

## **Anastenaria: A Multi Dimensional Celebration in Orthodox Greece**

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### **Abstract :**

This celebration as it actually happens in Greece has been described under various angles. The actual presentation goes back at the majestic ceremonies happening in the "dark valley" of North Thrace till the beginning of the last century and situates this phenomenon in its historical and geographical dimension in relation to the many customs that it incorporates and in particular the Dionysian festivals and firewalking. Finally, we will briefly examine the position of the Orthodox Church on the sacred dance in general and on the "Anastenaria" in particular

### **Introduction :**

The "Anastenaria" ceremonies take place in some cities in northern Greece and Bulgaria during a few days around May 21st, feast of Saints Constantine and Helen . They constitute a pale reflection of the customs that happened in the Stranza Valley (today in Bulgaria) until the beginning of the 20th century. In Greece, they are perpetuated by refugees coming from this region.

These customs include various manifestations of veneration of the icons of the Saints : processions, blessings of water, animal sacrifices, ritual meals, and, above all, ecstatic dances that reach their climax in firewalking. Everything is accompanied by incense, intense music performed by drums, lyra (stringed instrument), flute and gaida (bagpipes) as well as songs narrating in a "dreamlike" and "symbolic" manner the adventures of some Constantine in Middle Age Byzantium.

The icons differ a little from the canon, particularly in St Helen's posture; she seems prepared to dance.

At previous CID congresses Marie Hélène Devaux has described in detail these ceremonies and France Schott Billmann presented her studies on the symbolism of the couple "Constantine and Helene" the importance of the person of Emperor Constantine and the analysis of the strange songs.

The following presentation describes the majestic ceremonies at their homeland (Strantzsa ) and situates this phenomenon in its historical and geographical dimension in relation to the many customs that it incorporates and in particular the Dionysian festivals and firewalking. Finally, we will briefly examine the position of the Orthodox Church on the sacred dance in general and on the "Anastenaria" in particular

## Anastenaria in Stranza

The following text is excerpt from the article published in "The Great Hellenic Encyclopedia" of 1928.

The "Anastenaria" took place in some villages inside a long valley surrounded by high mountains and so difficult to access that the Ottomans named it as "The Obscure Province".

The description concerns the village « Kosti » the "high place" of these ceremonies.

### May 2d

During this day, women and girls of the village brought the icon to the place where the sacred fountain of the village was located. They cleaned the place, lit candles, washed themselves with holy water and danced. From then on, these dances were held each evening until May 21st.

### Sunday preceding May 21st

A celebration common to all villages was held at a place (Tripori) situated in a gully (Vlahovo) full of sacred springs, each belonging to one of these villages. Inside a sacred grove, each village had its own hut.

The peasants arrived in procession in this sacred place. At the head were the musicians with a big drum, a lyre, a flute and a bagpipe followed by men holding censers and censuring the "anastenarides" who carried the icons. The families of peasants, carrying bread, wine and a lamb to be sacrificed, followed. The priests of the village also took part in the procession.

On the spot the priests blessed the water of the sacred fountain of the village, and then the icons were deposited in the hut of the village where the peasants venerated them with candles and incense and some confessed. A meal followed, at the end of which the non-native priests were asked to leave.

Then began the ecstatic dance of the "anastenarides" with the icons and at the same time the peasants danced local dances. As ecstasy reached its peak the "anastenarides" invaded the space of the peasants so that they could worship the icons and immediately afterwards they rushed through the forest to return to the village. The peasants also returned home and continued the dance until dawn.

### The eve of May 21st

During the week of May 21<sup>st</sup> and in particular the day before, all the inhabitants of the village brought wooden logs which they deposited on a pile in the place of the village

The chief of the "anastenarides" bought (with money pooled) a three year old bull "perfect" that is not castrated and without any physical defect. The day before, they brought this "kurbani" (sacred victim) in full procession (music, incense, icons) and attached it outside of the church behind the Altar.

In the evening people gathered at the house of the chief of the "anastenarides", they drank and then went in procession to the church where only the "anastenarides" were permitted to enter. There, their chief distributed one icon of the Saints to each of them, keeping the last one for himself.

Then the procession went to the village square where the pile of woods had burned and was in a state of hot coals. The "anastenarides" started their dance near the embers and the peasants danced

beside them. When the "anastenarides" arrived at paroxysm they went dancing for a few minutes on the embers.

