

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE MACEDONIAN STRUGGLE: A Unique Phenomenon of Historical Sculpture in Greece¹

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Abstract

The Macedonian Struggle (1904-1908) was one of the most important national efforts of the 20th century and the one that prepared the ground for the liberation of Macedonia during the Balkan Wars (1912-13). It was trench warfare conducted by the Greeks both against the Ottoman Turks and the Bulgarian comitadjis who were plotting its lands. The Greekness of Macedonia was the dominant issue and many people from all over Greece gave their lives, including Pavlos Melas, whose premature and unjust sacrifice was a point of reference for all fighters. Thus, a new generation of heroes was “born”, and their descendants tried tenaciously to keep their memory alive. In order to honor and acknowledge the sacrifice of the Macedonian fighters, they created monuments in Macedonian cities, towns and villages that immortalized the protagonists and chronicled the events of the period. On the other hand, these works are not only historical monuments but also art monuments that enrich with their new elements the sculpture of historical subjects of Modern Greek art. In fact, their number is impressive and far exceeds works of this type that refer to other national moments of the Greek history.

Keywords: Macedonian Struggle, Pavlos Melas, Modern Greek sculpture, historical sculpture, Monuments of the Macedonian Struggle.

¹ This study is based on the one-year post-doctoral research (2022-23) carried out at the Department of History and Archeology of the Faculty of Philosophy of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki with the cooperation of the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle of Thessaloniki and the scientific supervisor Professor Vassilis Gounaris as well as the supervisor of the research emeritus professor Miltiadis Papanikolaou.

Introduction

Ethnic rivalries never ceased to exist in long-suffering Macedonia, which formed part of the Eastern Question during the 19th century. However, the rivalry between various ethnicities - and mainly between the Greeks, the Turks, and the Bulgarians - intensified with the signing of the Treaty of Berlin signed by all the great powers of the time in 1878. It was preceded in 1872 by the Establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchate, which reduced the power of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and this act was one of the causes of the Greek-Bulgarian conflicts in Macedonia and beyond². The Hellenic Kingdom supported in every way the effort of the Greeks to not only maintain the national spirit and the national consciousness of its inhabitants high, but also to remove the Bulgarian danger³. It is clear that this multi-faceted struggle of the Greeks had ideological and national starting points, as the Greekness of Macedonia, was historically emanated by the figures of Alexander the Great, King Philip and the philosopher Aristotle whose legacy permeated the Greeks culturally.

However, the geostrategic interests of the great powers of that period (especially Russia, Ottoman Turkey, and the English-French) coincided with the national awakenings of the Balkan peoples, creating conflict between them. "The 19th century - writes Spyridon Sfetas - was the century of the national struggles of the Balkan inhabitants for the formation of a national state"⁴, while Vassilis Gounaris posits, among others, language as a condition for the establishment of nations (4).

In this climate, Greece tried to fight for its rights, establishing in 1904 the "Hellenic Macedonian Committee", and making its consulate in Thessaloniki a stronghold of all its actions, marking the beginning of the Macedonian Struggle (Figure 1). In the same year, Pavlos Melas, who was the most emblematic figure of the Macedonian Struggle and a model of heroic behavior, was murdered. The Macedonian Struggle ended with the Revolution of the Young Turks in 1908 in Thessaloniki.

² See I. Koliopoulos "The Newest Macedonia" in *The Newest and Modern Macedonia. History- Economy-Society-Culture*, ed . I. Koliopoulos and I. Hasiotis, Thessaloniki-Athens, 19th century, 1st floor, Papazisi Publications - Observer Publishing House, p. 10. See also of the same writer "The Macedonian Struggle. The position of the Greeks in Macedonia from 1881 to 1896" in the *History of the Greek Nation. From 1881 to 1913*, vol. XIV, Athens 1975: Athens Publishing House, pp . 215-220.

