that resounds in other Modern Greek names of the place such as: ο Κάτω Κόσμος (the world below or the underworld) or ο Κάτω Γης (the earth below, the under earth). The road of all the living leads to Hades, which is simply described as “πικρός” (bitter) – one of the key words used to characterize the Modern Greek underworld (EDT 1947, 146), reflecting not only the popular beliefs concerning the conditions of afterlife existence but rather the feeling of the living after the bereavement, like in this song, where a mother complains to her dead child:

Εσύ, παιδί μου, εκίνησες να πας 'ς τον Κάτου κόσμο,

²⁷ I outlined the problem of Charos in Modern Greek demotic songs as a far descendant of Ancient Greek Charon in my recent paper: "Charos psychopompos? Tracing the continuity of the idea of a Ferryman of the Dead in Greek culture", *Classica Cracoviensia XIII*, 2009, p. 17–33, where I also give an extensive bibliography on the subject.

Κι' αφήσες τη μαννούλα σου πικρή, χαροκαμένη.
(Politis, 199)

The dead long for the upper world which they had been forever deprived of; sometimes they would like to go up there (*να' ρθουν στον Πάνω κόσμο*, EDT 1947, 134) like in the touching conversation between Charos and a young girl who says to Death:

μόν' με πονεί οχ το σπίτι μου και οχ τον Απάνω κόσμο.
(Politis, 221)

The most common phrase used as a synonym to “to die” is “πάω στον Κάτω Κόσμο” (I go to the world below, Politis 199, 204, 205). In one of the well-known dirges we come across a comparison of a child or a bride to the little bird (*πουλάκι*) lost forever because gone to the world below:

Εχτές προχτές επέρασε να πάει 'ς τον Κάτου Κόσμο
(Politis, 204)

The vision of the afterlife existence in Modern Greek Hades that dominates in demotic songs is sullen and depressive, it resonates with the imagery of Babylonian kingdom of the dead. There is no specific landscape of the world below, the place is far from concretized in a detailed depiction. The language describing the afterlife reality is very plain and simple, it is said that the deceased are just under the gravestone, under the soil, eating dust (*κουρνιαχτός*)²⁸, which is called “the poison of the gravestone” (*της πλάκας το φαρμάκι*):

*Στον κάτω κόσμο βρίσκονται, στην πλάκα και στο χώμα
και γεύονται τον κουρνιαχτό, της πλάκας το φαρμάκι.*
(EDT 1947, 163)²⁹

The idea of the placing the world of the dead at the furthest bottom of the vertical structure of the world, according to the folk worldview, is expressed in another name for the Underworld – *τα Τάρταρα* which, beyond all doubts, echoes the Ancient Greek *Tartarus*³⁰. However, in demotic songs it is not simply a name but a

²⁸ I would daresay that the meaning of *κουρνιαχτός* could be extended to “ashes”. In such case it would be an echo of a well known connection between the ashes and dying. In Polish lament songs there is a phrase equivalent to “to die” – “to go to the death ashes” (*idę w śmiertelne popioły*) which could be – as I suppose – a far echo of the pre-Christian custom of burning the corpses. See *Słownik stereotypów i symboli ludowych T. I, I* 1996: p. 329–338.

²⁹ See also Politis, 185, with the same formula slightly modified: *και γεύομαι τον κουρνιαχτό, δειπνάω από το χώμα, / και πίνω τ'οριστάλαχτο της πλάκας το φαρμάκι.*

³⁰ See Hesiod, *Theog.* 722–726, *πελώρης ἔσχατα γαίης* (731). See also Hom. *Il.* VIII. 13–16, *βάθιστον ὑπὸ χθονός ἐστι βέρεθρον* (14).

component of the phrase “κάτω στα Τάρταρα της γης” (down at the furthest edges of the earth) that invariably makes the first part of the verse whereas the other one is replaceable. Let us look at the examples of the formula with a different second component:

Κάτω στα Τάρταρα της γης, κάτω στον Κατουκόσμο
(Pasayanis, 51)

Κάτω στα Τάρταρα της γης, τα κρυοπαγωμένα
(Politis, 207)

