

When Harvati became Mycenae (1916). Toponyms and nation building in early-20th century Greece

Pandeleimon Hionidis*

Independent Researcher, Greece

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When Harvati became Mycenae (1916). Toponyms and nation building in early-20th century Greece

Abstract: This article examines Greek perceptions and politics related to place names in the early 20th century. Although the tendency to rename places was already strong during the War of Independence in the 1820s, it finally became a systematic process in June 1909, when the “Toponyms of Greece Committee” was established and staffed by distinguished academics. The case of Harvati-Mycenae, though not unique in modern Greek history, presents an indicative example of the interaction between administrative expediency and national aspirations in the reshaping of the map of Greece. The history of this small village in Argolida [Argolída], which in 1916 was renamed from *Harvati* to *Mycenae*, is part of the long-lasting practice of changing names and adapting geography to the political and ideological necessities of the state.

* Contact: 128 Filoktitou Street, 13122 Ilion, Greece; e-mail: hionidispl@hotmail.com.

We argue that this process was an integral part of a ruling ideology that stressed continuity and kinship of the modern Greeks with an alleged glorious national past.

Keywords: Toponyms, renaming, Greece, nationalism, Mycenae.

Quand Harvati est devenu Mycenae (1916). Toponymes et construction de la nation dans la Grèce du début du XXe siècle

Résumé : L'article suivant examine les perceptions et les décisions politiques qui ont entraîné le changement de noms de lieux dans le royaume grec au cours des premières décennies du 20e siècle. La tendance à renommer les lieux était déjà forte durant les années de la Révolution Grecque de 1821, mais s'est finalement systématisée après 1909, lorsque le «comité des toponymes de la Grèce» a été fondé. Le cas du village de Harvati-Mycenae, sans être unique, est cependant révélateur de l'interaction entre les changements administratifs et les aspirations nationales dans le processus de refonte de la carte de la Grèce. Ainsi, l'histoire du petit village d'Argolide [Argolída], rebaptisé en 1916 de *Harvati* à *Mycenae*, s'inscrit dans un effort suffisant, par le changement de nom, pour adapter la géographie aux besoins politiques et idéologiques respectifs de l'État. Ce processus était une composante de l'idéologie dominante, qui mettait l'accent sur la relation des Grecs modernes avec un passé national glorieux.

Mots-clés : Toponymes, renommer, nationalisme, Grèce, Mycènes.

Als Harvati zu Mycenae wurde (1916). Toponyme und Nationsbildung im Griechenland des frühen 20. Jahrhunderts

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Artikel untersucht griechische Ansichten und Politik im Zusammenhang mit geographischen Namen im frühen 20. Jahrhundert. Obwohl die Tendenz zur Umbenennung von Orten bereits während des Unabhängigkeitskrieges in den 1820er Jahren stark ausgeprägt war, wurde sie schließlich im Juni 1909 systematisch betrieben, als das „Komitee für die Toponyme Griechenlands“ gegründet und mit angesehenen Wissenschaftlern besetzt wurde. Der Fall von Harvati-Mycenae ist zwar nicht einzigartig in der modernen griechischen Geschichte, bildet aber ein bezeichnendes Beispiel für die Wechselwirkung zwischen administrativer Zweckmäßigkeit und nationalen Bestrebungen bei der Neugestaltung der Karte Griechenlands. Die Geschichte dieses kleinen Dorfes in Argolida [Argolída], das 1916 von *Harvati* in *Mycenae* umbenannt wurde, ist Teil der langjährigen Praxis, Namen zu ändern und die Geographie an die politischen und ideologischen Bedürfnisse des Staates anzupassen. Wir argumentieren, dass dieser Prozess ein integraler Bestandteil einer herrschenden Ideologie war, welche die Kontinuität und Verwandtschaft der modernen Griechen mit einer angeblich ruhmreichen nationalen Vergangenheit betonte.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Geographische Namen, Umbenennung, Nationalismus, Griechenland, Mycenae.