³ See regarding I. Hasiotis "Milestones and main phases of the history of Macedonia during the Turkish rule" in *Modern and Modern Macedonia. History-Economy-Society-Culture*, ed . I. Koliopoulos and I. Hasiotis, Thessaloniki-Athens, 19th century, 1st floor, Papazisi Publications - Paratintis Publishing House, pp . 14-33. See also I. Mazarakis "Macedonia on the eve of the Struggle" in the *History of the Greek Nation. From 1881 to 1913*, vol. XIV, Athens: Athens publishing house, pp . 220-254

⁴ See Vassilis K. Gounaris, *The Balkans of the Greeks. From the Enlightenment to World War I*. Thessaloniki 2007, Epikentro Publications, p. 34 and see Spyridon Sfetas, "Introduction to Balkan History", vol. 1. *From the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans until the first World War (1354-1918)*. Thessaloniki 2009, Vantias Publications, p. 123.



Figure 1 - Ziller, Greek Consulate, now Museum of the Macedonian Struggle, 1890-1893, Agia Sophia & Consult Koromilas Street, Thessaloniki

Since then, the Macedonian Struggle passed into legend and stories talking about the heroic struggle of the protagonists and the participation in it of fighters from all parts of Greece, from Crete to Kastoria. The scholars of the time, such as Penelope Delta and Ion Dragoumis, as well as folk tradition glorified the Struggle and described a war that was fought in the swamps, plains and mountains of the Macedonian land⁵.

To commemorate the events of that heroic period and to perpetuate the memory of the people who fought under adverse conditions to keep the Greekness of Macedonia alive, the Greek state, the local government and various cultural institutions and individuals erected monuments in many parts of the country. These are mainly busts and statues of heroes of the Macedonian Struggle, monuments in honor of anonymous people (Macedonian fighters) who fought for this cause (the priest and the teacher, the Macedonian woman), while streets, squares and military camps, were named after Macedonian fighters. Geographically, Thessaloniki, as the capital of Macedonia, acquired the most sculptures, while the dominant figure was Pavlos Melas, who is now treated as a Greek martyr⁶.

⁵ A leading literary work on the heroic period of the Macedonian Struggle is Penelope Delta's historical novel *The Mysteries of the Swamp*, which was first published in 1937 and made a great impression thanks to the fascinating way in which it described the dramatic events of the Macedonian Struggle (2004-2008).

⁶ For the outdoor sculptures of the city of Thessaloniki see Miltiadis Papanikolaou (1985) *Outdoor sculptures of Thessaloniki*. Thessaloniki: Bank of Macedonia Thrace and Stavros Panagiotakis (2014), *Sculptures of post-war Thessaloniki and the contemporary trends of public visual interventions*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Thessaloniki. For the sculpture of Florina see Andreou, A. & Vamvakidou, I. (2006), *The population of statues. The case of Florina*, Thessaloniki: Stamouli Publications. For the ideological aspects of outdoor sculptures in Macedonia see Syrago Tsiara (2004), *National Memorial Landscapes. Stories of Macedonia written in marble*. Athens, Klidaritmos Publications.

The purpose of the above actions and initiatives is to keep the Macedonian Struggle alive in the collective memory as historical testimonies. On the other hand, these works belong to the history of Modern Greek sculpture as they add new aspects to its evolution (mainly in the sculpture of historical subjects/in the historical sculpture of Greece) and convey to the viewer the dominant perception and ideology. It should also be noted that the same areas several monuments have been erected in honor of Alexander the Great, the father of Philip II and the philosopher Aristotle, which were semiotically linked in various ways to the case of the Macedonian Question⁷.

Naturally, the public sculpture is not completed with its construction but with its "conversation" with the viewer - over time – so that the conditions of its interpretation are dependent on the environment (social, political and cultural). The most characteristic element of the research is that the number of monuments is impressively large and superior to corresponding works for other historical events, even those of the national Palingenesis.

Monuments of Heroes of the Macedonian Struggle and their History

Undoubtedly, the monuments of the Macedonian Struggle, whether they refer to anonymous or named heroes, as they are public and displayed in emblematic areas of Macedonia, aim above all to emphasize the national pride, to awaken the national consciousness and self-awareness of the people, but also to be bearers of the collective memory for heroes and for events of the greatest national importance. The Macedonian Struggle produced its own heroes because of the nature of the Struggle (the untold local difficulties and international obstacles) and the fact that their sacrifice and self-denial served as a guide for later generations as the Macedonian Question remained open for decades.