The picture of a sort of a “distorted” world of the dead is also echoed in the periphrastic names which evoke the idea of “negation” or “denial” (της Άρνης, της Άρνησιάς), where the dead sleep on the ground and have the soil instead of sheets:

θα πάω ‘ς της Άρνης τα βουνά, ‘ς της Άρνησιάς τη βρύση
και έχω της γης για στρώματα, σεντόνια έχω το χώμα
(Politis, 185)

“The Mountains of Negation/Denial” (άρνης βουνά) that we come across here become, in different variations of the same idea, “fields” or “places” of negation (αρνησιάς μέρη/κάμποι)³¹ as well as “gorges”, “dales” (λαγκάδια, Politis, 184; Pasayanis, 15, 17), or “springs” (βρύση, Politis, 233). The world below is a negation of the world above, for here “the white ones become black” (οι άσπροι μαύροι γίνονται, Pasayanis, 12) and the dead, though they were close friends and intimates, seem to not recognize each other at all, “deny” (αρνιούνται) each other, like in this lament song, where a mother and her child negate each other:

Πήγα ‘ς της Άρνης τα βουνά, ‘ς της Άρνης τα λαγκάδια,
π’ αρνιέται η μάννα το παιδί, και το παιδί τη μάννα,
π’ αρνειώνται και ταντρόγνα και πλιά δεν ανταμώνουν.
(Politis, 184)

Thus, the folk picture of the underworld that emerges from Modern Greek dirges evokes the idea of oblivion deeply rooted in eschatological beliefs of many European traditions, bringing to mind once more the archaic way of conceptualization of the netherworld we find in Homeric depiction of Hades, where the souls are deprived of conscience before they drink a drop of blood. According to this belief a man after death plunges into forgetfulness, which can be understood in two ways: he loses the bonds with the previous life or he is being forgotten by the living. Such a conviction is attested by another group of names of the Modern Greek Underworld, resembling the Ancient Greek river of forgetfulness,

³¹ Anagnostopoulos 1984, p. 270.

Lethe (Λήθη), the waters of which allowed the dead to forget their memories from life³². This variety of names following this idea circles around the semantic field of “oblivion”, “forgetfulness” (λησμονιά, αλησμονιά, αλησμόνη).

There is a significant lament song, where a child addresses to his/her father, asking him if he sees “that mountain over there that is the highest of all” (εκείνο το βουνό, π’άλλο ψηλό δεν είναι) – the formula recurring in countless songs, especially ones about Charos. The description of the landscape that follows brings the idea of the passage into the underworld through oblivion. At the foot of the mountain there is a cold spring from which the sheep drink and forget about their lambs, their flocks and the world. From the same spring drank also the father and forgot about his children and his empty house:

Το πίνουν άγρια πρόβατα κι’ αλησμονάν τη στρούγκα,
το πίνουν και τα ήμερα κι’ αλησμονάν τον κόσμο.
Το ‘πιες και συ, πατέρα μου, και δεν ξαναθυμάσαι
και δε θυμάσαι τα παιδιά, το έρημο το σπίτι.

(EDT 1947, 167)

Moreover, according to Greek phraseology the dead are “locked down in Oblivion” where they are given the keys while entering but not while they are trying to go out, where the houses are dark, the walls are covered by cobwebs³³ and all the people are mingled together, what is illustrated by this lament song of a mother and her dead daughter:

Κόρη μου, σε κλειδώσανε κάτω ‘ς την Αλησμόνη
Που ‘ς το μπα δίγουν τα κλειδιά, ‘ς το έβγα δεν τα δίγουν (...)
Εκεί ‘ν’ τα σπίτια σκοτεινά, οι τοίχοι ραχνιασμένοι,
Εκεί μεγάλοι και μικροί είν’ ανακατεμένοι.

(Politis, 206)

The motif of cobwebs as characteristic elements of the landscape of the realm of the dead appears in another commonly used periphrastic name of the Modern Greek Underworld, *αραχνιασμένη πλάκα* (cobwebbed gravestone) or *αραχνιασμένη πέτρα* (cob-

³² The memory of a “border water” was quite long alive among the Eastern Slavs. In Russian folklore it is preserved in the significant name of the mythic river – *zabyt’ reka* (the river of oblivion) – the dead, after crossing it, forget about the world. The water was both the border and the junction – it allowed the communication between the living and the dead. See Bylina 1999, p. 16–17.