After this first dance on the embers, the "anastenarides" visited the houses of the village and danced while the peasants were setting the table. During the feast that ensued all drank a lot and it is possible that orgies happened. These feasts contrasted with the frugal and pious life that "anastenarides" and peasants led throughout the year.

Once the feasts were over, the "anastenarides" returned to the embers, danced to the utmost ecstasy and then went to the neighboring village followed by the crowd and musicians. They were welcomed by the "anastenarides" and peasants of this village, they danced with them and then returned home.

### May 21st and the following week

After the end of the Mass in honor of the Saints, the priest went to the sacred fountain of the village in order to bless the waters, accompanied by the chief of the "anastenarides" who carried the main icon .

Afterwards , this icon was deposited in the church and the priest blessed the bull and other animals tied outside the church. The chief of the "Anastenarides" killed the bull with an ax and removed his skin with a knife. The blood of the victim should pour out to the foundations of the church. The meat and a piece of skin sufficient to make one hoof were distributed to the peasants. The ax and the knife of the sacrifice were considered sacred.

At night the ecstatic dancing on the embers and the excursions and nocturnal visits took place again , and this continued for about eight nights. Throughout the festivities, a lamp was hung in front of the house of each of the "anastenarides" symbol of the sacred function of the inhabitant.

### The end of the celebration

To mark the end of this period of celebrations, the "Anastenarides" browsed the village in procession and dance, making the sign of the cross at the four main streets. Then they returned to the house of their chief for an ultimate meal at the end of which they brought the icons back in the Church.

## Supplement on the “ Anastenarides ”

During all these ceremonies non-natives were not welcome. And if anyone dared to make fun of anything, he risked to be killed.

The "Anastenarides" formed a fraternity, whose chief was elected. To be admitted to this fraternity, the candidate should be "seized by the Saint" during ecstatic dances, but also approved by the Chief and appreciated by the other members.

Apart from the celebrations on May, the "anastenarides" also functioned as priests, curers, diviners and oracles. They confessed the peasants, anticipated the outcome of a case, unveiled thieves, interpreted dreams, "hunted vampires" in times of epizootics, inaugurated the foundations of new houses and danced with icons in the rooms of sick peasants asking a forecast from the Saint on the evolution of their health.

They were convinced that their celebrations on May were absolutely necessary for the village's prosperity, agriculture and livestock. They remained devoted to the strict observance of the custom despite the negative reactions of the Episcopal authority . The Bishop's Siege was situated outside this valley at the Black Sea Coast. When these reactions resulted in the ban of the ecstatic part, they considered that great misfortunes would come to the region.

## **History**

The earliest records on the existence of those Ceremonies date back to Byzantine sources in the 12th and 13th centuries, a troubled period of cross-breeding of various ethnic groups and religious movements in Northern Thrace.

These testimonies do not allow us to go back to the historical beginning of this custom. However, its resemblance to Dionysian ceremonies in ancient Thrace is astonishing and suggests that they constitute the perpetuation of a pre-Christian custom.

Indeed, according to German Hellenist Erwin Rohde, in ancient times ecstatic ceremonies took place in the mountains during the dark night under the dim light of the torches and under a deafening music of drums, cymbals and flutes that , combined with the consumption of wine and cannabis smokes, excited the dancers to the highest degree. They danced with wild cries, rushed into the mountains and ended up tearing the sacrificial bull to pieces which they swallowed raw..

The goal of this orgy was the "en-thous-iasme", the union of man to god or the incarnation of the god in man through ecstasy achieved by dance, music, wine and intoxicating smoke.

It is also noteworthy that the ancient Thracians attributed to Dionysus divinatory and other qualities, as did the peasants with the "Anastenarides".

Ecstatic dance phenomena for healing purposes also took place in this period (until the beginning of the 20th century) in actual Bulgaria with the "Rousaldjides" who traveled through the villages and healed the sick by ecstatic dances; as well as Christi heretics in Russia who believed that through the ecstatic dance men incorporated Jesus and women incorporated Mary.

On the other hand the flow of the blood of the sacred victim (bull) towards the foundations of the Church resembles to the sacrifices of the religion of Mithra, one of the mystery religions imported to Rome (like that of Cybele and Attis or Isis and Serapis). Mithra religion is of Indian origin and probably arrived in Greece by Alexander the Great. It includes the rite of "taurobole", sacrifice of a bull. Whose blood sprinkles the earth, pledge of fertility for the year to come.

## Firewalking

The phenomenon of dancing or walking on the embers is widespread since ancient times.