1. Introduction

In [June 1909](#) a Royal Decree was published in the [Greek Government Gazette](#) referring to the policy of changing place names and, in particular, forming the “Toponyms of Greece Committee” [Epitropeia ton Toponymion tis Ellados]. Showing great resolution to eradicate “foreign elements [which] displaced the older Greek names during the long life of the nation”, Nikolaos Levidis, Minister of Interior, elaborated the proposed scheme by outlining, in the preamble of the Decree, the reasons that made the formation of the committee imperative: “This phenomenon is truly sad, because barbaric names and some cacophonous Greek ones hurt the linguistic feeling of the Greeks [and] cause false suspicions about the national composition of the population in those areas, as foreign names could be considered as witnesses of foreign origin. [...] when the Turkish yoke was thrown off, they [previous Greek governments] considered the obliteration of all signs of previous national hardship as a legitimate and imposing task” ([Government Gazette, 8 June 1909, 547–548](#)).

This article examines how representative of Greek perceptions of place names in early 20th century this assessment was. This task involves a threefold process. The first step consists in unravelling the constituent parts, which formed the body of Greek opinion on toponyms, in their relation to history and nationalism, in the 19th century. Secondly, this article sets out to describe in detail, understand, interpret, and evaluate the “The Toponyms of Greece Committee” within the framework of ideological developments in the Greek kingdom. Lastly, it is pertinent to the scope of this study to ascertain briefly if critical approaches on the prevailing notions about place names did manage to produce powerful challenges to the process of reshaping the map of Greece.

Academic interest in the course of changing toponyms in the independent Greek state emanates from two main interpretative lines of argument. In a number of studies on Greek nationalism, reactions to “barbaric” place names have been presented in the context of nation-building and statecraft throughout the 19th and in the first decades of the 20th century. For instance, [Liakos \(2008: 230\)](#) has acknowledged that “one way to achieve [the] reorganization of the historical consciousness” over the last 170 years was “to attribute new names to common places, or to nationalize space”. Moreover, the modification of names – alongside ancient monuments and the Greek language – has been included in “a process of purification” in Greece that aimed at bridging the gap between past and present “in the revival of classical past as an idealized model” ([Tziovas 2008: 287](#)). As recent works on Greek nationalism highlight the importance of “material landmarks in the iconography of the national dream”, systematic efforts at renaming villages and towns have found their place in research on the methods exploited by Greek national discourse in order to

portray “the continuity of the nation” (Hamilakis 2007: 17).

On the other hand, the systematic study of place names, although still in a seminal state, has already produced valuable tools and methodological strategies for approaching the subject. For example, Kiramargiou (2010) has split the whole course of renaming places into periods, evaluating the motives of the protagonists, the extent of the projects, and their ranging success in each of these stages. In a much larger scale, the National Hellenic Research Foundation has set up and runs an online platform, where researchers constantly upload data about place names, all relevant legislation, and the existing bibliography (National Hellenic Research Foundation 2021).

All these works have indeed succeeded in underlining that proper understanding of toponyms’ history must rest upon the historical recovery of ideologies. They have, thus, rescued the subject from its solitary existence. Case studies are now needed, research and publications on specific toponyms, that will verify or question the articulated scheme on statecraft, nation-building, and toponyms.

In this line, the case of Harvati-Mycenae, though not unique in modern Greek history, presents an indicative example of the interaction between administrative expediency and national aspirations in the reshaping of the map of Greece. The history of this small village in Argolida [Argolída], which in 1916 was renamed from *Harvati* to *Mycenae*, is, of course, part of a long-lasting practice of changing names and adapting geography to the political and ideological necessities of the state; but, at the same time, it seems to challenge a number of assumptions about the process. Harvati is situated in the Peloponnese [Pelopónnisos], which was part of the Greek kingdom since its foundation in 1830, and not in “the Macedonian landscape”, where supposedly the official renaming of most local places was an enterprise “of great and urgent necessity” (Carabott 2005: 48). Equally, the presumption that the “Hellenization” of place names was a defensive mechanism “advancing the dogma of national continuity whenever their [the Greeks’] racial purity was challenged” (Tziovas 2008: 293) could hardly explain a renaming that happened in 1916 in a seemingly “fully Hellenized” area of Old Greece.

Here our concerns are to understand a particular case, that of Harvati-Mycenae, and to attempt to deal with the underlying elements we can identify in the process of name changing, which was officially adopted by the Greek state in the 19th and 20th century. We will argue that this process was an integral part of a ruling ideology that stressed continuity and kinship with the past.