³³ Mavrogordato (1955, p. 46) cites a conventional phrase used to describe the tombs that we come across among others in “ *Erotokritos*”, a romance written in the Cretan dialect in the early 17th century – *Αραχνιασμένες Πόρτες* (*cobwebby doors*).

webbed stone)³⁴. Such expressions in most cases follow another representation of the underworld, deeply rooted in folk conscience, namely the visualization of a funeral as a conviction that we all are eaten by “the black earth” (η μαύρη γη)³⁵. Both names are connected together in a commonly met formula recurring in countless versions throughout demotic poetry: μαύρη γη τσ’αραχλιασμένη πλάκα (EDT 1947, 137). Charos, the personification of death significantly introduces himself to a girl who is afraid of opening the door to him: “I am the son of the black earth and cobwebbed stone” (είμαι γιος της μαύρης γης τσ’αραχλιασμένης πέτρας, EDT 1947, 152). In another song it is said that Charos “throws the dead one into the black earth” (‘ς τη μαύρη γης με ρήχνει, Politis, 220).

According to the folk view of the world, the earth (η γη) is conceived in a very archaic way, as a mother that gives life and into which the life comes back after death³⁶. For bearers of traditional culture the man is regarded as the son of the earth for whom it is his mother that gives him peace after death³⁷. However, such an attitude is sometimes ambiguous and the earth is considered as a sort of a divine power, a goddess that receive a man as its fo-

³⁴ According to the folk view of the world, especially in Slavic folk tradition, the stones are situated on the borders of the worlds, far from the places inhabited by men. They symbolize, among others, the centre of the world or the place of passage from one to another state/world. There was also a common belief that the souls of men could incarnate into the stones and as a result people put them onto the graves. The same applies to the marbles referring to the other world and connected inseparably with the graves. See *Słownik stereotypów i symboli ludowych T. I, 1* 1996, p. 349, 438. Polish lament songs have a frequent motif of a large stone, a grave boulder – *glaz grobowy*, for instance: *Żegnam was mili przyjaciele, mnie czas pod glaz grobowy ściele* (I say farewell to you my dear friends, when time is making my bed under the grave boulder). See *Słownik stereotypów i symboli ludowych T. I, 1* 1996, p. 401–403.

³⁵ About the relationship between the men and the earth in Greek folk tradition see especially Alexiou 2002, p. 195f.; Danforth 1982, p. 102f., following Lawson 1910, p. 388, also cites an interesting curse “μη σε χωνέψει η γη” (may the earth not digest you).

³⁶ *Słownik stereotypów i symboli ludowych T. I, 2* 1999, p. 17–36. Let me quote a fragment of a Polish lament song that gives an illustration of this conviction: *Powracasz w ziemię, co matką twą była, teraz cię strawi, niedawno żywiła* (You came back to earth that was your mother, she will digest you now, she has fed you so far). See *ibid.* p. 35. Interestingly, we find almost the same phraseology in a Cretan phrase that should be uttered shortly three times after death, as Danforth notices: *τούτ’ η γης που σ’ έθρεψε, τούτη θα σε φάει* (“This very earth which nourished you will eat you as well”), See Danforth 1982, p. 102.

³⁷ *Ibidem* p. 19f.

od³⁸, which finds its reflection in various dirges where the living, though they know it is the natural course of life, complain about the fact that the earth eats everything around, both the birds and the men:

*που τρώγει αιτούς και σταυραϊτούς, και νιαις με τα στολίδια
τρώει του μαννάδων τα παιδιά, τον αδερφιόν ταδέρφια,
που τρώγει και τα αντρόγυνα τα πολυαγαπήμενα.*
(Politis, 175).

