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THE SNAKES OF MARKOPOULO

by Mother Nectaria McLees

Although the Greek island of Cephalonia is often described as more arid and rocky than its fertile Ionian neighbors, in the spring it is beautifully carpeted with mountain grass and wildflowers. At the southern tip of this windswept island are the villages of Markopoulo and Arginia where for centuries, between the Feasts of Transfiguration and Dormition, hundreds of snakes have mysteriously descended from the rocky slopes to enter the village church and circle the icon of the Mother of God, only to disappear back into the hills until the following year. A daughter of native Cephalonians, Veterinarian Joanne Stefanatos traveled to the island to assist us with research into this unique phenomenon.

At the southeast end of the island is the little village of Markopoulo where, for centuries, hundreds of small harmless snakes with crosses on their heads appear from the hills at the time of the Feast of the Dormition, crawling into the village church and up and around the iconostasis.

They first appear around or slightly after the Feast of the Transfiguration on August 6, and a Paraclesis (canon) is said every night until the Dormition on August 15. After the feast, they disappear into the hills and no trace of them is seen until the following August.

Local church tradition says that sometime before the 16th century, villagers noticed flames engulfing a tree near the village. They ran to the site and when the fire was put out, the tree and the surrounding brush were completely charred. At the base of the tree, however, was an icon, unharmed, of the Mother of God. Later known as the *Panagia Fidiotissa*, the icon was taken to a nearby church, but repeatedly returned supernaturally to the place of its finding until a chapel was built there, dedicated to the Mother of God, and later a women's monastery. No historical records remain of the monastery, but it was thought to have been attacked over several centuries by Barbary pirates, and finally destroyed by the pirate chief Barbarossa in 1705. A second church, also dedicated to the *Panagia of Langouvarda*, was destroyed by an earthquake in 1953. All that remains now are ruins of the original bell-tower, out of which the snakes appear each August.

There are several versions of the snake's origins. A fantastic folktale recounts that during the pirate attack, nuns of the local monastery ran to the bell tower for protection and, praying to the Mother of God to save them, were turned into snakes themselves. A parallel tradition says that during one of the attacks the pirates were driven back in terror at the sight of thousands of snakes surrounding the monastery. A third explanation says that it was only after the monastery burnt down in 1705, and the Dormition icon of the *Panagia Fidiotissa* was found miraculously untouched, that the snakes began to appear and crawl up the iconostasis each August.

To complicate matters, the phenomenon of the snakes crawling onto the iconostasis and around the icon of the Mother of God between Transfiguration and Dormition has also happened, though to a lesser degree, in the neighboring village of Arginia. This has led scientists to offer theories attributing their appearance to a fresh water spring in Arginia and a possible migration route running from Arginia to Markoupolo.

In 2000, Dr. Joanne Stefanatos, a Greek-American veterinarian investigating the phenomenon for *Road to Emmaus*, reported: "The snakes have a natural dark cross on their heads, and their stripes are transverse and very distinctive. No herpetologist that has examined them can tell which species they are in the known nomenclature. These snakes are not seen at any other time of year, only at Dormition when they appear in church."¹

According to locals, the return of the snakes is a prophecy of a calm and peaceful year, and that they have come every year in living memory except for the Dormition of 1940, the very day on which the Greek cruiser *Elli* was torpedoed by an Italian submarine in the harbor of Tinos, plunging Greece into World War II, and eight months before the Italian and German occupation of Cephalonia with 12,000 troops. Nor did the snakes appear in 1953, the year of a devastating local earthquake.

Two decades ago, we remarked that it would be interesting to learn if the snakes also appeared on Dormition before the 1923/1924 change from the Julian Calendar to the Revised Julian/Gregorian (“New Calendar”) in Constantinople and Greece. If so, this would refute the idea of their appearance as following a naturally timed migratory pattern.

At that time, we were told by both locals and the diocesan office that no one remembered. However, according to a 2011 blog article by John Sanidopoulos, during the turmoil in Greece over the unexpected change, the Cephalonians decided to leave the decision to Panaghia and wait to see if the snakes came according to the Old Calendar feast days as in the past, or if they would come according to the New Calendar. Sanidopoulos reports that to the great surprise of the villagers, the snakes came 13 days earlier that year, between the New Calendar Transfiguration and the Dormition, and have done so ever since. This seems to demonstrate that the snakes’ previous arrival on the Old Calendar date was not just a habitual migratory pattern, nor was the change a single coincidence.²

Over the past two decades the phenomenon has drawn huge crowds—20,000 people in the summer of 2001 alone—and with so many visitors the snakes can’t come out of the hills for fear of being trampled underfoot. Church wardens and villagers now go and collect a number of snakes before they reach the immense crowds. They carry them into church where they climb around the icon on the iconostasis, and the visitors are allowed to handle them. ✦

1 Nun Nectaria McLees, from “Cephalonia” in *Evlogeite, A Pilgrim’s Guide to Greece*, St. Nicholas Press, Maysville, MO, 2002. www.stnicholaspress.net

2 John Sanidopoulos, “The Holy Snakes of Kefallonia and the Calendar Change of 1924, August 6, 2011. Retrieved 10/2/16: <http://www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2011/08/holy-snakes-of-kefallonia-and-calendar.html>.