2. Toponyms and Greek nationalism in the 19th century

The tendency to rename places was already strong during the War of Independence in the 1820s. The first Greek National Assembly was convened in December 1821 in a small village in the Peloponnese, Piada. At first the

settlement's name, of no obvious Greek origin, tacitly slipped into the *Pediada*, the Greek word for the plain. Not surprisingly, members of the same assembly also decided to replace the carbonari-style symbols of the Greek insurgents with a picture of Athena, the ancient goddess (Skopetea 1988: 37). A few months later, in May 1822, the newly formed Administration decided to rename the place; Piada became *New Epidavros*, acquiring a name from classical antiquity. With regard to toponyms, practice and current use has receded in the face of telling symbolism.

On 7 May 1832, a treaty was signed between the three European Powers (United Kingdom, France, and Russia) and Bavaria [Bayern] establishing the Greek kingdom. The articles of the treaty provided for the accession of Prince Otto of Bavaria to the throne of the independent state. The treaty of 1832 was the final act in a series of diplomatic initiatives on behalf of the Powers since their first intervention in Greek affairs, five years after the outbreak of the Greek revolution in 1821 (Dakin 1973). A significant portion of the Greek population remained under Ottoman rule; the term Great Idea (Megali Idea) was used throughout the 19th century to describe the object of the incorporation of all the members of the Greek nation to a large kingdom, the dream of the revival of the Byzantine Empire (Skopetea 1988). Therefore, Greece tried to take advantage of successive crises of the Eastern Question by encouraging revolts among the Greeks of the Ottoman Empire.

After gaining independence, the Greeks of the kingdom had to overcome factionalism and disunity and to establish a cohesive Greek national identity “that was needed to foster unification under centralized government” (Kinley 2016: 52, 79). The revival of antiquity in modern Greece, the myth of the reborn Phoenix, aimed at the legitimization of genealogy, while classical antiquity was also projected as “the ideal model for the organization of a modern society” (Liakos 2008: 205). The filling of the immense gap between antiquity and modernity, became the task of Greek nationalism, which mobilized different resources in the process. Ancient structures were freed from “the offending modern buildings” and even churches had to be sacrificed for the sake of a “purification program”, especially in Athens [Athina] (Athanasopoulou 2002: 290). In art, the newly established discipline of archaeology sustained the idea of continuity from Cycladic to Classical art, “then moving through Byzantium to modern Greece” (Plantzos 2008: 11). History, folklore studies and linguistics emerged as the national disciplines further elaborating and systematizing these ideas (Voutsaki 2020: 145). Moving between the schemes of revival and continuity, Greek nationalism appropriated Greek prehistory, Classical antiquity and the Byzantine period to meet current ideological needs. As Voutsaki (2020: 152) has argued, “the essence of (Modern) Greek identity, its spirit and its soul, rested in its past”.

During the reign of King Otto (1833–1862), statecraft and nation building in the Greek kingdom relied on the imaginary revival of ancient Greek culture, which implied pushing aside the country's medieval and more recent Ottoman

past (Makridimitris 2003: 164). When Jacob Philipp Fallmerayer, in the introduction of his *Geschichte der Halbinsel Morea*, declared in 1830 the complete eradication of the Greek nation and its replacement by a mixture of mainly Slavic tribes during the Middle Ages, the need to prove the continuous and uninterrupted presence of the Greek nation in the country became imperative (Veloudis 1982: 29–30). The disturbing element in Fallmerayer's suggestion was its logical deduction, the repudiation of the modern Greeks' pretensions to being considered as the living representatives of the ancient Hellenic civilization. Since sympathy for the Greek people, especially during the War of Independence in the 1820s, was largely inspired by classical recollections, challenging the continuity of the Greek race was equivalent to "striking at the root of all Philhellenism" (Tozer 1869: 304).

As Fallmerayer's historical argument was based on the connection of the geographical names in the Peloponnese with the national composition of the area, in the 19th century the Greek state turned to the geography of Strabo as a method of upholding the Greekness of the modern Greeks. In 1833, while Otto was a minor, the Regency split the state into prefectures, provinces, and municipalities, in which towns, villages and settlements were incorporated; they chose "euphonic" names from ancient, mainly, and Byzantine topography or, at least, archaic-looking names in an effort to connect Greece with its assumed glorious past.