Another lament song introduces a dramatic monologue of a mother of a ten years old dead child. She addresses to his son Kostas and asks him, among others, if he is not bored with sleeping in the earth and staying out at night in the black earth:

*Πες μας, δεν εβαρέθηκες στο χώμα να κοιμάσαι;
στη μαύρη γη να ζενυχτάς, δίχως να μας θυμάσαι;*
(EDT 1947, 159)

The phenomenon of death is sometimes conceived as a marriage to The Black Earth, which is a reflection of the motif of wedding with Death/Charos³⁹ (common and widespread in Greek folklore) that I am not going to present here because it is obviously beyond the scope of this paper. In the collection of Pasayanis we find an interesting example of such a motif: dead Antonis is said to have married the Black Earth, takes the gravestone as his mother-in-law and black stones as his brothers and cousins:

*Ο Αντώνης επαντρεύτηκε κι επήρε μια γυναίκα,
κάνει την πλάκα πεθερά, τη Μαυρηγή γυναίκα,
κι όλα τα μαυροχάλικα αδέρφια και ξαδέρφια.*
(Pasayanis, 116)

The last group of the names of the world of the dead or rather the phrases embodying the idea of the folk Afterlife beliefs that I intend to outline here includes the folk conviction that the underworld is a domain of Death/Charos who has absolute power over the souls dwelling in there. The land of Death is called correspondingly to the part of the kingdom he possesses or is actually building and thus makes a sort of a rhetoric *pars pro toto* as, of

³⁸ Psychogiou in her well documented and extensive study about the rituals of death and life in Modern Greek folklore regards the periphrastic name μαύρη γη as a goddess Μαυρηγή, the divinity more powerful than death itself in the personification of Charos whom she considers just a guide of the dead (νεκροπομπός). The personality of all-embracing Μαυρηγή Psychogiou analyzes referring to the myth of “beautiful Helen” (της «ωραίας» Ελένης) as a vegetation goddess of death and rebirth. See Psychogiou 2008, p. 26f.

³⁹ See EDT 1947, 145 (*ωσάν τσ’ εώ παντρεύομαι, παίρνω τον Χάρων άντρα*).

course, it represents the whole property of Charos. The phrases describing the world below are connected with a well-known motif of the songs of Charos that we find in various versions, where Death builds something, usually palace (το παλάτι), seraglio (το σαράι), tent (η τέντα), tower (ο πύργος), garden/orchard (το περιβόλι), using as a material the corpses of the dead of a different kind.

The formulaic phrases in different variations containing that motif usually go in the beginning of the poem:

Ο Χάρος εβουλήθηκε να φτειάσει περιβόλι.
(Pasayanis, 7, 9)

Ο Χάρος εβουλήθηκε πύργο να θεμελιώση.
(Pasayanis, 8)

Όταν εχτίστη ο Ουρανός κι εθεμελιώθη ο κόσμος,
Ο Χάρος τότε αρχίνησε να φτείανη περιβόλι.
(Pasayanis, 10)

Interestingly, the idea of a garden of Death in some demotic songs becomes altered by substituting the name of Charos by the name of the underworld and turns into “the garden of Hades” (στου Άδη το περιβόλι, Pasayanis, 1, 50). Moreover, in the Cypriot folk song “the garden” (το περιβόλι) is replaced by “the gardens of Charos” (στου Χάρου τους μπαξέδες, EDT 1947, 140). The same word for “garden”, of Turkish origin – μπαξές (bahçe), is used in a song included by Pasayanis in his collection, with a slight but a very significant and astonishing difference. The landscape of the depicted scene turns out to be the coast, the seashore, where a garden stretches with lemon trees (κει ‘ναι μπαξές με λεμονιές, Pasayanis, 42) and where in the middle of it one can find a cold spring into which “Go there to shave yourself, go there to change yourself”:

Εκεί να πας να ζουριστείς, κι εκεί να πας ναλλάξης.

The enigmatic picture that emerges from that song at a first glance is – as I suppose – a variation of the above-mentioned idea of the land of oblivion closely connected with the river of forgetfulness that is known from Ancient Greek myth, repeated subsequently and established in Roman mythology⁴⁰. In this sense, the “change” expressed in the last verse is a symbolic passage to the other world by drinking a drop from the cold spring in the highly

⁴⁰ See, for example, Verg., *Aeneid*, VI 705 and 713 (“Animae, quibus altera fato/ corpora debentur, Lethaei ad fluminis undam/ securos latices et longa oblivia potant”).

unusual gardens at the seashore. The land of the dead need not to be mentioned literally, it is obviously hinted at in a way that could be comprehensible and easy to guess for every listener of the cited song.