The first monuments began to be built in the interwar period, but most of them were created from the post-war period onwards until almost the present day. The fluctuation of the number of assignments is due to two reasons: the first is the evolution of the Macedonian Question and the second is the political circumstances⁸.

⁷ See Tsihla, M. E. (2019). "Ideological and Aesthetic Standards of Greek Open-Air Sculpture: Three Emblematic Statues of Thessaloniki". In *International Journal of Arts Humanities and Social Studies*. Volume 4, Issue 8. pp . 29-36.

⁸ The political events that affected Greece's international relations, but also its internal upheavals, were first and foremost the creation of the federal state in the south of the Yugoslav Republic under Tito under the name "People's Republic of Macedonia" in 1944. The recognition of this state by the UN as an independent state in 1991 as a consequence of the breakup of Yugoslavia under the name "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (FYROM) and Greece's international agreement with that state (known as the "Prespa Agreement") in 2019 with name "Republic of North Macedonia". In this post-war period, Greece had consolidated its democratic course with the exception of the seven-year dictatorship (1967-1974) which played its own role in this case.

As already mentioned, Pavlos Melas was the dominant figure in outdoor sculpture, but also in other forms of art; he is the most recognizable figure and the one who inspired most artists in rendering mental qualities such as heroism, bravery, and self-sacrifice. Pavlos Melas was immediately honored right after the end of the Macedonian Struggle with the creation of a monument in Athens in 1910, while from the 1950s, the execution of busts and statues followed in Thessaloniki and other cities of Northern Greece, which exist in large numbers, as a reminder of his sacrifice. But also, other Macedonian fighters, such as Captain Kottas, Captain Gonos, Captain Vardas, and many others, who have been honored in statues and busts. As well as political supporters of the Struggle (Ion Dragoumis, Lambros Koromilas, etc.) and priests, such as the Metropolitan of Kastoria Germanos Karavangelis.

Based on the research, the total number of public monuments that exist in Greece with reference to the Macedonian Struggle exceed in number 200, a particularly high number compared to other thematic categories⁹. Well-known artists such as Michalis Tombros, Natalia Mela-Konstantinidis, Dimitris Kalamaras, Thanasis Minopoulos, Efthimis Kalevras and many others were recruited for the execution of these sculptures. For Modern Greek sculpture, this thematic is an extremely interesting chapter.

The cities that housed the largest number of monuments of Macedonian fighters are mainly Thessaloniki, Florina and Kastoria. Florina excels in the number of similar projects with around 30 monuments, followed by Thessaloniki with 22 and Kastoria with 12. But also, other cities such as Kozani, Siatista, Pella, Giannitsa, Veria, Serres, Drama and Kilkis, have remarkable war monuments and hero memorials dedicated to the Macedonian Struggle¹⁰.

Historical Sculpture: Typology – Iconography – Style

Historical subjects have always been very popular among the many genres and categories of Art History iconography, and artists have been forced to move between history and myth, legend, and tradition. For the Modern Greek reality, the Greek Revolution, the Macedonian Struggle, the Balkan Wars and the National Resistance were the main sources of inspiration for Greek artists. The Revolution of 1821 has a great place in the artistic repertoire, without a doubt, but the Macedonian Struggle certainly occupies the primary place now, as according to our research, the

⁹ The number of statues and busts should include votive columns, various environments, museum and church spaces, Macedonian warrior heroes, hagiographies and architectural compositions.

¹⁰ If the first work erected for the Macedonian fighters is the monument of Pavlos Melas in Athens in 1910, as well as the bust of Emilianos Lazarides, Metropolitan of Grevena in Grevena in 1921, one of the last is the bust of the priest Evgenios Panakakis in Heraklion, Crete and Lesbos in 2017.

monuments dedicated to its memory, outnumber any other category of historical interest¹¹.

Public sculpture aims to stimulate the memory by any means and mainly with visual stimuli, so that it is easily perceived by the viewers who are the anonymous crowd, the ones passing through the public spaces. "The past - writes Syrago Tsiara - emerges in the present with the help of memory. Memory, however, does not preserve the original product of the senses unchanged. It transforms, adds, and removes elements, adapting the raw material to our current needs"¹².