In June 1834 an anonymous correspondent in the *Sotir* newspaper of the Greek capital accurately summed up the implications of the whole endeavour: "It was, of course, a worthy task of a government, which was invited to the country to contribute to its rebirth, to try to eliminate, as much as possible, all the barbaric and disgraceful names given during the past centuries of misery in the mountains and islands, in the cities and villages of Greece and replace them with names, which adorned these marshes during the glorious era of antiquity, or, if they do not exist, with other names that have Greek origin and ending" (*Sotir*, 21 June 1834: 184).

As the Royal Decree of 1833 established a fairly limited number of prefectures and municipalities, where towns and villages were merged, the toponymic diversity of the country was not fully reflected on the administrative map. Therefore, in the period 1863–1908 only 38 cities changed name, in most cases abandoning a foreign for an ancient Hellenic one (Kiramargiou 2010: 4).

In the 19th century, one way to reorganize historical time, nationalize space and form consciousness in Greece was to attribute new names to common places.

3. "The Toponyms of Greece Committee", 1909–1945

The Greek 19th century was to end with dramatic developments; in 1893 Greece declared itself bankrupt, in 1897 it was crushed by the Ottoman Empire in the battlefield. In the 1900s the political system was in crisis, with the

succession of short-lived governments in power, an international commission controlled the country's poor finances, while the prevalent national narrative of the Great Idea had lost its credibility (Clogg 1979: Chapter 4). The public demand for a reform, which in August 1909 led to a military coup, was again expressed by turning to Greece's glorious past.

In June 1909, a Royal Decree was published in the *Government Gazette* establishing the "Toponyms of Greece Committee" (no 125, 8 June 1909). Profound scholars in the fields of geography, archaeology, history, and linguistics were named as the best qualified persons to take the lead, as their presence would add "systematic scientific study and principles" to the whole effort.

As we have seen, in Levidis's reasoning in 1909, the association of geography, as depicted through place names, with the national narrative of historical continuity becomes obvious. If foreign names cast shadows on the origin of modern Greeks, Greek names would dissolve them, especially if scientific prestige assented to the task. Greek nationalism sought the cause of its failure in the surviving elements of the period of the "Ottoman yoke", endeavoured to extirpate them, and looked with fervour to a glorious past, not medieval or modern, but almost exclusively classic. In the 1909 Decree, King George defined as the Committee's work not only "the change of foreign and cacophonous names unrelated to any event in Greek history", but also the replacement of the "inappropriate Greek" toponyms, which took the place of ancient and better known Greek names.

The examination of the list of officers and members of the toponyms Committee reveals the main sources of recruiting "specialists". The Commission included 14 members; the Athenian National University provided an obvious source of recruitment (six members), as well as the group of curators of antiquities, trustees, and chief librarians (four members). A Member of Parliament, who also was the president of the National Geographical Society, two high-ranking officers of the Ministry of Interior and a cartographer were also included in the list of members. Nikolaos Politis (see Figure 1), professor of mythology and classical archaeology and the father of folklore studies in Greece, took the office of president; Konstantinos Rados, professor of maritime history, and Georgios Homatianos, director of the census department, appeared as secretaries (Politis 1920: 7).¹ Death of members and the resignations of others periodically led to minor changes in the making up of the committee (Politis 1920: 8).

¹ Nikolaos G. Politis, Spyridon Lambros (Professor of History, University of Athens), Georgios Chatzidakis (Professor of Linguistics, University of Athens), Gregorios Vernardakis (Professor of Philology, University of Athens), Christos Tsountas (Professor of Archaeology, University of Athens), Konstantinos N. Rados (Professor of Maritime History, University of Athens), Panagis Kavvadias (Secretary of the Archaeological Society), Dimitrios Kambouroglou (Director of the National Library), Kl. Stefanos (Director of the Anthropological Museum), G. Sotiriadis (Curators of the Archaeological Museum), Konstantinos Papamichalopoulos (MP and President of the National Geographic Society), M. Chrysochoos (Cartographer), A. Vambas (Ministry of Interior), G. Homatianos (Head of the Census Department).

