

Book Review

Hercules Millas, *National Myths in Greece*. London: Transnational Press, 2023, 244pp., ISBN 978-1-80135-099-0

In recent years we have seen historians pay increased attention to the informal and affective aspects of nationalism. The nation is often considered a moral rather than a political entity; and in its 'banal' guise nationalism can present itself as *unpolitisch* or 'metapolitical'.

This means that the culture-historical study of identitarian myths is gaining fresh relevance for nationalism studies. The assumption that the nation is marked off from others by its own specific 'character' seems too axiomatic to form part of a political agenda, but it does generate the assumption of a moral duty to remain true to this character and to the nation's 'authenticity'. Time, therefore, to look afresh at the informal, culturally maintained national self-images and at 'national myths'.

National self-images were traditionally the specialism in sociopsychologically inspired literary and cultural studies, closely intertwined with the study of ethnic stereotypes and 'othering'. National myths were placed on the agenda in mentality history as part of the 'invention of tradition' and 'lieux de mémoire' vogue of the 1980s, starting with Raoul Girardet's *Mythes et mythologies politiques* (1986) and cresting in the 1990s. Belgium, an easy nation to 'deconstruct', saw the early appearance of Anne Morelli's *Les grands mythes de l'histoire de Belgique, de Flandre et de Wallonie*; in 1995; Monika Flacke's benchmark *Die Mythen der Nationen* appeared in 1998. The historical sciences never quite embraced all this – it was, at best, seen as a 'cultural turn' that was felt to miss the core focus (sociopolitical, archivally-based) of the 'proper' historical sciences. To this reviewer at least, recent moves to place topics like affective nationalism and 'national indifference' on the

historical agenda seem like a belated catch-up and patch-up attempt for historians' earlier failure to actually engage with the metapolitical, culturally communicated and culturally maintained core ideologue of nationalism: that of the nation's authentic character.

In this situation, Iraklis Millas's small book *National Myths in Greece*, for all its modesty, comes as a very welcome reboot of the question. Millas is in many ways in a special position to provide this. He is biculturally Greek and Turkish, hailing from the Greek community long established in metropolitan Istanbul, and has made it his life's task to understand and to defuse (or even to deconstruct) the antagonism between those two nations. An engineer by training, he comes to that task with an approach that is unburdened by any methodologically or theoretical a priori assumptions or ingrained *parti-pris*, and with an empirical and pragmatic approach to things. To historians or cultural scholars this may on occasion appear naive or ingenuous, but it might be better to call it 'theoretically unprejudiced'. One small example of how this helps him to find fresh ways forward in the study of national antagonisms is his identification of meta-ethnotypes. In doing works on ethnonational characterizations (ethnotypes) with Greek and Turkish focus groups, he found that the usual ethnotypical questions (how do you Greeks/Turks see yourselves / the others?) triggered bland and nuanced answers and failed to account for the antagonism between the two groups. That antagonism came to the surface, however, when Millas probed further and asked the question 'How do you think the others view you?'. The responses evinced a mechanism of reciprocal imputation of ill-will. That ill-will was imputed to the other group (and by the very token of that ungenerous imputation also evinced by the respondents themselves).

In this book, too, Millas approaches an ingrained problem with ingenuous open-mindedness and uncluttered clarity of vision. He does, all the same, provide a very probing and wide-ranging conceptual discussion of the notion of myth in various fields and disciplines, which gives a solid background to Millas's commonsensical and even-handed discussions of myths related to the Orthodox Church, to ancient Greece,

and to the Greek language. In the process, Millas identifies a great number of ingrained tropes and memory-figures in the mythology (i.e., the repertoire of stock stories, heroes and themes) of Greek national thought. The fact that these are very often diffused across popular and consumer culture, as commonplaces and cultural 'background noise', reminds us of Michael Billig's 'banal' nationalism, but also forces us to widen that concept, for Billig tends to address political and state symbolism rather than a cultural repertoire.

Millas is driven by an urge, not just to understand culture but to remedy and transcend social conflict and national prejudice. As regards the former: historians of nationalism would have welcomed a stronger positioning of this approach vis-à-vis existing secondary literature on national myths elsewhere; the bibliography of the *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe* lists analyses of national mythologies for most European nations. The anthropological and historical deconstructions of racial essentialism in the wake of George Stocking is also a context that could have profitably helped Millas with positioning his approach. As it is, his application of the mythological approach to Greece (ever since the Fallmerayer provocations of 1830 a nation strenuously resisting deconstruction) is clear-sighted and courageous, and will be a very welcome source for future students of Greek identity history.

One also welcomes his pragmatic outlook. In the closing chapters Millas asks the question how, in a world that apparently cannot do without myths, we can nonetheless emancipate ourselves from them: to see and understand them for what they are, and not to let them govern us. For that wise pragmatism, and for his cosmopolitanism, historians should salute his endeavour.