The Greek sculptors had the education and the ability to draw from their models those elements with which they compose their works. As Stelios Lydakis claims¹³, they knew very well the sculptural types that prevailed internationally and that had been fully assimilated by Greek iconography. The story of the Macedonian Struggle has many aspects, but for its recognition in the viewer's field of vision, it should have certain constants so that its message can be conveyed more easily and directly. And in this case the sculptures have a specific **typology** concerning the clothing, the symbols, the posture, the expression besides its particular individual characteristics that make it easily identifiable as Macedonian fighter. The sculptor presents the figure in traditional Macedonian costume¹⁴ with his weaponry and religious symbols. As a rule, the figures follow the model the portrait of Pavlos Melas depicted by distinguished painters and sculptors, almost immediately after his death. Thus, the Macedonian fighters are distinguished by their typical expression that degrades individuality, they have a plain look and roughness in their appearance, suggestive of the hardships and difficulties of their struggle.

From **an iconographic** point of view, the busts and statues fully preserve their ethnographic elements. Their costumes, together with the hat, and especially with their weapons, which refer to a specific period, leave no doubt to the viewer that he is looking at the tough and determined Macedonian warrior. An additional characteristic element is the existence of the cross, declaring their Orthodox faith, which is present either on the hat or on the uniform in front of the chest. It is obvious

¹¹ On the contrary, in historical painting, the images of the Greek Revolution prevail, as most of the Greek artists of the 19th and 20th centuries dealt with heroic iconography in 1821. For this topic, see Ilias Mykoniatis (1979) *The Twenty One in painting. Contribution to the study of the iconography of the Struggle*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Thessaloniki University of Applied Sciences

¹² See Syrago Tsiara (2004) *Landscapes of Macedonia. Stories of Macedonia written in marble*. Athens, Kleidaritmos Publications, p. 15

¹³ See Stelios Lydakis (1981) *The Greek Sculptors*, vol. 5. Modern Greek sculpture. History-typology- dictionary of sculptures, Athens, Publishing House 'Melissa', p. 194

¹⁴ The typical Macedonian traditional costume is made up of the following elements: The traditional Macedonian warrior Pavlos Melas costume, includes a black-colored frock with pleat, shirt, lined and hand-embroidered overcoat (kasinaki), hat and tassels (optional tights and tsaruchia). See samples of costume in the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle in Dolso, Kastoria.

that the *Portraits of Greek Fighters of the Greek Revolution* by the Bavarian artist Karl Kratsheisen influenced this type of iconography.

Stylistically, these portraits, whether they are statues or busts, mostly have academic characteristics, as realistic depiction is the artists' main pursuit. As a rule, they follow models of outdoor sculpture of similar works from the Baroque period and even earlier with variations in treatment according to the skills of the sculptor. Thus, one recognizes in some of them the perfect technique and the incomparable expression, as a reflection of inner mental states. As, for example, are the excellent busts of *Germanos Karavangelis* (Thessaloniki) by the sculptor Aliko Hatzis and *Ion Dragoumis* (also in Thessaloniki) work by the sculptor Michalis Tombros (Figure 2, Figure 3). With similar features, the amazing statue of *Pavlos Melas* (or *Macedonian Fighter*) was created in 1940 by the sculptor of the old Athenian school, Georgios Dimitriadis the Athenian. The work is located in Drama, suffered many adventures during the Bulgarian occupation of the city in World War II and richly represents the virtues of Greek realism (Figure 4).



Figure 2 - Hatzis, *Bust of Germanos Karavangelis*, 1956, marble, h. 1.00m., Green space in front of Panagia Chalkeon, Thessaloniki



Figure 3 - Tombros, *Bust of Ion Dragoumis*, 1954, marble, h. 1.00m., YMCA Square, Thessaloniki



Figure 4 - Dimitriadis the Athenian, *Statue of Unknown Macedonian Fighter or Pavlos Melas*, 1940, marble, D. Gounari Street, Drama

Of course, influences from modern movements have also existed in these works, sometimes causing reactions, due to the inability to recognize the person depicted. As for example happened with the dummy of *Captain Kottas* in Florina, the work of Dimitris Kalamaras, due to the strong expressionistic aspect of the sculpture (Figure 5). The sculptor Natalia-Mela Konstantinidis was more restrained in the construction

of the statue of *Pavlos Melas* in Thessaloniki, where the Cubist concept gave the sculpture a modern look (Figure 6).