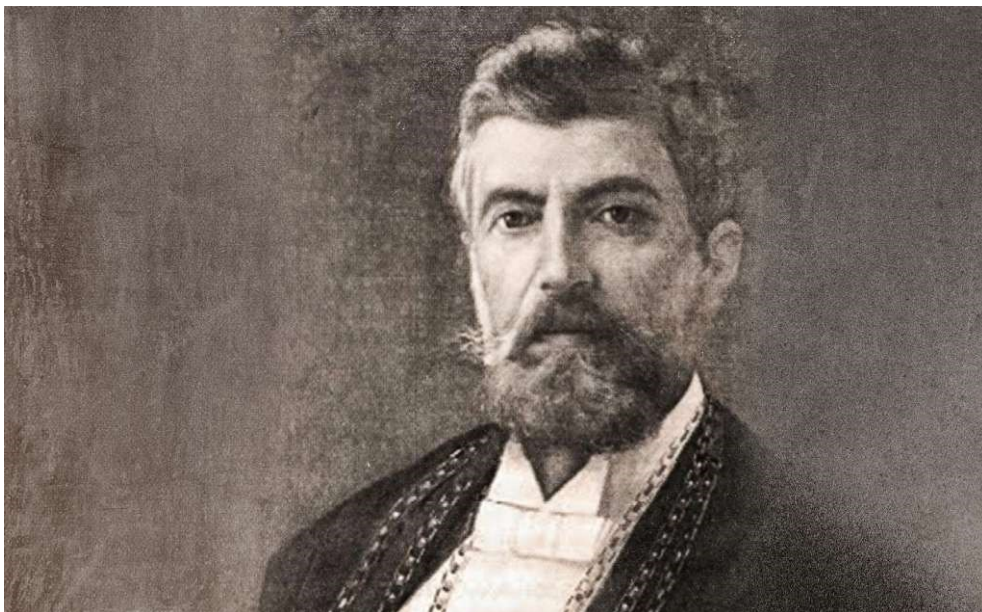


Figure 1: Portrait of Nikolaos Politis (1852–1921) as Rector of the Athenian University.
(Source: www.kentrolaografias.gr, accessed 2021-10-07.)

The establishment of the Committee was not reported in the newspapers of the time, since in 1909 the renaming course was mainly associated with a tendency to search for and return to the roots of Greek civilization on a literary level and was not a controversial political issue that had to be addressed immediately.

The Athenian Committee appointed local committees, which had to study toponyms on the spot and submit their proposal to Politis and his colleagues. An academic, member of the Committee, thoroughly studied the proposed name, trying to apply ancient to modern geography; finally, the members of the central body met to approve or reject the new name. The predominant criteria for accepting a proposal were its “Greekness” and “historicity”, making the new names “euphonic”, “Greek” and, as far as possible, “infrequent”. As a result of its structure, however, the Committee moved extremely slowly, as its members were involved in exhaustive studies and fruitless discussions, while its recommendations were rarely applied.

After 1912, two events made it imperative to speed up the renaming process. The administrative reorganization of 1912 created new municipalities and for the first time numerous separate communities. Thus, many existing toponyms in foreign languages – Politis called them “weird names” (Politis 1920: 8) – came to the surface of the administrative map of the country. In addition, after the Balkan Wars and the First World War the Greek kingdom annexed large parts of Epirus [Ípiros], Macedonia [Makedonía], and Thrace [Thráki], where the need for adapting the map to the Greek national and linguistic system was urgent.

As the Committee struggled to be equal to the task, it was actually sidelined in the face of the urgent need for the Hellenization of the new provinces of Greece. In the period 1909–1920 about 200 changes of toponyms were completed under the close supervision of the Committee; from 1926 to 1928 in Macedonia and Thrace 2,479 cities, towns, and villages were renamed with the typical approval of the Committee. Finally, after the War, in 1945, a “Council of Toponyms” made up by university professors, state officials, and teachers replaced the Committee.

A small community of farmers and shepherds was the only case of name-changing that the Commission approved of in 1916 in the large areas of Argolida and Corinthia [Κορινθία], when *Mycenae* replaced *Harvati* on the map of the area.

4. When Harvati became Mycenae, 1916

Harvati was a small village on the outskirts of the plain of Argos, in the prefecture of Argolida, in the northeastern Peloponnese (see [Figure 2](#)). Its population ranged between 121 inhabitants in 1846 and 252 inhabitants in 1907 ([Lithoksoou 2005: 32](#)). From 1833 to 1912, Harvati was one of the seven villages that composed the Municipality of Mycenae – the settlement is mentioned in consecutive censuses as *Harvati* or *Harvation* with the addition of the ending “-ion”, which is common in Greek toponyms.



Figure 2: Mycenae in Argolida, Peloponnese. (Source: google.com/maps.)