The champions are in the Hindu world where the oldest testimonies go back for 4000 years.

Here are two examples in the Hindu diaspora of today:

-Bali : young girls walk on fire in a ceremony called Sanghyangdedari; the Balinese believe that the young girls embody gods during the firewalk.

- Réunion Island : "Purification" firewalking after 40 days of fasting

In Japan, for 1300 years the mystics "Yamabushi" who combine Buddhism and Shinto, perpetuate an embers dance festival on the nearby mountains of Tokyo.

Among others, firewalking also happens among Tibetan monks and the mystics of Hawaii called "Kahunas".

Even the Catholic Church canonized St. Francis of Paola in 1519, largely because of his ability to handle fire of the censer without getting burned.

Similar phenomena are reported in antiquity in Rome, Asia Minor, Persia and Greece. Thus at Ephesus, the priestesses of Artemis walked barefoot on the fire without getting burned. And the philosopher Jamblic wrote that this ritual was frequent. According to him it is a "theurgic" practice, that is a demonstration of the divine power through the priests.

Last but not least, the Top Symbol is the story of 3 young people in the furnace, quoted in the book of Daniel

### Remarks

Firewalking is a phenomenon based on a knowledge of how to move the feet on the coals and principally on a trance state more or less acute and transmissible from person to person. Apart from some very impressive phenomena, this primordial psychological aspect is explicable and not miraculous, to the point that nowadays non-denominational schools teach common people how to dance on embers.

On the other hand, dancing on embers is not the essential part of the Anastenaria. Their predominant characteristic is extatic dance mostly out of embers as well as the multiple manifestations of this ancestral custom

## The Position of the Orthodox Church

As you all know the course of the dance in Christian cult was and remains full of obstacles.

As regards the oriental churches, dance remains forbidden in cult with the exception of ritual round dances in baptism and wedding ceremonies and one very important and significant exception : The Ethiopian Church which conserves dance in the cult since the 6<sup>th</sup> century without interruption

However , orthodox priests, at least in Greece, dance outside the church on the occasion of religious feasts.

Here are some samples of the attitude of Eastern Church concerning dance through the ages :

The following two Fathers of the Church, creators of the principal orthodox liturgies still celebrated declared

John Chrysostom (AD 345-407), 'where dancing is, there is the evil one'

St. Basil of Caesarea in 350 called dancing "the most noble activity of the angels"

During Middle Ages in Byzantium. some dancing in Christian sacred places was allowed like - moirologia (= mourning laments), which were eventually allowed to be chanted and danced in a circular movement in the narthex (entrance or lobby area)

There are also testimonies of people dancing inside the church, on Easter and Christmas with some pantomime (from 10<sup>th</sup> till 13<sup>th</sup> century)

However, the information on dancing at this period is very scarce; some images have been saved mainly in church frescos appearing amongst religious subjects.

Concerning "Anastenaria" , as we have seen before, the Church represented by Episcopal authority always tried to forbid or restrain them whereas local priests took part in the Ceremonies .

Greek "Anastenarides" as refugees faced initially (1920 to 1950) difficulties because the local populations, priests and bishops were strangers to those customs and the church remained hostile. The sacred fountains and the sacred grove did not exist in their new homelands , although blessing of waters is a basic characteristic in Eastern Church .

Anastenaria were almost "hidden" till the fifties when important folklorists "rediscovered" those amazing celebrations . From then on, local authorities accepted or even encouraged the celebration sometimes in order to bring tourists attracted by the firewalking.

The lower clergy remained comprehensive or hostile depending on the personality of the priest while the official church condemned but tolerated

## **Conclusion**

The "Anastenaria" belongs to the ceremonies dominated by the ecstatic dance and which aim to fusion human and divine and to provoke healings and other benefits.

The celebration, even in its contemporary reduced form, astonishes us by the multitude of aspects and customs that it encompasses as well as by its longevity over millennia of history. It is therefore rightly classified as Intangible Heritage of Humanity at UNESCO in 2009.

The hostile position of the Church is based on a set of synodal decisions concerning dance and on the fact that these dances with the icons are part of a series of events in the limit of the church rituals. In fact the issue is as old as the church: the dancing body in trance or in ecstasy cannot be controlled

However the "Anastenarides" of today consider themselves as pious orthodox Christians expressing a particular devotion to certain saints as all Orthodox and Catholic christians do and honoring the Saints via the icons as do all Orthodox Christians. As for the orgiastic side or the Dionysian intoxication, they appear today rather symbolic.