Gathering the above-mentioned names of the abode of the dead appearing in Modern Greek folk songs, we are able to see the conceptualization of afterlife beliefs according to the folk worldview. The convictions concerning the place where all the souls finally go to, that emerge from the outlined attempt of linguistic categorization of the names of the other world, are plainly far from the Christian vision of heaven and hell that is a characteristic feature of the folk culture in general. However, the Greek case is more specific and differs in comparison with, for instance, the Slavic folk mythology. In fact, the abode of the dead according to demotic songs is echoed without any doubt in the Ancient Greek representations of the underworld, which is confirmed not only by the names and phrases denoting it but – more importantly – by the vision of the gloomy afterlife existence of an individual. The soul does not wander about looking for its place to rest but goes straight to the kingdom of death, where it stays forever, longing for the upper world that it had been ultimately deprived of, conscious of the fact that “In Hades and in Black Earth there is no feasts and dances” (*Στον Άδη και στη Μαυρηγή/ δεν είναι γλέντια και χοροί*, Pasayanis, 93).

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Collections of folk songs:

Ελληνικά Δημοτικά Τραγούδια, τ. I, Ακαδημία Αθηνών 1947 (EDT 1947).

Pasayanis, K., *Μανιάτικα μοιρολόγια και τραγούδια*, Αθήναι 1928.

Politis, N. G., *Εκλογαί από τα τραγούδια του ελληνικού λαού*, Αθήναι 1925.

Sotirios, Ch., *Folk Songs of Mantinea, Greece*, Berkley and Los Angeles 1965 (FSM).

Others:

Alexiou, M., "Modern Greek Folklore and its Relations to the Past. The Evolution of Charos in Greek Tradition," *Proceedings of the 1975 of Modern Greek Studies*, University of California Press 1978, pp. 211–236.

Alexiou, M., *Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*, revised by D. Yatromanolakis and P. Roilos, Cambridge University Press 2002.

Anagnostopoulos, I. Sp., *Ο θάνατος και ο κάτω κόσμος στη δημοτική ποίηση. Εσχατολογία της δημοτικής ποίησης*, Αθήνα 1984.

Aries, P., *Człowiek i Śmierć*, Warszawa 1992.

Bartmiński, J. (red.), *Słownik stereotypów i symboli ludowych T. I, 1*, Lublin 1996.

- Bartmiński, J. (red.), *Słownik stereotypów i symboli ludowych T. I, 2*, Lublin 1999.
- Bartmiński, J., *Językowe podstawy obrazu świata*, Lublin 2006.
- Bernstein, A. E., *Jak powstało piekło. Śmierć i zadośćuczynienie w świecie starożytnym oraz początkach chrześcijaństwa*, Kraków 2006.
- Bylina, S., *Kultura ludowa Polski i Słowiańszczyzny średniowiecznej*, Warszawa 1999.
- Danforth, L., *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece*, Princeton University Press 1982.
- Homer, *The Odyssey with an English Translation by A.T. Murray*, Text accessible on: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/> [access: 13.01.2011].
- Lawson, J. C., *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion*, Cambridge 1910.
- Mavrogordato, J., "Modern Greek Folksongs of the Dead", *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 75, 1955, 42–53.
- Przymuszała, L., "Narodziny i śmierć we frazeologii gwarowej", in Wojciech Chlebda (ed.), *Frazeologia a językowe obrazy świata przelomu wieków*, Opole 2007, pp.105–110.
- Psychogiou, E., «Μαυρηγή» και Ελένη. Τελετουργίες θανάτου και αναγέννησης, Αθήνα 2008.
- Sourvinou-Inwood, Ch., "Reading" Greek Death. *To the End of Classical Period*, Oxford 1995.
- Strimska, M., *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives (Religion in Contemporary Cultures)*, ABC-CLIO 2005.
- Szyjewski, A., *Religia Słowian*, Kraków 2003.
- Zadrożyńska, A., Vražinovski, T., *Ludowe obrzędy i podania. Etnograficzne i folklorystyczne studia porównawcze wsi polskiej i macedońskiej*, Warszawa 2002.
- Zaświaty i krainy mityczne*, red. Małgorzata Sacha-Piekło, Kraków 1999.