This potty little village derived its importance from its proximity to the archaeological site of Mycenae. The Greek geographer [Antonios Miliarakis](#), who visited the place in the mid-1880s, counted the roads linking the cities of

Argos and of Nafplion and the village of Harvati among the few carriageways to be found in the whole of Argolida. As he remarked, this was due to “the antiquities of Mycenae”, as Harvati itself had “nothing worth mentioning” (Miliarakis 1886: 13, 55). Built 1.5 kilometres from the prehistoric acropolis, foreign travellers had to pass through the small and insignificant village with the strange name to reach their destination.

The place until 1916 presented two features, which summarized the whole problem of changing toponyms in Greece.

At first, its original name, *Harvati*, constituted part of the “rich Slavic-Albanian-Wallachian-Greek toponymic” of the Peloponnese; namely, Slavic names, with few exceptions, originated from the early era of Slavic invasions, during the 7th and 8th centuries (Anagnostakis 2000: 31). A small cluster of Slavic toponyms was located on the edge of the Argolic plain, in the region of Mycenae (Kordosis 1981: 392) (see Figure 3).

If the name *Harvati* was a hangover from the early Middle Ages, when Slavic tribes settled in the area, the origin of its inhabitants and their language were current problems. The inhabitants of Harvati were of Albanian origin, descendants of large families who moved to the district in the 14th century. Miliarakis, the Greek geographer mentioned previously, who visited Argolida as late as the 1880s, noticed that half of the prefecture’s population were of Albanian origin and spoke the Albanian language. In the municipality of Mycenae “all inhabitants were Albanians” and in the village of Harvati “all 162 of its inhabitants are of Albanian origin and speak Albanian” (Miliarakis 1886: 54–55).

All the elements of the problem were there: a settlement with a non-Greek name, populated with villagers who did not speak the Greek language, next to the archaeological site of Mycenae, which Greek national narrative pictured as the visible and tangible proof of the uninterrupted ties of the modern Greeks with their glorious ancestors. To make matters worse, travellers visited the place in growing numbers after Heinrich Schliemann’s excavations in the 1870s making the situation even more embarrassing, as, after 1912, they were coming across a separate community (Government Gazette, no 262A, 31 August 1912) under the name of *Harvati* in the environs of prehistoric Mycenae.

If “odd national and racial theories”, which presented the Albanians as “a branch of the Greek nation or race” and were circulated in 19th-century Greece (Skopetea 1988: 144), could accommodate the origin and the language of the locals, the case of the village’s name was a burning question. For Greek national narrative it was imperative that the toponym *Mycenae* would (re)appear in the map of modern Greece. In the decades that followed Schliemann’s excavations, “the notion of linear continuity was extended to prehistory” with archaeological interest embracing a wider area beside classical Athens (Tziouvas 2008: 290). In fact, Greek archaeologist Christos Tsountas, based on Schliemann’s and his own discoveries at Mycenae, talked about “the existence of a timeless ‘Greek spirit’, permeating Greek history from prehistory to the present” (Plantzos

2008: 18). According to Tsountas, the Myceneans were Greeks; actually, he denied any “eastern influences” attributing “all things worthy of our attention [...] to the spirit of the land and the genius of the race” (Voutsaki 2020: 7; Plantzos 2008: 18). Surprisingly, that “cradle of Hellenism” had still in 1916 a “cacophonous” and “barbaric” name, let alone its people’s questionable origin. Interestingly, Christos Tsountas was a member of the Toponyms of Greece Committee, although there is no evidence that he played any leading role in the renaming of Harvati to *Mycenae*.