Figure 5 - Kalamaras, Statue of Captain Kottas, 1961, brass, h . 2.00 m., Florina Railway Station Park



Figure 6 - Mela, Statue of Pavlos Melas, 1996, brass, h . 2.00m., Tsirogianni Square, Thessaloniki

In general, those works bear, sometimes blatantly and sometimes less obviously, characteristics of the national heroes of the 1821 Revolution so that the collective memory easily receives the traces of a critical historical period. In any case, the

sculpture of historical subjects of a more recent national period as well as the large number of statues is an important chapter of Modern Greek sculpture, constitutes a new example and provides useful insights into this art category.

The Reception

The Macedonian Struggle has always been alive in the consciousness of the Greeks, especially the inhabitants of Macedonia. Essentially, the involvement of the state and the agencies for this case began in 1944 (forty years after the start of the Macedonian Struggle) with the creation of the federal state of the "People's Republic of Macedonia" by Marshal Tito, the then leader of Yugoslavia. Initiatives to create monuments of a heroic nature in almost all Macedonian cities were the direct pursuits of many agencies from both the private and public sectors. References to the need to perpetuate the memory went hand in hand with public sentiment to accept the events as national actions of the highest importance. That is why the message communicated by these monuments was positively received by the general public, despite all the political oppositions that had appeared from time to time. The local communities responded to the creation of monuments for the Macedonian Struggle, which means that the first reception reactions of the works through news and texts of people "who came into direct contact" with the work constitute a first record of receiving the artistic work¹⁵.

All the events for the heroes of the Macedonian Struggle are celebratory and every time they receive not only a lot of publicity, but also an official character. The commemorations for the Macedonian Struggle are many and frequent.

Officially, the Greek state celebrates the day of the Macedonian Struggle, which is October 10, the day of the death of Pavlos Melas. The issue of the creation of monuments for the Macedonian Struggle was dependent on the international developments on the issue of Macedonia on a historical and political level. However, certain reactions for ideological reasons did not stop every time the question of Macedonia's national identity was discussed¹⁶.

Works of this type operate in various ways on the viewer who considers and inquires about them. He is the one who faces them with a variety of emotions and with reactions relative to their significance and importance for local societies. That is why their characteristics are roughly the same: moral elevation (self-sacrifice, self-denial,

¹⁵ According to Antonis Kotidis who analyzed the theory of reception in his book *Modernism and Tradition* in the Greek art of the interwar period. Thessaloniki 1993: University Publications Studio Press, p. 45 and so on

¹⁶ See Andreou, A. & Vamvakidou, I., (2006) *The population of statues. The case of Florina*, Thessaloniki 2006: Stamouli Publications, 97 and so on.

religiousness), patriotic fervor (bravery, love for the mother country), obeying the "Oath" they took before their fight, honoring the the Holy Trinity and promising faith, secrecy, sacrifice and patriotism¹⁷.

Undoubtedly, the impact of the Macedonian Struggle on the inhabitants of the regions that experienced the events and the references to the memory of its protagonists, was great and led the descendants to create monuments, the number of which is impressive. The impact of history was profound as these works "shed light" on historical conditions and circumstances.

Conclusions

It is a fact that the number of monuments dedicated to the Macedonian Struggle - from museums and votive columns to busts and statues- is impressively large and this fact in itself is a gain for the study of Modern Greek culture. Although the monuments are mostly found in Macedonian cities, it proves that the inhabitants wish to collect knowledge that perpetuates the collective memory. A wide range of public and private agencies as well as private associations and individuals assigned these monuments and well-known and renowned artists were recruited to create them. These are works with undeniable historical content but also works that add another aspect to Modern Greek sculpture. The timeless value of symbols (national and religious), the references to cultural characteristics and the legendary imprinting of features with references to brave behaviors and heroic actions of people betray a perception that appropriates an entire era and what it represents in the consciousness of the people of Macedonia.

¹⁷ Reference to "Oath of the Macedonian Warrior"

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