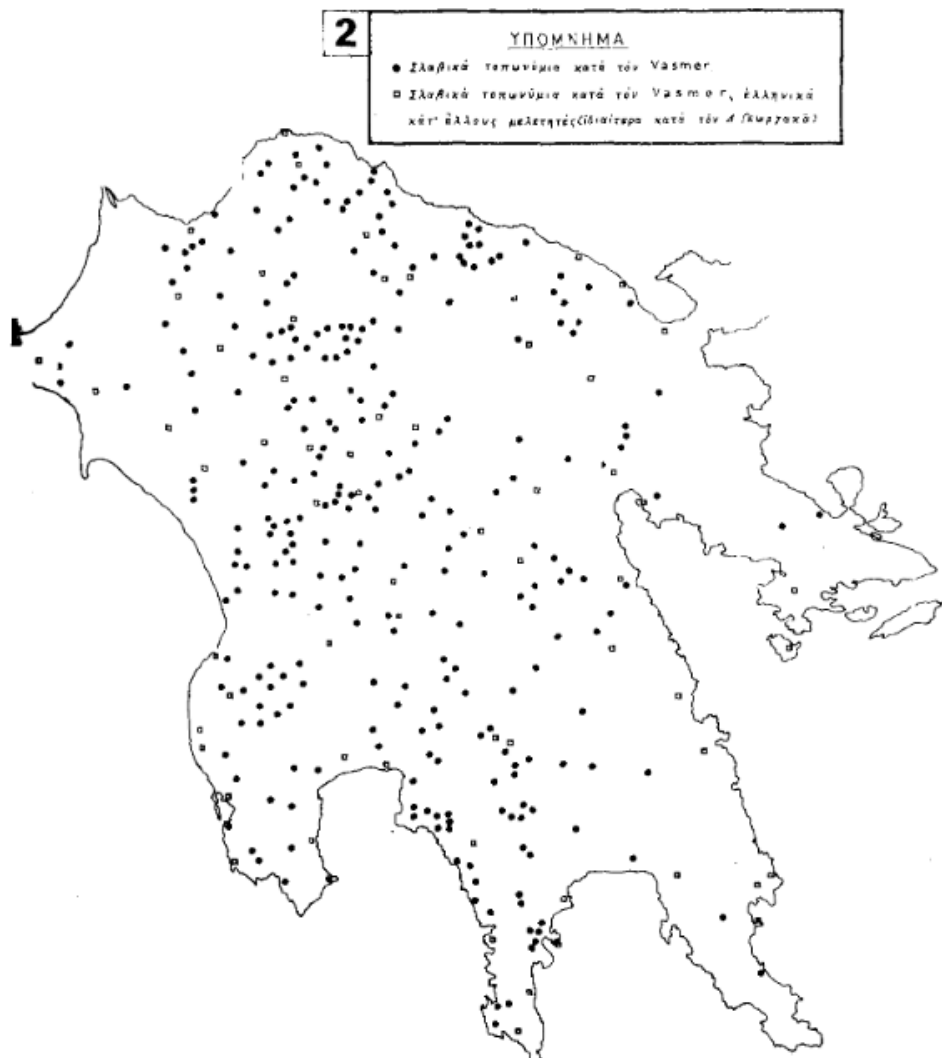


Figure 3: Slavic toponyms in the Peloponnese. (Source: Kordosis 1981: 437.)

In September 1916 the Committee consented to the unanimous proposal of Harvati’s local council and renamed the village to *Mycenae*. Politis’s report

is revealing: “The name Harvati reminds of the settlement in the village of Croats or a single Croat who was probably its owner. This ignominious and insignificant event obliterated the venerable name of Mycenae, where the modern village is situated. The council of Harvati has the legitimate right to demand its ancient name back” (Politis 1920: 60).

In 1928 the nearby settlement of Priftani, which was part of the Community of Mycenae, was renamed abandoning its Albanian name to *Monastirakion*, the Greek word for “small monastery” (Government Gazette, no 193A, 20 September 1928). The first census after World War II, reads as follows: “Community of Mycenae, 630 inhabitants – Mycenae 361, Monastirakion 269” (Government Gazette, no 160A, 18 June 1953). *Harvati* was obliterated, at least from the official documents of the Greek kingdom (see Figure 4).

20	Κοινότης Μυκηνῶν	630
	1 Μυκῆναι, αἰ.....	361
	2 Μοναστηράκιον, τὸ.....	269

Figure 4: *Mycenae* and *Monastirakion* as appeared in the 1953 census.

5. Voices of protest and the “mottled blood”

Reactions to changing the names of settlements in Greece were few and did not have any significant influence on the whole process. Both in the 19th and the 20th centuries, reactions came from two sources, medieval historians and scholars of the Demoticism movement.

The excessive promotion and emphasis on classical antiquity inevitably led the medieval and modern history of Greece to deliberate obscurity. Governments did not have the right to replace the geographical names that had been preserved for centuries, disrupting the relationship of people with their space, just because they considered them barbaric, Slavic, Venetian or Turkish: “If these names are the remnants of the transition of foreign tribes through Greek territory, who has the right to erase the traces of history?” (Miliarakis 1886: ia). In the 1950s, reflections on what had happened, and continued to happen, on the issue of toponyms were again confined within academic circles. Konstantinos Amantos, a historian of the Byzantine era specialized on toponyms, insisted on the importance of preserving and studying place names in order to fully understand their linguistic, historical, and cultural value (Amantos 1952). In 1955, Konstantinos Dimaras, a leading historian of Modern Greek Literature, noted that “it is difficult to estimate how much all these places that lost their name, the one tied to the traditions, with the still direct memory of the achievements of our fathers, lost in human dynamism” (Dimaras 1955).

On the other hand, a group of mainly young scholars linked the toponymic

problem with their wider views on the “soul of the Greek people” and the people’s language, traditions, and culture. The movement of Demoticism, which propagated the adoption of the vernacular as the official language, endeavoured to disassociate modern Greek identity from the classical past and focused on literature and linguistic change. The demoticists’ main argument was based on the idea that past can be recovered as a material and visible presence in the Greek nation’s recent past and its present, in the people’s language and culture. As they preferred sociological to historical arguments, the movement’s followers adopted “a more diffused, popular and immediate feeling for identity” (Liakos 2001: 39).

In the (battle) field of toponyms, the case of Fotos Politis was typical of Demoticism’s notions, with a strong personal-family dimension. Fotos Politis, the son of Nikolaos Politis, launched a harsh criticism against the “Toponyms of Greece Committee”, presided by his own father. Fotos Politis, in a number of furious letters addressed to his parents, correctly underlined the Committee’s motives. Although the demoticists were mainly linked to the language dispute, Politis chose to comment on the issue of place names in the context of national history. Existing toponyms were alive, integral part of “the people’s soul”, but Minister Levidis was a “maniac [...] an ancestor-worshiper”, who was profoundly embarrassed, even ashamed, for the mixed origin of his race. By renaming villages, Levidis and the Greek government were trying to hide the Greeks’ “mottled blood” (Moullas 1992). It was obvious that what was disturbing was not the primacy in the “clean language” (*katharevousa*), in which the new toponyms were written, but the imposition of the Greek language as a whole and the Greek-centric interpretation of history at the expense of the linguistic and cultural-ethnological wealth of the Greek state.

6. Conclusions

After the establishment of the independent Greek kingdom in 1832, the necessity of a new toponymic map that would reflect the unity of Hellenism in time and space led to the organized effort of renaming settlements in Greece. Despite reactions and mistakes, the general idea that by changing a name you can manipulate collective memory proved to be effective.

Today, Mycenae is a small village with 354 inhabitants in the Prefecture of Argolida in the Peloponnese. Its inhabitants are engaged in agriculture, animal husbandry, and tourism services. However, despite the small size of the village, its name appears in the municipality in which it belongs, that of Argos-Mycenae, a municipality with over 40,000 inhabitants. The discrepancy between the current “modest” situation of Mycenae and the gravity of the toponym is, of course, easily explained, if we look back at the history of the place. The name brings, to inhabitants and visitors, memories of “Rich in Gold” Mycenae, the kingdom of mythical Agamemnon, first sung by Homer in his epics.

The description of the modern village of Mycenae in a Greek travel site is indicative of the motives and the results of the renaming process: “History produces history and civilization creates civilization, as modern European historians write [sic]. Mycenae is a source of energy and historic memory [...]. Today, it is a small village of about 450 inhabitants, located in the NE of the plain of Argolida. Until 1928 [sic] the village was called Harvati. Since then, it took its ancient name back. The current inhabitants of the village cultivate the land of their ancestors” (touristorama.com).

Harvati became *Mycenae* in 1916, but villages were changing names in Argolida as late as 1953. In total, from 1831 to 2011, almost 5,000 settlements were renamed in Greece, some more than once. Therefore, Harvati-Mycenae represents only a small portion of a long-lasting practice of adapting geography to the necessities of the Greek state and Greek nationalism. In fact, forced changes of place names was one of the popular techniques employed by Balkan states besides Greece (Albania, Bulgaria) in a period of national consolidation, in the early 20th century, in order “to eliminate what were seen as potential fifth column” (Kain Hart 1999: 204).

Just like landscapes (Tilley 2006: 7), the names of villages and towns in Greece were contested, changed, and re-changed, according to political, ideological and cultural needs.

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